

## The Ankerberg Theological Research Institute

*"If we do not listen to the prophets we shall have to listen to Providence."*  
-- A. C. Craig

In this article, we take a general look at the subject of Biblical prophecy and show why it is important to both Christians and nonChristians.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Someone once said, "We should all be concerned about our future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there."

In the movie version of H. G. Wells' *Time Machine*, "George" (Rod Taylor) began an incredible journey that would transport him far into the future. If you watched that intriguing motion picture, perhaps you remember being captivated. As this intrepid adventurer sat in his time machine, he could literally view time passing by--the hours rolled into days, the days into years, the years into decades and the decades into centuries and hundreds of centuries. Because he was able to leap into the distant future, he could actually behold the "destiny" of humanity.

Perhaps some things we find impossible to fathom, let alone achieve, really are possible under different circumstances. For example, who would deny that God--if He chose--could transport people into the future and reveal to them what would happen? Jesus Himself once commented in a different context, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God" (Mk. 10:27, cf. Lk. 1:37).

Perhaps the truth about "time travel" may be just as startling as in H. G. Wells' novel. Perhaps a select few of history actually have been "transported into the future" so to speak--and lived to tell about it. In essence, this is just what God did with several biblical prophets and apostles. Ezekiel, Daniel, the Apostle John and others were each shown events that would take place in the future and/or at the end of the world. Impossible? The only question is whether the evidence for such a claim is convincing.

The writings of these prophets were "consistently oriented around predictive themes....the prophets 'regarded the foretelling of the future as of the essence of their function.'"<sup>1</sup>

For H. G. Wells, humanity's future was both terrifying and hopeful. This is also the future of mankind seen by the biblical prophets. And this future may have more relevance to us personally than we think.

Who would deny that the future affects us all? Which man or woman alive would ever say his or her future was unimportant? This is why millions of people turn to astrologers and other diviners or fortune tellers--because they think such people can accurately predict their future or their destiny. (Unfortunately, as we documented in our *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Harvest House, 1996), such divinatory methods are not only unreliable, they are consequential.)

On the other hand, the ancient Hebrew prophets made startling predictions about the future, predictions that should amaze anyone. Most of these predictions have already come true and there is every reason to believe that all their prophecies will sooner or later be fulfilled.

In the Bible, God clearly declares that He can accurately predict the future. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, He made four startling statements:

First, God says that He alone is God and that what He predicts to happen, He will certainly bring to pass. "To whom will you liken me. . .that we may be compared?...*I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.* I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please....What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isaiah 46:5, 10-11). Before such an event happens, God claims He has already announced it. "See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; *before they spring into being I announce them to you*" (Isaiah 42:9, emphasis added).

Second, God emphasizes that He has stated his predictions *openly* to the entire world and that what He speaks concerning the future is true and will certainly take place. By contrast, those who trust in false gods may claim to predict the future, but little evidence for such a claim has ever been forthcoming. God says, "I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness;...I, the Lord, speak the truth;...Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations....who pray to gods that cannot save. [Let your gods] Declare what is to be [if they are gods], present it [their evidence]--let them take counsel together. *Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord?* And there is no God apart from Me....By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked" (Isaiah 45:19-23).

The religious world today offers men and women endless different gods to whom they may give their allegiance. But which god should they choose? How are they to know who the true God is? A central purpose of biblical prophecy is to show men and women *who* the one true God is<sup>2</sup> "so that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God and that there is no other" (1 Kings 8:60; cf. verses 1-59):

...the fact of predictive prophecy brings, first of all, glory to God; for each prediction testifies to its Author's wisdom and sovereignty over the future. As Isaiah spoke forth to the Israelites of his day, "Who hath declared it from the beginning, that we may say, He is right?"....Predictions point up His powers, as contrasted with those of any conceivable rivals;...When Joshua spoke out in faith and foretold the miracle of the cutting off of the waters of the Jordan (Josh. 3:13), he assured his people, "Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you" (v. 10); and to this end the prediction itself contributed, just as did the subsequent miracle.<sup>3</sup>

Third, God Himself challenges people, including the gods they trust, to compare His predictions with all others. Again, He teaches that His knowledge of the future is proof that *He alone is the Lord*. No one else has told of things to come (Isaiah 41:20-27).

