

Why Study Prophecy?

The Importance of Prophecy

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I have an assignment for the teens in our groups. I want you to study the book of Habakkuk. It is a small three-chapter book in the Minor Prophets. And, when you read it, I want you to think about how it applies to today and figure out for yourself how it applies to the Churches of God and to the world. Also look to see if there is anything in the book of Habakkuk that should teach us about what we should be doing at this time. What does it teach us about God and what He is doing at this time?

I have not made up my mind yet, but I have been thinking about maybe speaking about Habakkuk in my next sermon.

But today, I am speaking about prophecy in general. And, for most Church of God members, prophecy just stirs the blood! Our fascination with prophecy probably goes back to the beginning of our calling. Our first recollections of the Church of God often have to do with Mr. Armstrong explaining some prophecy on the broadcast, or telecast, or in some booklet, or *Plain Truth* article. They made us hungry for more prophecy.

We made available books and booklets to read like *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*, which ended up being the most requested book ever by the audiences of the Worldwide Church of God's *World Tomorrow* broadcast, and later telecast. Also, the booklet *Revelation: Unveiled at Last!* And, there was also *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. When I was a little kid, I loved the cover of that booklet. I thought it was really neat. It was almost like a comic strip with all those scary horsemen such as Death riding on the Pale Horse.

All these booklets, broadcasts, and telecasts propelled us down the road to prophecy. We sucked it right up. We loved it! Prophecy is fascinating. It is intriguing. And, in a way, it is kind of scary too, to know the future far in advance.

Some people look at it like some huge mystery, or a huge puzzle that needs to be solved. And so they go at it like Sherlock Holmes, trying to find every little clue and detail so they will know what is going to happen in the next few years.

Some people devote almost all of their study time to the study of prophecy—that is once they get stung by that prophecy bug, it seems like there is no cure for it in some people.

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And that, of course, leads to a great imbalance in their lives because all they are reading about is prophecy, and not about some of these more important things. The Bible, as we have been so often told, is about 1/3 prophecy—actually slightly less than that. It is just about 30 percent.

For God to devote so much space to prophecy implies that indeed it is important. However, we cannot forget the other 2/3 portion of the Bible, which includes history and all the instruction in righteousness. Maybe that should give us a formula for what our study time should be devoted to. Let us say about 30% prophecy, 30% history, and 40% Christian living and doctrines. Among those three, which would you choose as the most important to your salvation? Surely it is not prophecy. Surely it is not history. So, that leaves the wisdom of Christian living.

But, as I alluded to above, the neglect of the study of prophecy would be just as bad as only studying prophecy. You must have that balance. And to say, "I just do not understand prophecy. I am not geared that way," is an excuse for not delving into it every once in a while because really there are important principles and lessons that you can learn from the prophecies.

So, today, we are going to look into the question, "Why Study Prophecy?"

Why study prophecy at all? Now, the way that I have organized it, it might seem more like a lecture than a sermon, however I hope it will be instructive and helpful for your study time and getting a good grasp of why we should study prophecy.

So, here we are. It is very close to the end of the age, we think. And, many are going kind of bonkers over prophecy. It seems like every few months we hear on the radio that some person has come up with a date and time for Christ's return. All His followers will meet in some predetermined spot, and they wait for Christ to come. And that day passes, and another prophecy is wrong. Things like this and many others like it give prophecy a bad name.

We have heard in the past about Jim Jones, or the Heavenly Gates group, or David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, where they use prophetic scripture to convince their people to follow a way that is not good. And in their cases, many died, because they had this idea about how prophecy was going work out, how they were to be so instrumental in it, and that they should do certain things.

And it surely strikes the Churches of God too. Prophecy has done more to divide us than to unite us, lately. One group believes that Elijah has come, and so has Elisha! But,

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you know, the people in that group, even the early supporters, are beginning to complain that their group is unbalanced, that all they do is talk about prophecy, yet they are not feeding the people what they need to know. Every message seems to be on prophecy. And it is getting boring and repetitive.

And then on the other side, in our former group, the Worldwide Church of God has repudiated prophecy. I do not know if they believe any of it any more. It seems that anything that Mr. Armstrong taught they would repudiate, just because it bore his name.

So we have extremes.

