

# To Watch And Keep

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During his ministry, Herbert Armstrong stressed quite a few times that a third of God's Word is the word of prophecy. The question naturally arises, then, what is its purpose? How does God want us to use prophecy? What does He expect us to gain from it?

Before going any further, we should note that this article will focus primarily on God's prophecies for His church, and will not consider the use of Bible prophecies directed to the people of the world outside of the church. One of the purposes of prophecies to the world (Greek *kosmos*) appears repeatedly in the book of Ezekiel. For instance, the prophecy found in Ezekiel 6 concerns God's judgment on the idolatry of Israel. However, in verse 7, God says, "The slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

This formula, expressing the ability of prophecy to reveal God at work in the world, is repeated in different formats throughout the word of prophecy. When prophecy is dramatically fulfilled, the wicked, who today deny that God is and that He is working, will understand that He is very much working.

However, God's Word is written for us, those called into His church. We already believe, and we know who God is. We also know that He is working in and through us, as well as to bring about His purpose on earth. The question thus becomes, "What is God seeking through prophecy from us who believe Him?"

## ***Warning, Promise, Command***

Consider what is written in Revelation 16:13-14:

And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.

Do we fully understand *any* part of Revelation 16? Do we really know the timing of this passage? Do we grasp how it will all work out? Has *anyone* in history ever really understood this particular prophecy? This is just one example; tens of other examples could have been cited.

We do receive some insight as we analyze this prophecy in context, and we can figure out some answers. We get the general idea, the essence of the prophecy. Yet, after reading Revelation 16, we are left to wonder, "How is it all going to work out? How will events move to turn out this way?" Because this is God's Word, we believe it will work out, but we do not know all the answers.

At this point, we come face to face with Revelation 16:15. Christ Himself is speaking: "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they

see his shame." Here is an explicit warning: that Christ will come as a thief. In the midst of disaster upon disaster and global war, some in God's church will be surprised by it. It seems ironic how that could happen, but it is apparently going to happen that way.

Here also is a conditional promise: Those who watch and keep their garments will be blessed.

Revelation 16 does not just reveal prophetic information about the future like some type of crystal ball. No, the prophecy is capped with a command to act: to "watch" and to "keep." Choosing not to remain vigilant, choosing not to guard our spiritual condition from atrophy, we can become complacent. We can become neglectful. Our obedience to the commands to watch and to keep is what is truly important to this particular scripture—not a full understanding of every nuance of this chapter.

In fact, what God wants to see—and in fact, expects to see—is our obedience in faith to the commands of this passage notwithstanding our lack of understanding of the details. In this sense, the blessing promised in verse 15 comes in spite of our full understanding of this prophecy, or lack thereof. Knowledge is not a prerequisite to receiving the blessing. Obedience is.

We believe God's word of prophecy, though we may not always necessarily understand it. Nevertheless, God wants the prophecy to motivate us to obedience, and our obedience will bring a blessing with it.

### ***Hear and Do***

In James 1:22, the apostle admonishes us to be obedient doers, not just hearers, of the Word. In the context of this subject, it means acting and doing the commands so often embedded in the prophetic word. James' command to act, rather than just to hear, is frequently echoed in prophecy, as in Revelation 1:3: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words [*logos*] of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near."

The "and" in this verse is very important. God does not say that we are blessed simply if we hear and if we read. This is not to suggest that we should not study God's prophetic word; of course, we should. All Scripture is given for our edification and our inspiration (II Timothy 3:16). It is all inspired for that purpose. However, we are to read or hear *and* to keep.

What do we keep? Do we keep predictions about horsemen and beasts? How does one do that? What we are to keep are those commands that are liberally sprinkled throughout the word of prophecy—in the book of Revelation and in the prophetic sections of the gospels and epistles, as well as in the prophecies of the Old Testament. For instance, the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 contain several commands to repent and repeated commands to overcome.

The prophetic word is not just a collection of mind puzzles that we are somehow supposed to unravel. God's prophecies are not that at all, but they are calls for change. They are calls for our growth. Remember, the blessing comes to those who keep, who *do* what God commands whether or not we understand the details of the prophecy.

God is faithful. A Christian reading this passage a thousand years ago, who had no idea of what we know of history or of the technology that we understand now, could receive the blessing through obedience, just as we can. Again, knowing is not the issue, but obedience is.

The word "keep" is a command that appears ten times in the book of Revelation. It is the same word that is translated in John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." We will notice just a few of its appearances. The first three are written to three of the seven churches: Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, respectively:

**Revelation 2:26:** ". . . keeps My works until the end. . . ."

**Revelation 3:3:** ". . . hold fast and repent. . . ." [Here, "hold fast" is the same Greek word as "to keep" in the other examples.]

