

Prophecy Fails

Keeping Prophecy in the Proper Perspective

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Prophecy has always been a major part of the teaching of the church of God, at least in this past century. For many of us, prophecy was the vehicle that God used to get our attention. He actually made prophecy a part of our calling. And for most people it was that they would listen to Herbert Armstrong on the radio or see him on television and he spoke on prophecy a lot. You know, whether it was the beast, whether it was the false prophet, whether it was the various visions that Daniel had, all the book of Revelation, the Olivet Prophecy, different parables that had prophetic importance to us, and all of that sort of thing, not to mention all the prophecies that are in the Old Testament that he would go to.

And in kind of parallel to that, the church's booklets on prophecy were always the most popular and the most requested in the church's inventory: from *The United States and The British Commonwealth in Prophecy*, to *Who is the Beast?*, *The Book of Revelation Unveiled at Last!*, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, and those sorts. So, prophecy has always been an important part of the work.

Herbert Armstrong would remind us that prophecy is 30% of God's Word, which testifies to its importance! Almost one-third of the Bible is prophecy. And it is really very important to us as proof of God's sovereignty, and His involvement in the affairs of men. When God speaks a word, let us say a prophetic word of whatever it is that He wants to come to pass, it goes forth, and as He says in Isaiah 55 that it does not come back to Him empty. That means it is fulfilled by the time it comes back to Him.

And so we see in the fulfillment of prophecy that God is working. And when He says something will happen, we can be sure of that. We can see Him working in the affairs of men. Because He has said it, it gets done. So we see prophecy then as a proof of God's sovereignty.

It is a proof that God does what He says what He will do (slightly different from the last point). It simply means that He fulfills His promises, and we can have faith in that.

Because we have seen that what He says comes to pass, we know that if He says something else will happen, we can have faith that it will too. So it is a bulwark to our faith. It also helps to motivate us, to spur us on, to be prepared for Christ's return.

It is by the prophecies that we see in God's Word, as Christ says, that when you see these things happen, know that it is very near. So, we can see from the prophecies and comparing them with things that are happening in the world that we know that time is short. And so this motivates us to do the things we need to do to be prepared for Jesus Christ's return, and for our jobs in God's Kingdom.

All that being said though, prophecy is not the most important part of God's Word. It is definitely to us the most stimulating. It is the most exciting part of God's Word; the most intriguing. There are puzzles to be solved. There are things to watch for. There are graphic images of beasts and whatnot that run through the pages of the Bible that is really interesting and stimulates the mind, gets us thinking about things.

We get to compare it with history. We get to compare it with current events. And all these things we can really get into them. But it is far from the most important thing that we can take out of God's Word. And it is my estimation, looking at it from my angle, that too many of us place too much emphasis on prophecy, and not enough on what is truly important, which is doctrine and Christian living that comes out of God's Word. It is these two things—doctrine and Christian living—where the rubber meets the road. That is where God's judgment on us will fall.

Do you think (hypothetically speaking) in the judgment, God says, “Do you know who the false prophet is?” Or does He say, “Did you love your neighbor as yourself?” Where is God's judgment going to fall, on our knowledge of prophecy and how well we can put it together? Or on how we are applying what it is that He said that we should do?

So in the next minute or two, I would like to look at a few cautionary scriptures in God's Word to help us reprioritize prophecy.

Now before I go any further, let me say that we need to preach on prophecy. We need to write on prophecy. We need to think about prophecy. We need to study prophecy. However, and this is *a big however*, we must do these things with the firm knowledge that our teaching on prophecy, our studying on prophecy, our thinking on prophecy (except where prophecy has already been fulfilled) *is highly speculative and subject to change*. That is very important.

I know every time we speak on prophecy, we do not say, “What I am about to say is my interpretation,” or, “This is what I have speculated on how this will come about,” but believe me when I tell you, that is what we are thinking. Unless we know from the Scriptures and from history that something has already occurred, we cannot speak dogmatically about anything, except the firm things that Jesus Christ and the apostles and the prophets have told us will happen. But only in the context of what the Bible says about it, not in the context of how we think they may happen.

So I am even going to utter this heresy right now, that even Herbert W. Armstrong's understanding of prophecy is not the gospel truth. He was a man just as we are. And he had God's Spirit, and I am sure He got the framework of prophecy correct—at least most of it. But we know that many of his prognostications have not come to pass, and the timing he placed on things is way late. He would always say, “Five years, 10 years, 20 years down the road, . . .” and it is been 17 years already since he has died. And so, we need to look at things in terms of the change of the times.