Some get hair-brained ideas about different specific prophecies, and often the leadership of their particular group does not agree with it. "Well," they say, "you are just not inspired by God. You are obviously not part of the church. But, I am. Those who think like I do, will come and follow me, and we will set up somewhere else, and we will make our own church." And their one big doctrine will be this obscure prophecy that they think will divide the sheep from the goats somehow. But if you do not believe their prophecy, well, you might as well kiss the place of safety goodbye. So they leave in a huff, and start their own group of "true believers"—well, true believers in their prophecy.

But, it just does not work that way. We have gotten off into the twigs in some areas of prophecy. We need to get ourselves back to the basics—becoming re-grounded in what prophecy really is, what the prophets are, what use are the prophets, and why we should study the prophecies—so that we can understand just where it fits in our Christian lives, not chronological history.

1. What is Prophecy?

We are going to start with the basics from the beginning. The Bible does not give a "dictionary" definition of prophecy. You would not expect it to do that either. There are very few instances where the Bible says that such and such is... and then gives a definition. Rather, it is usually something that we must gather from all the scriptures, and see its overall sense of the matter.

The most common definition that I have heard, and it is also the one that they gave us at Ambassador College in Pasadena, California is that ***prophecy is history written in advance by God***. It is, then, God revealing His will and His plan to us long before it ever happens. It may be a few months, a few years, or even hundreds, or thousands of years yet in the future. But, we know that with God, if He says a thing, it will happen and come to pass. No one can stop Him and His plan. And, He reveals these things to us—His

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will, His plan—out of love. We will touch more on that part later.

It is my opinion that this definition may be a bit too narrow. Prophecy can be looked at from a wider perspective than history written in advance by God. II Peter 1 is one of the most seminal scriptures on prophecy in the whole Bible.

II Peter 1:19-21 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, 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, 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, to me, this is the Bible's definition of prophecy—all three of these verses.

Peter implies here that prophecy is anything spoken or written, under the inspiration of God. It is true. Prophecy is anything and everything spoken or written under the inspiration of God. It is God breathed—God inspired—words.

However, what does this mean? It is the whole Bible. Not, just one third of the Bible. But, everything that God said that is written down here in the Bible is prophecy. Let us see if this is right.

Hebrews 1:1 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,...

Paul says basically the same thing. The words that God spoke through the prophets and wrote down for us are prophetic. Prophecy is just the inspired word of God.

Now, this is true and more correct of the two definitions, because prophecy is not only the foretelling predictions, it is also proclaiming God's word. So, it is foretelling, and it is also forth-telling. It is speaking ahead as well as speaking out. You can speak ahead of time about what is going to occur, or you can speak out the words of God.

So, this is why you find history, wisdom, and Christian living as well as predictions in the books of the prophets. Look in the book of Jeremiah. There, you will find prayers, history, current events of the time. You will find teaching on what the people should be doing, what they should have been doing in their time, as well as the prophecies, the oracles about various things. Prophecy is all those things rolled into one. So you see

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that prophecy is much wider and broader subject than just foretelling what is over the next horizon.

It is also speaking out. Look at Amos. Surely, he tells Israel what is going to happen within the next couple hundred years, but he spent a great deal of time castigating the people for their sins, for how far they had fallen from God, and on how they needed to come back. Those things are not just prophecies. They are how God's people should live.

So, prophecy covers a whole gamut of forms and topics, specific instances, and specific examples, and even things that Ezekiel did: where he went about acting out prophecies. And Daniel: where he would carry a message; and Samuel: when he would scold the king. All these things are included in prophecy. So, prophecy is hardly a one-dimensional subject, where we normally thought of it as only predicting future events.

2. What are the Functions of a Prophet?

What is a prophet? What are his functions? What are his duties? What is God having him do? How does God use His prophets to further His plan along?

First, He uses his prophets to foretell the future. (I do not have these in any particular order.) This is the common one. God wants us to know what is going to happen for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is to prove that He is God. He wants us to know and to know that we know that He is God, and we are following the One who can bring prophecy to pass. We need to be reassured once in a while that our God is the One who has events in His hands and in His books. The events are going to come to pass just as He says that they will. It gives us great hope and great faith.

It is only the Eternal God who can bring about future events spoken of hundreds or thousands of years in advance. He has the power to make them happen. This proves His existence, and it proves just how powerful He is. This gives us great hope to loose all our doubts because we know that our God is God.

Isaiah 46:9-11 Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.

Period. Exclamation point!

Only God can do things like this. No mere mortal can live for hundreds of thousands of years to predict a thing, and then make it come to pass. No mere mortal—no mere spirit being has the power to bring such astounding events to pass by his sovereign will. Only God has the eternity and the power to do such things.