God informs us that He has many witnesses to His predictions, and He emphasizes again and again that His prophecies of the future prove that He alone is God.

Because the false prophets and their gods cannot produce evidence for their claimed powers of prediction, God even mocks them: "All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things? Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they [the false prophets and gods] were right, so that others may hear and say, 'It is true.' 'You are my witnesses,' declares the Lord... 'So that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior.... You are my witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'that I am God.... I am the Lord, who has made all things,... who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, *who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers....*'" (Isaiah 43:9-12, 44:24-26, emphasis added).

...so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this,... Present your case," says the Lord. "Set forth your arguments.... Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen.... Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods.... But you are less than nothing.... Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know, or beforehand, so we could say, 'He was right'? No one told of this, no one foretold it, no one heard any words from you. *I was the first to tell [you].*" (Isaiah 41:20-24, 26, 27)

Why did God do all this? God did this so that even the skeptics and stubborn would have no excuse for rejecting His predictions. "I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. For I knew how stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze. Therefore, I told you these things long ago; *before they happened I announced them to you* so that you could not say, 'My idols did them';... You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them? From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you.... You have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, 'Yes, I knew of them'" (Isaiah 48:3-7).

Further, God emphatically warned men not to presumptuously speak of the future in his name: "But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death" (Deuteronomy 18:20).

When the people wondered how to discern whether God was the author of a prophetic message or not He told them clearly: "You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has *not* been spoken by the Lord?' If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does *not* take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has *not* spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him" (Deuteronomy 18:21-22, emphasis added).

Indeed, because of the consequences of leading people astray, God warns that He Himself will be against anyone who falsely claims to be His prophet. Obviously, this does not bode well for the many cult leaders today who falsely claim to be God's prophet and to speak His words, Mormon "prophets" and the Watchtower Society of the Jehovah's Witnesses being contemporary examples: "Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, 'The Lord declares,' when the Lord has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled.... Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign Lord" (Ezekiel 13:6, 8).

But it is important to note that it is *also* possible that a false prophet can occasionally accurately predict the future or perform a miracle. These are counterfeit, i.e., demonic miracles, that originate from the supernatural world of lying spirits the Bible identifies as demons.

In these cases God instructs: "If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, *and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them,' you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer....* That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God,..." (Deuteronomy 13:1-3, 5, emphasis added).

Again, the many false prophecies of cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormonism (documented in our books on these subjects) prove that these religions are not from God. Their long history of opposition to God and His Word proves their allegiances lie elsewhere. Unfortunately, in offering false gods to others, they have preached rebellion against the one true God. (See our *The Facts on the Jehovah's Witnesses* and *Behind the Mask of Mormonism* (Harvest House).

Our discussion above proves that God does claim in the Bible that He accurately predicts the future. His predictions are to be judged on the basis of their accuracy and He emphasizes that His accuracy will be nothing less than 100%. God tells us His prophet is "recognized as one truly sent by the Lord *only if his prediction comes true*" (Jeremiah 28:9, emphasis added) because "whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the sovereign Lord." (Ezek. 12:28).

#### **Why the Subject of Biblical Prophecy Is Important**

"No Bible subject holds more practical implications than the subject of prophecy."

-- Vance Havner<sup>4</sup>

"Much of the Bible is devoted to prediction. Nothing God has yet done for us can compare With all that is written in the sure word of prophecy."

-- A. W. Tozer<sup>5</sup>

Is the subject and study of Biblical prophecy really that vital?

Many people today, even some Christians, think that the study of prophecy is of little or no relevance. Some further claim there are so many differing views on the subject that it's difficult to know what to believe. Others argue Biblical prophecy deals with general or obscure predictions that could mean anything to anyone. Thus, rather than consider prophecy of spiritual or apologetic value (apologetics involves the defense of the Christian faith), such individuals consider it more of a nuisance.

But we disagree. Prophecy is vital because prophecy is God speaking to man in the Bible. Who can logically argue that what God says is unimportant?