**Revelation 3:8:** ". . . have kept My word. . . ."

**Revelation 12:17:** ". . . who keep the commandments of God. . . ." [This is written to the remnant of the seed, that is, to God's elect.]

As we can see, God has sprinkled this command to "keep" all over the prophecies of Revelation.

### ***Not Seeing and Believing***

The apostle Paul himself, as intelligent as he was, as inspired as he was, admitted that he lacked complete and full understanding, claiming according to the Phillips translation in I Corinthians 13:12, "At present we are like men looking at puzzling reflections in a mirror." Only a highly deceived person would claim that prophecy is transparent to him. Those who are wise among God's people understand that we see the future through translucent glass, through fogged glass, not clearly. The question is, can we believe even when we do not see clearly?

Thomas, not yet having seen Christ after His resurrection, doubted the resurrection's reality. But upon encountering the risen Christ, Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and My God!" Christ's reply to Thomas' statement is very telling: "Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'" (John 20:28-29).

The second appearance of the verb "seen" here is the same Greek word that is often translated as "know," as it is in verse 14. Mary is outside the sepulcher, and she saw Jesus and did not *know* that it was He. It could just as easily read that she "did not see that it was Jesus." In English, we often connect the idea of sight with knowledge or with knowing. We do it all the time. We can be staring at a formula or a concept straight in the face, as it were, and not understanding it or not agreeing, and we simply say, "I don't see it." And when the light finally dawns, we say, "Oh, yes! Now I see it. Now I understand."

Yet Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen"—those who lack full understanding and knowledge—"and yet have believed." "Believe" here is the verb form of the Greek noun that is often translated as "the faith." Christ promises the blessing to those who do not see, who do not have full understanding, but who nevertheless believe. We often expect to know and understand so much, yet we are to live by faith.

Believing the prophetic word and putting into practice the commands to repent, to keep, and to watch that appear so often in God's prophetic word are walking by faith rather than by sight or by knowledge. Paul mentions this in II Corinthians 5:7.

### ***"Imagination of Disaster"***

Novelist Henry James claimed, "Those who lack the imagination of disaster are doomed to be surprised by the world." By "imagination," James is not referring to a fake disaster, that is, an imaginary disaster, but he is using the word in its dictionary sense, "the formation of visual images of things not present." Writers present these types of images—these imaginations—to the public all the time. They appear in movies and in horror stories. They are called science *fiction*. Neither the writers nor the public believe these images. To them the imagination of disaster is understood to be unreal, fantastic, incredible, just another movie or just another book.

Those of this world reckon God's prophecies, from God's Book, to be mere fantasies and myths—just another book. They count them to be the imaginations of a long-gone and highly superstitious people. However, we of the holy truth do not think this way; we believe the word of prophecy. We believe these "visual images of things not yet present," images formed by God Himself and given to us in the Scriptures. These are images of disaster, dreadful judgments on the unrepentant. They are also images of blessing, word-portraits of the World Tomorrow, the Kingdom of God on earth, and of life in eternity, our hope.

We may not fully understand in detail all of these images of disaster and images of blessing, but we believe them. We are not of those who scoff at the visual images that God gives us (II Peter 3:1-4). They are real to us. Having the same faith as the Speaker of this prophetic word—the same faith that operates in Jesus Christ—we, like Him, are able to call "those things which do not exist as though they did" (Romans 4:17), so sure are we that the word of prophecy will ultimately come about.

With that faith of Christ that works in us, we share the mind of God (I Corinthians 2:16), and we look at time in many ways just as He does, through the eyes of faith. The word of prophecy has great value, yet it lies, not in our understanding of it, but in our belief of it. We believe often in the face of our lack of understanding.

The prophetic word works as a kind of counterweight to complacency. Believing it to be sure, we are motivated to watch and to keep and to repent. It motivates us to obey. The imagination of God—those images of blessings and disasters that He provides in His Word—keeps us from falling into complacency if we believe His prophetic word and follow up that belief with obedience.

However, the engineering metaphor of a counterweight is troublesome because it is so static. It is closer to the truth to say that the word of prophecy, when believed, when acted on in obedience, is a *dynamic* force, not a static one.

In I Peter 1, Peter speaks about Christ. Note that the word "seen" in the first phrase is the same word mentioned above that is often translated as "know."

. . . whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you. . . . (I Peter 1:8-10)

Peter goes on for some length writing about the work of the prophets and prophecy. The point, however, is that the end, or the result, of our faith is salvation. The word of prophecy, because it gives us opportunity to exercise our faith by putting it into action, is a dynamic force, motivating us

toward salvation. Far from simply a static counterweight, the prophetic word, when believed on and acted on, *drives* us to God's Kingdom.

What is more, God's Word does all of this even when we do not fully understand it.