Turn to Joshua 6 for an example, though we do not often think of him as being a prophet. But he is. Here is a prophecy that he spoke, showing that this was God's words and prophecy through Joshua, because 500 years passed before this was fulfilled.

Joshua 6:26 Then Joshua charged them at that time, saying, "Cursed be the man before the LORD who rises up and builds this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates."

What he is saying here is that there will be child sacrifice in order to appease the gods—the old Canaanite practice of building a city on the bones of a sacrificial victim. And where this was fulfilled is found in I Kings 16, and the chronicler points this out.

I Kings 16:34 In his [Ahab's] days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation with Abiram his firstborn, and with his youngest son Segub he set up its gates, according to the word of the LORD, which He had spoken through Joshua the son of Nun.

What we see here is that God fulfilled this prophecy to the very letter. He laid his foundation with his firstborn son, and set up the gates with his youngest son. What a gruesome prophecy that God fulfilled to the letter.

The second function of a prophet is God's use of them to carry out a mission. Now, sometimes these missions from God are merely warning someone or some group of people that something is about to happen. So, they had better change their ways, or hit the trail, or whatever He wants them to do. But, He always gives them a clear idea of what He wants them to do. At other times, though, the mission is more specific than that. God often calls a prophet to do one major work that may well affect events for centuries or millennia in the future.

Here is an example in Exodus 3.

Exodus 3:7-10 And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

So, this was Moses' mission. God sent that man, Moses, to Pharaoh so that he could give him a message, which was, "Let My people go!" And then, once Pharaoh agreed to this with a little persuasion from God, he took that ragtag group of a couple million people and all their flocks, herds, and worldly goods and trekked them across the desert for 40 years.

And, on the way, God gave them the law, the judgments, and the statutes; all those Israelites died; a new generation became of age, and they learned the law, the statutes, and judgments; God set up the priesthood. And then finally, God brought them to the edge of the Promised Land, and then Joshua took them from there.

But all this that Moses did had far, far reaching effects. And probably, the most far-reaching effect was that He brought Israel back into the land of Canaan and therefore made it possible for such people as David to be born and rule. And from David came the Messiah.

This was not just a little thing that Moses did. This mission from God to Moses is still affecting everyone today and will continue to affect everyone for all time. This was not a little mission. This was one of the biggies. This is one of the top world-changing events.

In my estimation, this ranks right after the events at Calvary. But even Calvary could not have happened unless Moses' mission had been accomplished first.

In Acts 11, we will see this in action in the New Testament. This one is not quite so big, but I am sure that the people that it affected thought it was quite big. This is quoted from a prophet named Agabus.

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Acts 11:27-30 And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the [mostly Roman] world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar [by comparison]. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Like I said, this was not so earth-shattering in scope. But, to the people in Judea, it was certainly appreciated. God looked down and saw the people of Judea and the headquarters church there were going to be suffering through this famine. And so He sent the man, Agabus, with a mission to get the Church of God to start collecting foodstuffs for the people in Judea. He did not want the work to stop just because some little ol' plague was coming on the world. So, He sent Agabus. Agabus was used again, in Acts 21:10, in a similar fashion to Ezekiel, in that he took Paul's belt off and acted out what was soon to happen; the owner of this belt would soon find himself in bonds in prison if he continues to Jerusalem. Paul knew what was about to happen.

There are other examples, such as Nathan sent on a mission to David to declare his sin. Elijah had several missions from God. Jonah was sent to Nineveh. Isaiah was sent to Hezekiah, while Jeremiah was sent the final kings of Judah. This was true, too, of Samuel, and several of the unnamed prophets. They all had missions from God to warn, to counsel, or to accuse some one, or some group that something needed to get done.

A. Prophets Are Used by God to Reveal Sin, to Warn of Consequences, and to Call to Repentance.

Now, this function is almost always part of the prophet's duties. Because, what good is being part of God's people if you do not do what God says? A prophet is always trying to get the people to return to God, to get rid of their sins, and to be afraid of what would happen if they continued in their sins. God is a loving God. He does not just warn people that impending disaster is coming, He also tells them how to avoid it: what they should be doing so that this disaster will not occur at all.

So then, because He warns them, the prophet counsels repentance and tells them what will happen if they do not change and how to make sure that they are on the right side of the fence when the disaster comes or to make sure that it does not come on them at all. This is a classic scripture (in Isaiah 58) on this particular function of a prophet.