Things are very much different now than they were when Mr. Armstrong died. The world has changed dramatically in that time. And so, he got the skeleton right, I am sure of it, but where we hang current events is where we need to be careful. And we need to understand that even his prognostications, his predictions, the way he thought things would turn out, are merely expert opinion—not revelation. He knew of which he spoke. But we cannot treat them with the same definite revelatory character that the actual words of God's Bible—God's Word has. So we have a responsibility to rethink these matters in light of what we know today.

If we doggedly hang on to every word, comma, and period of Mr. Armstrong's writings, we will eventually go the way of the Amish and the Mennonites; people whom the times have passed by. They are stuck in 16th or 17th century modes of thinking. So they wear black all the time. They will not use machinery. They will not even drive automobiles. God does not say anything about that in His words, but they are stuck with the teachings of someone back several hundred years, and they are failing to apply God's Word properly. So I just want to caution us that Christ tells us to watch so that we will stay current. If we stop watching and say we have already figured things out, we are going to miss it. So we need to stay current.

Let us go to II Peter. I want to enlighten you about this one particular scripture, because it is very important. I think that in the past we have misused this somewhat by implying that the church's interpretations of prophecies are right.

II Peter 1:19-21 We also have the prophetic word made more sure which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Knowing this first [this is the scripture] that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Now I would like you to do something very violent. You can do it in your own way. Rip that word *interpretation* out of there. I am not saying let us do this literally. But it is a very poor translation of this word. The Greek word that is there does not mean interpretation. It is actually on the entire other end of the spectrum. Do you know what this word means? Literally it means *impulse*. And its usage here should probably be the word, as it is in my New King James version, *origin*—source.

Let us read and put that in: “Knowing this first that no prophecy of scripture is of any private origin.” And, if you want a quick interpretation (pardon the use of the word) of this verse, you simply go to the next verse. Verse 21

interprets verse 20. It is saying the exact same thing. Verse 21 says, “For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

So what does verse 20 say? It says that the prophecies that we find in God's Word have their source in God, and so they are more sure than anything else that we have ever come across on this earth. It has nothing to do with our interpretation of prophecy. It is simply saying that the source of God's prophetic Word is God Himself. And though God used prophets, its credibility does not hang on them. God's Word's credibility hangs on God. And we can be super sure that what He says will happen, will happen.

This does not mean that you cannot look into the Bible and have an opinion about how it is going to come about. But that opinion had better be based on God's Word, because the source is in God.

And so Peter's caution here is that we need to take heed to the Scriptures more than what men say, because the Scriptures have the backing of God Himself. And the men have the backing of God only in the sense that they have been inspired by God, and are subject to failure, to not heeding the inspiration of God, or what have you. But the word itself, that is sure.

You might want to jot down Luke 24:44-49. This is where Christ explains the scriptures about Himself to His apostles, and says that He will give them the Holy Spirit so that they can understand these things. That is how we come to understand the truth, by God's inspiration. And that is also how we come to understand prophecy.

But prophecy itself is deliberately vague, and couched in symbolic language to obscure the meaning, as it says in Matthew 13:10-17, so that those who do not know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God will not understand. And from my sermon from last week, even we ourselves will not know the timing of things, specifically the timing of His coming.

I was going to go into I Corinthians 13, which was my whole point, but I have gone on too long. But I do want to go there and just pick up one or two. I Corinthians 13, of course, is the love chapter.

I Corinthians 13:8 Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail.

Paul is very specific here, very positive. Prophecies will fail. He says the same things about tongues. Tongues will cease. Knowledge will vanish away. Then he says, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part.” What does that tell you? What is the most important thing that we are supposed to be doing right now? We are supposed to be getting back to love. And love is that big term under which fits, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And then it is further broken down into the first four commandments, and then the last six commandments.

And then it is further refined again, and again, and again throughout God's Word in very more specific instances. *That* is the important thing!

I Corinthians 13:10-12 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

So we do not know everything right now. Not even the apostle Paul knew everything then. And who was he compared to us? So do not expect us always to be right. Do not expect Herbert Armstrong always to be right. We all know in part and we are coming into a greater understanding.

But let us remember what the apostle Paul says here. In this whole section we will just encapsulate it in verse 13:

I Corinthians 13:13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

At the end of chapter 12, he said, “I am going to show you a more excellent way,” and that more excellent way is the way of love. That is where our hearts and minds should be.

I have not meant to be offensive to anybody, but I have been seeing this fixation with prophecy crop up too much not to say anything. Focusing on prophecy can be an artful dodging of our more important responsibilities.

So as we approach the Passover, less than two weeks away, it may be a good idea if we take a look at our own approach to these matters and resolve to put more emphasis where it belongs, which is growing in God's character, which is love.