Anyone who seriously begins to study the biblical prophecies will find that, first, the subject of prophecy is not something that is rare or occasional to the pages of Scripture. There are over 600 direct references in the Bible to "prophecy" and "prophets."<sup>6</sup> Significantly, approximately 27%(!) of the entire Bible contains prophetic material, some of which has already come true and some which remains to be fulfilled. Only 4 of the 66 books of the Bible are without prophecy--Ruth, Song of Solomon, Philemon, and 3 John.<sup>7</sup> Even the shortest book of the Bible mentions prophecy (Jude 14, 17-18):

"...out of the OT's 23,210 verses, 6,641 contain predictive material, or 28 1/2 percent. Out of the NT's 7,914 verses, 1,711 contain predictive material, or 21 1/2 percent. So for the entire Bible's 31,124 verses, 8,352 contain predictive material, or 27 percent of the whole."<sup>8</sup> Of these, over 1,800 verses (including 318 in the New Testament) deal with the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the study of prophecy is a serious matter because God Himself tells us to study it. The Apostle Peter informs us that we "will do well to pay attention to it" because biblical prophecy is not the words of men, nor the interpretations of men, but the words and interpretation of God Himself:

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and *you will do well to pay attention to it*, as to a light shining in a dark place,...Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19-21, emphasis added)

The Apostle Paul taught, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, emphasis added). If *all* Scripture is inspired by God and useful, then this must also refer to all *prophecy*, for it, too, is Scripture. God Himself, therefore, teaches that the study of prophecy is useful for teaching, for training in righteousness and, as we shall see, for much more.

### **JESUS AND PROPHECY**

Third, prophecy is important because in Matthew 24, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself encouraged the study of prophecy.

On one particular occasion Jesus was asked a question about the future by his disciples: "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus had just finished His own startling prediction that Herod's magnificent temple would be completely destroyed. It was unthinkable that this should ever happen, but Jesus foretold its destruction to the unpredictable extent that "not one stone here will be left on another." This prophecy was literally fulfilled in 70 A.D. during Titus' overthrow of Jerusalem in a most unusual manner. The heat of the flames of war melted the temple gold so that it ran between the stone crevices, forcing the Romans to tear every stone apart to recover the precious metal<sup>10</sup>:

The temple itself--though Titus actually tried to preserve it against being destroyed--was nevertheless put to fire. Its vast treasures were plundered, and as much as possible of the gold sheeting which covered the walls and doors and columns was removed by the soldiers. However, the heat of the fire was so intense that much of the gold was melted and ran between the stones of the building, which had been laid without mortar. For the next twenty-five years or more, men continued to pry these stones apart, one by one, to obtain the gold which they knew had run between them. And thus it came about the Lord's words were exactly fulfilled: "There shall not be left here one stone upon another." (Matt. 24:2).<sup>11</sup>

This is a question on future events and the end of the world if there ever was one.

His answer clearly reveals what Jesus thinks about the subject of prophecy.

Did Jesus inform His disciples the issue was irrelevant? Did He say the subject dealt with predictions so obscure that they were useless? Did He report that there were so many commentators who disagreed over the issue that a discussion of it was futile? No. Instead, He answered their question directly and in detail, supplying a great deal of information about future events--including those that would immediately precede His personal physical return to the earth from heaven (See Matthew Chapter 24).<sup>12</sup>

To realize the importance Jesus placed on prophecy, one only need read some of His statements in Mark 13:

"Watch out that no one deceives you....The end is still to come....You must be on your guard....So be on your guard; *I have told you everything ahead of time*....When you see these things happening, you *know* that it [my return] is near, right at the door....Be on guard! Be alert!....Therefore keep watch....What I say to you, *I say to everyone*: Watch!" (Mark 13:5, 7, 9, 23, 29, 33, 35, 37, emphasis added).