Isaiah 58:1 Cry aloud, spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

You know, the Old Testament prophets were constantly showing the people where they had gone wrong. And do you know what? It almost invariably landed them in either hot water, in jail, or in the grave. Not only is this one of the primary functions of a prophet, it is also maybe one of the most serious, especially for the prophet himself, because if he gives his message to a people who do not want to hear, it often meant his life. He is told to spare not. And who likes to not be spared? Well of course, everyone wants to be spared. But when the prophet comes in with both barrels blazing, usually they find a way to shut his mouth against them. But, not before God has him say all that He sent him to say for Him.

You can also check for yourself Ezekiel 33:1-11 and "The Watchman Message." This passage also shows the prophet's responsibility in this fashion. He is to be like the watchman on the city wall. If he sees the disaster coming, but does not warn the people about it and the people die, the blood is on his head according to our God and Judge. Usually the people shoot him off the wall (one way or another). But according to God, if he has warned the people, he has fulfilled his job, and he is finished. No blood is on his head. But, if he shirks that responsibility somehow and does not warn the people when a disaster clearly is on the way, then God says that the people will still die for their sins, but the blood will also be on the prophet's head, too, for not warning them. Even though the prophet agrees and tells God, "I will do it, because You are more important than anybody else, and I should do what You want me to do."

The function has not changed in the New Testament.

Luke 3:3 And he [John the Baptist] went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

Luke 3:7-9 Then he [John the Baptist] said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father. [This will not happen to us, because we are the Covenant People].' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. [That old covenant does not mean much when it comes to this sort of thing.] And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

"You had better repent and bear fruit worthy of this message, and if you do not, the ax is ready and waiting to chop you down." This was a thankless job. Just like many prophets, John the Baptist became headless. He died because of his preaching.

God does not want harm to come to the people. He does not want to harm people. He is not a cruel God, like many would have you believe. He wants people to have abundant, successful, happy lives. And the prophet's job was to show the people how that would be accomplished. But most people did not see it that way in the end. They either cut their heads off, threw them into the fire, sawed them in two, or let them rot and starve in a pit. It is not very pleasant to think about.

But, their job as a prophet often required that they had to be willing to suffer for God's sake.

B. God Uses His Prophets to Reveal Himself to Others.

Oftentimes, God must send a prophet to a people who have forgotten that God even exists or to where some people are who are confused as to who the real God really is. So, they need a reminder. The prophet has to reintroduce God to them, sometimes through some very spectacular ways. Please turn to I Kings 18. This just may be the most spectacular way this was accomplished outside of the Transfiguration.

I Kings 18:20-24 So Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel. And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? [These people were confused! They had no idea.] If the LOORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him [and do not be double minded about all this]." But the people [were confused and] answered him not a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LOORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LOORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God." So all the people answered and said, "It is well spoken."

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This sounds like a pretty good plan. If there is a god out there, and he wants to be known, then he will certainly answer one group or the other. So, they went through all this, and it was funny how they danced and leaped around, gashed themselves, and did all sorts of odd things. And nothing happened which caused Elijah to say to them, "Oh, he must be asleep, or went on a journey. Maybe you need to cry louder and wake him up."

Yet, nothing happened. All day long, nothing happened. So Elijah prepared his sacrifice, building an altar with un-hewn stones as said in the Pentateuch. They dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold two seahs of seed. (I do not know what unit of measure this is.) He put the wood on and then laid the bull on top of that; then he dumped three water pot jars of water on the sacrifice, wetting the wood, and filling the trench down around below.

I Kings 18:36-37 And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again."

It might have taken me about 15 seconds to read this mighty little prayer.

I Kings 18:38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench.

It must have been, "Whoosh!" And suddenly it was all gone, with only a hole in the ground.

I Kings 18:39 Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!"

And then they went and killed all the prophets of Baal for being false prophets. This is pretty serious.

God reveals Himself. That is one of the functions of a prophet—to reveal God. This

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spectacular miracle jarred the people of Israel into admitting that our God is God!

Now, these things did not completely change them, because they went right back into idolatry shortly thereafter. However, God made His witness through Elijah.

You can also check for yourself Matthew 17:1-5 and Christ's Transfiguration. This is probably the most spectacular revelation of God in the entire Bible! It ranks right up there with Isaiah seeing God; and also right up there with the revelations that Ezekiel saw too with God's portable throne, and the four living creatures with their four wings, and the four wheels.

One way or another, God reveals through His servants, to those who are listening, who God is. And He does this through His prophets.

C. God uses His Prophets to Witness before the People.

Now, I have touched on this just a little bit earlier. Like Elijah said, prophets are sometimes the only converted person among all the people at the moment. And His life was witness to them on what God is, how God lives, what He wants His people to do, how He wants His people to act, and where He wants His people to live—all these things. The prophets and the apostles were bound by his office to be an example among the people. By his life and sometimes more often by his death, the prophet shows how a godly man lives and acts. And preaching aside, his life made a witness to the people.

Probably the best-known example of this is in the life of the prophet Ezekiel.

Remember? Ezekiel was the one who was told to do all those strange things before the people. He acted out all these things and humbled himself before the people to do as he was told. Once, he had to lie on his side so many days and then roll over to the other side for so many days again. Another time he acted out Zechariah leaving Jerusalem with a bag over his shoulder, digging out through the wall, presenting the story by acting.

Do you suppose he might have been a bit embarrassed having to do all these things? But he was setting an example, teaching through acting, and doing as he was told by God to do. He was witnessing before the people, on God's behalf, a prophecy that God was about to bring about.

He wanted the people to get a certain amount of teaching from all this too. Turn to

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Ezekiel 24, to a very poignant section of scripture that the prophet acted on in order to witness to the people.

Ezekiel 24:15-16 Also the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes [your wife] with one stroke; yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, nor shall your tears run down."

"Ezekiel, keep a stiff upper lip. We are going to use this as an occasion to witness before the people. It is not going to be easy. But, you must do it."

Ezekiel 24:17-24 "Sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead; bind your turban on your head, and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover your lips, and do not eat man's bread of sorrow." So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died; and the next morning I did as I was commanded. And the people said to me, "Will you not tell us what these things signify to us, that you behave so?" Then I answered them, "The word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Speak to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I will profane My sanctuary, your arrogant boast, the desire of your eyes, the delight of your soul; and your sons and daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword. And you shall do as I have done; you shall not cover your lips nor eat man's bread of sorrow. Your turbans shall be on your heads and your sandals on your feet; you shall neither mourn nor weep, but you shall pine away in your iniquities and mourn with one another. Thus Ezekiel is a sign to you; according to all that he has done you shall do; and when this comes, you shall know that I am the Lord GOD.'"

He is saying, "Israel! Because you have sinned, I will bring these calamities upon you, and you will pine away because of your sin. Your sins have brought this upon you. And you do not have any reason to mourn or weep for these people. You should be weeping that you have sinned, and brought this upon yourselves."

At first, Ezekiel had to show the way through his own example.

Now, this function of a prophet has not changed very much under the New Covenant either. Prophets are not only the first to tell, but also to show. Write down, II Thessalonians 3:6-9, and the example of the apostle Paul. If you remember in II

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Thessalonians 2, he gave the prophecy of The Man of Sin. Now, in the very next chapter he tells them, "Now while I was with you, I acted this way, did these things, and made myself no burden among you to show you that this is how you should live. Follow my example."

So, the principle is the same in the Old Testament, and the New Testament. A person's example is always more powerful than his words.

3. What is the Focus of Prophecy?

Since we know now what a prophet does, what is the focus of prophecy altogether? Is it Israel? Is it the Church of God? Is it the end of the age? Is it something even better than these?

This passage, in Luke 24, takes place as they are ending their journey on the road to Emmaus. Remember? Jesus had died and had also risen. Two of the disciples were going to Emmaus, and Jesus joins them on the road without being recognized. He was asking about all the turmoil that was taking place. And they told Him. And then He tells them that they should have recognized Him.

Luke 24:27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

Luke 24:44 Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me."

So what is the focus of prophecy? Christ is the focus of prophecy. Paul puts this in a different way in Romans 10. My dad has used this several times in his recent series.

Romans 10:4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

So, not only is He the focus of the Law, He is also the focus of the prophets. And He told us in those verses in Luke 24 that He is also the focus of the Psalms! All the scriptures have their focus on Him—Jesus Christ! Every one of the prophecies have

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something to do with Jesus Christ, or His Kingdom of God, or His subjects, or His law, or His life, or some other thing connected with Christ in one way or another. So, keep this in mind as you study the prophecies—Jesus Christ is the central figure in every one of them.

4. So, Why Study Prophecy?

I believe we have gathered enough background information to put together some valid reasons why we need to study prophecy from time to time. So, I have come up with four points and have ranked them in the order of importance, from the least to the greatest according to my way of thinking. Of course, you may not see it that way, but it is my way of presenting them to you, with the teaching aspects the most important point to grasp.