Some skeptics may assume that Jesus was only a man and so his words were devoid of divine authority. But Jesus Himself repeatedly emphasized that "whatever I say is just what the Father [God] has told me to say" (John 12:50). Further, Jesus proved His claim to deity (John 1:1, 14; 5:17-18, 21-23; 8:58; 10:30; 14:9) by resurrecting Himself from the dead, something accomplished by no other man in human history (see Jn. 2:19-22).<sup>13</sup>

Christ even commanded believers to understand and to keep the words of prophecy. These commands were given or implied not once, but several times in the New Testament. For example, in Matthew 24 Jesus speaks of the "abomination of desolation which was spoken of through the prophet Daniel," and he specifically instructs--"Let the reader understand"--clearly indicating his desire to "let the reader understand" the prophecy of Daniel concerning the last days and its significance to them personally.

Jesus prophesied of the end time, "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-22). Can any believer logically maintain that being informed about those days is insignificant, especially if they may be approaching? (see v. 20)

In fact, Jesus never chided His disciples for seeking to be informed on prophecy, but he did scold them for ignoring it: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25). The only time Jesus didn't answer questions on eschatology concerned a very specific setting of dates (Acts 1:7; Matthew 24:36; see v. 42-44). In addition, Jesus taught that Old Testament predictions concerning Himself were of crucial importance.<sup>14</sup> He said, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44, cf. v. 27; Matthew 5:17; John 5:39).

Here and elsewhere, Jesus taught that the entire Hebrew Bible was about Him--that 39 separate books written by 30 different authors over a period of 1,100 years (from 1,500 B.C. to 400 B.C.) predicted the events of His life in particular detail.

This is why Christian scholars have recognized that the entire Bible is Christological: "Jesus Christ remains the heart of prophecy."<sup>15</sup> In a fascinating study, *Christ: The Theme Of The Bible*, Dr. Norman Geisler concludes that Christ is everywhere present in all 66 books of the Bible, even though 39 were written before He lived.

Christ fulfills literally dozens of Old Testament types, pre-figures, and prophecies, from the Priesthoods and Tabernacle to Levitical feasts and offerings, from Messianic principles and pictures, even to the complex structural architecture of the Bible itself.<sup>16</sup> Throughout its pages, "Christ is seen as the implicit or underlying theme of all of Scripture."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in every book of the Bible Christ is seen.<sup>18</sup>

For example, in another book Dr. Geisler summarizes his discussion showing how Christ is seen in each of the 66 books of the Bible:

As we have just seen, Christ is the theme of both Testaments of the Bible as well as each of the eight sections of Scripture. In addition to this, Christocentric themes are found in each one of the 66 books of the Bible. As a sample, Christ is the Seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15); He is the Passover Lamb (Exod. 12:3f.), the Atoning Sacrifice (Lev. 17:11), the Smitten Rock (Num. 20:8, 11), and the Faithful Prophet (Deut. 18:18). Christ is the Captain of the Lord's Host (Josh. 5:15), the Divine Deliverer (Judg. 2:18), and the Kinsman Redeemer (Ruth 3:12). Christ is anticipated as the Anointed One (1 Sam. 2:10) and as the Son of David (11 Sam. 7:14). In I and II Kings Christ may be viewed as the coming King and in I and II Chronicles as the Builder of the Temple (1 Chron. 28:20). Ezra represents Christ as the Restorer of the Temple (Ezra 6:14, 15), Nehemiah shows Him as the Restorer of the Nation (Neh. 6:15), and Esther portrays Him as the Preserver of the Nation (Esther 4:14). Christ is also seen as the Living Redeemer (Job 19:25), as the Praise of Israel (Ps. 150:6), the Wisdom of God (Prov. 8:22, 23), The Great Teacher (Eccles. 12:11), and the Fairest of Ten Thousand (Song of Sol. 5:10). Christ is the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53:11), the Maker of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31), the Man of Sorrows (Lam. 3:28-30), the Glory of God (Ezek. 43:2), and the coming Messiah (Dan. 9:25). He is also depicted as the Lover of the Unfaithful (Hos. 3:1), the Hope of Israel (Joel 3:16), the Husbandman (Amos 9:13), the Savior (Obad. 21), the Resurrected One (Jon. 2:10), the Ruler in Israel (Mic. 5:2), the Avenger (Nah. 2:1), the Holy God (Hab. 1:13), the King of Israel (Zeph. 3:15), the Desire of Nations (Hag. 2:7), the Righteous Branch (Zech. 3:8), and the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2).