Learning and growing in Godly character is far more important than knowing who the leader of the Beast is, and when he will arrive, etc. It is far more important to become a Son of God in God's image than to know what is going on in prophecy. Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ and be made into the image of God.

Why study prophecy?

A. To Know a *GENERAL* Outline of Future Events.

When we start to getting into the particulars—the details and the twigs—we start getting off into something that probably does not matter a whole lot. And if we spend a lot of time in the minors, we will never make it to the majors—if you understand my drift. The more important priorities will end up passing you by if you spend too much time looking at the twigs.

Knowing the prophecies in the tiniest details is in the end a selfish pursuit. Think about it. It implies pride of one's knowledge of what is going to happen. It implies an attempt to save the self from calamity, does it not? It is more important, one feels, to escape the things that will come at the end, than to be ready for them, because he has God's character.

Remember what Christ said in Matthew 16:25? "Whoever desires to save his life, will lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake, will find it." Maybe if you are busy trying to save your life trying to know every in and out of prophecy, and how to avoid the coming end-time, you may just find yourself on the outs because you have not had time to develop the righteous character of God! And that is what is going to save you!—God

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looking down and saying, "Look! He has done everything I have asked him to do. I think I will save him from the hour of trouble, because he obeys Me."

Does knowing what is going to occur carry any weight with God in judging you, or at the end? Will our expertise and foreknowledge of dates, times, and events, and sequences, and how they are fit in rate any higher than love? Joy? Peace? Patience? Goodness? Kindness? Meekness? Faith? Mercy? Forbearance?

Would it be better to have the Godly character to face the difficult times, than to know what is going to happen around the bend in the road? Anything could be thrown at us! Would we have the Godly character to face it, no matter what?

We do not care what it is. We just know Who we are supposed to be following. And if we follow Him, the problem will be taken care of. We do not need to worry.

Remember that famous verse in Amos 3:7?

Amos 3:7 Surely the Lord God does nothing, Unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.

Sure! God does not leave us without warning. We know basically what is going to come. He sends prophets when we need to be warned or awakened. But, look at verse 3 (This is the more important thing!):

Amos 3:3 Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?

What is more important? To have a prophet come and tell you something or walking in agreement with God?

Now, probably if you are walking in agreement with God, the prophet is going to come and tell you something. But, if you are not in agreement with God, you probably will not heed a prophet. So, what is more important?

Besides, how can any man really figure out the details of what God is going to do? There is a verse that says that God's mind, His thoughts, and ways are so far above ours that it is like from here to the heavens. It is futile and proud to think that we could in any way understand what God is doing.

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I am not trying to put down the study of prophecy, but rather to put it in its right place. But when we start thinking that we are right, we are probably just plain wrong, because God's thoughts are so much higher than ours. We think that we have figured it out, but are we saying, "Look at me! I know what is going to happen! I am ready for it! God told me so!"

Some of these people, who do this, think that they are prophets! That God speaks to them! That is a whole lot of pride, I should think. So, they think they must go about telling everyone else what God has revealed to them. And then, they find themselves at odds with their brethren.

Now, if God is really speaking, He will let it be known.

Most human interpretations of prophecy are just plain wrong. How many people predicted that the Church of God was going to break up into little bitty pieces and be scattered over the face of the earth, as we find it today? How many?

We did not see it coming! We all thought we were going to sail right on into the place of safety, and we would be A-Ok. God would send out the plagues, Satan would be cast down, eventually Christ would come, and we would be cozy in a place of safety all this time, and Satan will be bound, and then we would all be transformed into Gods...and that is it...we have got it all figured out.

How many people figured out how much trouble this church would have before any of that scenario came about? Because God had to figure out which one of His sons and daughters is going to be there in the first place?

There were upwards to 140,000 people in this church attending at the Feast of Tabernacles, only about 12 years ago. How many can you count now? How many have just disappeared? How many are attending at their local church on the corner now?

Did anyone predict this?

Was not God's way far above all of ours? We did not have it right.

Did you ever think that there would be this much offense and hatred in the Church of God? Did you ever think that brethren would fight like they have? Did you think ten years ago that the ministry would be repudiated to such a high degree?

No. Because, our interpretations of prophecy were wrong.

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Now, what was more important? Being prepared for the Kingdom of God! And knowing what God's word said and doing God's word.

But no, we felt secure, because the prophecies said that if we were in the Worldwide Church of God, that we would just go blithely on into the place of safety on Mr. Hebert W. Armstrong's coattails because he was such a good guy. God was going to keep him alive until the place of safety. And hey! We got it made!

Now, what God thought is not of any private interpretation.

Ezekiel 22:16 ...then you shall know that I am the LOORD.

What does this say?

It says that after all of these things happen, then you will know!

John 13:19 "Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He [the Messiah, the Christ, your God]."

This means the very same thing that it does in Ezekiel 22 above. It will be after the thing comes to pass that will know. We will end up seeing these things in hindsight. "Ah ha! So that is how God did it! Wow! Is God not wonderful?" This gives Him the glory, because He is the One who brought it to pass. "Were we not stupid to think that it would happen this other way? God made everything to work out so well."

So, it is better to know the general outline of prophecy, and leave the details to God, because there are better reasons for studying.

B. To be Prepared for the Next Significant Event.

Now, this sounds opposite to what I was just covering. But, knowing how close to the end should spur us on to discover what God requires of those whom He will spare and glorify. The reason here is a bit different. The first one had a selfish motivation—to save one's self. The second one has a more spiritual motivation. We are talking about attitudes here. Why are we studying these things?

Are we studying them to know, thereby making our heads really big? Or are we studying

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them to please God and merit His approval—to qualify for His acceptance?

This reason emphasizes studying to make the grade. God is the Judge. He gives us our grades. We are studying to make the grade with Him, rather than satisfying our curiosity and our ego.

II Timothy 2 is another memory scripture.

II Timothy 2:15-18 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth [this next is their interpretation of a prophecy], saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.

They were not studying for the right reasons! Hymenaeus, and Philetus ended up taking a group out of the Church of God, and thereby destroying their faith.

II Timothy 2:19-21 Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

See? That is what we study to do! We study to be useful and prepared for whatever good works that God would have us to do, whatever it happens to be.

You can write down Revelation 19:7-9, and study that later for lack of time. But, this is what we are trying to do. This is a section about the Bride. We come to the marriage of the Bride, and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, "because the bride has made herself ready." We in the Church of the Great God quote this scripture a lot, because that is what we really need to be doing—preparing ourselves to become part of the Bride.

You should also jot down Revelation 3:11, and Revelation 3:19-20. These are the conclusions of the messages to Philadelphia and Laodicea. One says to hold fast so

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that no man may take your crown, while the other says that Christ stands at the door knocking, "be zealous and repent because if you do not open the door, you are in trouble, but if you do open the door, I will come in and dine with you."

This is where we are now. So that is why we study prophecy—to be prepared for whatever good use God would have us put to; not so that we are saved—physically—from the destruction ahead.

C. To Understand God's Will.

We study God's prophecies to understand His will. We touched on this a bit earlier, when we said that He reveals His purpose and His plans. And, maybe no better example of this is the Holy Days of God. The Holy Days are not only days that we keep, because God gave them as statutes, but they are also a prophetic outline of God's plan.

We just kept Pentecost. We saw the fulfillment of Pentecost in Acts 2. And, we know that the Feast of Trumpets has to do with Christ's return and the great trumpets that will be blown. So, now we know that we are somewhere between the two of them in fulfillment.

Now, what is His will during this time period? Well, we just read it—to become prepared to be part of the Bride. So, hold onto what we have been taught, become zealous, and repent. Those are the things that we need to be doing now.

You can study later Ezekiel 34. This is a thing that is happening right now. What is God's will right now? This is certainly specifically to the ministry. In the early part of the chapter, the ministry, the shepherds, are accused of abusing the sheep. And God goes through a whole list of things that they have done, and how they are truly guilty of them. Then, God gives instructions about what the ministry needs to be doing to get back in line with God's will right now. Now that the shepherds have abused the sheep, what do they do to get back into God's good graces?

But then, God says that not only were the shepherds to blame, but also the sheep are to be blamed also. And He gives instructions about what needs to be done by the sheep as well.

So, if there are any of you who say that the ministry is to blame about what has been going on in the Church of God, you are absolutely right. But, if you think that the sheep have no part in that, you would be absolutely wrong. And God gives instruction in

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Ezekiel 34 about what all needs to be done by both groups.

Now, we know that the prophetic books of Joel, Amos, Lamentations, and so many others are very applicable to this day and age. Yes, Habakkuk too. Are we conforming to His will? When we study those books and see what He tells us to do, are we stubbornly resisting and going contrary to what He is teaching us?