In the New Testament Christ is presented as the King of the Jews (Matt. 2:2), the Servant of the Lord (Mark 10:45), the Son of Man (Luke 19:10) and the Son of God (John 1:1). Christ is the Ascended Lord (Acts 1:10), the believer's Righteousness (Rom. 1:17), Sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30), Sufficiency (II Cor. 12:9) and Liberty (Gal. 2:4). He is revealed as the Exalted Head of the church (Eph. 1:22), the Christian's Joy (Phil. 1:26) and the Fullness of Deity (Col. 2:9). In the Thessalonian epistles Christ is the believer's Comfort (I Thess. 4:16, 17) and Glory (II Thess. 1:12). He is seen as the Christian's Preserver (I Tim. 4:10), Rewarder (II Tim. 4:8), Blessed Hope (Titus 2:13), and Substitute (Philem. 17). He is also High Priest (Heb. 4:15), the Giver of Wisdom (James 1:5), the Rock (I Peter 2:6), and Precious Promise (II Peter 1:4). John represents Christ as the Life (I John), the Truth (II John), and the Way (III John); Jude portrays Christ as the Advocate and Revelation shows Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19:16). It is literally true that the Bible is all about Christ!<sup>19</sup>

No Christian maintains that Messianic prophecy concerning Jesus is unimportant. It cuts to the core of who He is and why He came. But we must also remember that Messianic prophecy is equally concerned with Christ's Second Advent and the events surrounding it as much as it is with His First Advent. The Bible verses speaking of events in the last days (eschatology) are important for all.

The fourth reason prophecy is important is seen in its great evidential or apologetic value in confirming the divine inspiration of the Bible. There are many convincing reasons for believing that the Bible is God's Word to us (see John 17:17). We have given some of these in our books, *Ready with an Answer* and *The Case For Jesus The Messiah: Incredible Prophecies That Prove God Exists*.<sup>20</sup> Even the archaeological accuracy of the Scriptures is difficult to explain if the Bible was only written by erring men. For example, "over 25,000 sites from the biblical world have been confirmed" by modern archaeological discoveries.<sup>21</sup> As the famous archaeologist Nelson Glueck once observed, "As a matter of fact...it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference. Scores of archaeological discoveries have been made which confirm in clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible. And, by the same token, proper evaluation of biblical descriptions has often lead to amazing discoveries. They form tesserae [i.e., tessellate] in the vast mosaic of the Bible's almost incredibly correct historical memory."<sup>22</sup>

Prophecy is perhaps the single most credible proof that the Bible really is God's word to mankind. Many religious scriptures claim to be a revelation from God, but only the Bible offers definite proof in detailed, predictive prophecy. Prophecy proves that the Bible is divinely inspired because only God could predict the future in such specific detail again and again, century after century.

#### **Endnotes**

1. J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (NY: Harper & Row, 1973.), p. 10

2. Ibid., p.13.
3. Ibid.
4. John Blanchard, compiler, *More Gathered Gold* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1986), p. 254.
5. Ibid., p. 255.
6. Augustus H. Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*.
7. Payne, p. 681.
8. Ibid., p. 13.
9. John Wesley White, *Re-Entry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971.), p. 14; cf. Payne, p. 680.
10. Arthur Custance, "Some Striking Fulfillment of Prophecy" in *Hidden Things of God's Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), p. 135.
11. Ibid.
12. cf. John Ankerberg, et. al., *One World: Bible Prophecy and the New World Order* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1991).
13. John Ankerberg, John Weldon, *Do The Resurrection Accounts Conflict And What Proof Is There That Jesus Christ Rose From The Dead?* (Chattanooga, TN: Ankerberg Theological Research Institute, 1990).
14. See Norman Geisler, *Christ: The Theme Of The Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969).
15. Payne, p. 7.
16. Geisler, *Christ: The Theme Of The Bible*, pp. 31-87.
17. Ibid., p. 88.
18. Ibid., pp. 88-110.
19. Norman Geisler, *A Popular Survey Of The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), pp. 24-25.
20. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (NY: MacMillian, 1976).
21. Geisler, *Christ: The Theme Of The Bible*, p. 29 n.
22. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1959), p. 31.