We study prophecy to find out what God's will is. It is there that we learn what He has already said about how to get out of the problems we are in. This is one of the great reasons for studying prophecy—so if we are out of it, we can get back into it. And, if we are in it, it reminds us how to remain in it and get better. And, maybe if we study the prophecies to learn God's will, rather than wasting time on cloudy details, maybe the Churches of God would begin to come back together and heal.

But, sadly, we are using prophecies to divide ourselves now. Maybe if we used the prophecies in their God-intended reasons and purposes: to learn His will to know what to do, then maybe it would act as a salve on the Church of God and we could begin to heal again.

I do not know. We will have to look at the prophecies to see if that would be the case.

D. To Understand God and His Character.

This one is the most important. We are going into His image. And God takes every opportunity to instruct us in what He is, so that we can conform ourselves to that image. And when we go through prophecies we see what God does; how He treats nations; how He treats His people; how He treats Satan His enemy; how He treats His church; how He treats His prophets; what His goals are; how He goes about fulfilling His goals. Each of these acts demonstrates what He is like—His character. Does He show mercy? Does He show justice? Does He show both at the same time?

Does He show patience? Does He show anger? What made Him angry? What made Him to have patience? Was He faithful? Was He kind? Was He loving? Was He generous? Was He forbearing? Was He longsuffering?

The prophecies teach us about how God acts and reacts. Therefore, it shows us how we should act and react. We get exposed to His attributes in the prophecies. And over time, they round out the image of God that we must put on. Can we eventually say, "Well, if I was there, and had God's power, I would have done exactly the same thing."

Jot down Ezekiel 16. Read it from the standpoint of what God is, trying to take out pieces of Him. It shows God and how He treated Israel when she was young. He clothed her, He beautified her, and He did everything for her.

She rebelled.

She took all His blessings and gave them to her lovers, instead of Him. And still, He loved her. Then He said that He would have to punish her in order to bring her back. And He even says in there something like He punished her lightly. He was very sympathetic. He did not just smash her in one fell swoop. But, He punished her in strong bites to bring her back.

She rebelled again.

So, He punished her again, just a bit harder. And she rebelled again. And, she kept rebelling, and He kept punishing. But, He never lost His love for her. And even though she rebelled in the end, He says, "Even so, I am going to give you a new covenant, and I am going to clean you up, and I am still going to make you my people, if it is the last thing that I do!"

Look in those passages for God's characteristics. It is a really neat study. This kind of study should make us more appreciative of God and more hopeful of being accepted by God. See how many steps He takes and see how He goes overboard to accommodate us. He does not like sin at all. He does not stand for that. But, He does give us time to repent. And if we keep plugging away at righteousness, He will find a way to save us because He does not want to lose His sons and daughters.

Do you want to lose your sons and daughters? I do not think so (even as bad as they seem to be sometimes). They go do drugs. They go have sex. They go do whatever bad things that they seem to so easily find. Do you stop loving them?

You do what you can to bring them back, to help make them upright citizens—children you can be proud of—"There is my son! And, there is my daughter!"

God is the same way. He shows us through this prophecy in Ezekiel 16, He is just like us—well, really, we are just like Him.

So, this is where the prophecies become helpful in our daily lives—they reveal God to us in all His holiness, and all His glory, and all His love.

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Finally, turn to II Peter 2, and we will reread some of this passage. But, I will read it again. Take these home with you. 1) Peter says that the prophecies are more sure than even eye-witness accounts. You can take God's prophecies to the bank. If He said them, they will happen. They might not happen the way that we think that they will, but they will happen just the same. 2) Peter says that our opinions do not amount to a plug-nickel when it comes to the prophecies. Mr. Hebert W. Armstrong said that the Bible interprets itself. So if we want an interpretation of the prophecy, then we must also find it within the Bible. If God wants you to find it, He will lead you to it somehow. But it will be only within the Bible. It is not of any private interpretation. 3) The prophecies have the stamp of approval from God. They were directly inspired by Him. And because these are the representation of God's mind, will, and character, they are multi-faceted just as much as God Himself is. There are many levels of understanding prophecy, as well as anything else. There are many things that we can get out of them. We can study them from now until the end, whenever that will be, and we can still learn things from them that would be helpful.

Peter says in verse 19:

II Peter 1:19 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, 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.

Why study prophecy? Because it helps light the way to the Kingdom of God!