

GOD'S MESSAGE TO MAN THROUGH THE PROPHETS

I. THE COMMANDING IMPORTANCE OF THE PROPHETIC SCRIPTURES

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The fact that for many centuries the study of eschatology suffered immeasurably from those who held and enthusiastically propagated extreme and wild notions concerning the future, should not blind our eyes to the importance of eschatology. It is a matter of common agreement between both the Church and the world that we are living in perplexing times. It is not surprising to find that, although the greatest minds of the world are engaged with the state of world affairs, they have been able to come to no final nor satisfying conclusion as to either the cause of or the cure for present conditions.

The rank and file of the world are interested only as their own lives are touched by these circumstances, and, sadly enough, many untaught Christians are to be found in this group. The latter ask: "Why worry about present conditions or future events? If we live for Christ and testify for Him here and now, He will take care of the rest." Is it, then, merely a fancy on the part of some Christians to find out something not meant for them, when they seek to learn the things that lie ahead? We think not for several reasons.

It was the Dutch theologian van Oosterzee who succinctly wrote: "All true Theology is at the same time Teleology, which must of itself lead to Eschatology." From a general examination of the Word of God it will be found that there are seventeen books strictly prophetic in the Old Testament, besides the many portions of eschatological import in other books. Further study will reveal that fully one quarter of the Bible is prophecy, which rightly includes all that was predictive at the time of its utterance. With such a large place given to eschatology in the Word by the Spirit, it not only deserves, but commands our faithful and prayerful study. It certainly was never in the purpose of God that such a large portion of His Word should be neglected.

But if possible, the believer of this age has more reason to be interested in prophecy and its themes than ever before, because it is one of the purposes for which Christ sent the Spirit into the world. The Scriptures reveal an eightfold ministry of the Spirit in this age. He restrains evil in the world; He is said to reprove the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment; it is through His agency that regeneration is effected; He dwells in every believer who becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit by faith in Christ; it is His office work to baptize all believers into the body of Christ; the Spirit of God seals every believer, Himself being the seal;

the obedient and yielded believer is filled with the Spirit; and the Holy Spirit guides into truth.

It is with this last phase of the Spirit's ministry that we are here particularly interested. John in writing to believers reminds them that the anointing they have received of God abides in them, so that they have no need that man should instruct them. The anointing suffices to teach all things. Moreover, before His departure from this world the Lord Jesus in the upper room discourse recorded by John, declared to His disciples that, although He had been with them for some time, there were yet many things which they could not bear at that time. But, they are told, when the Spirit of truth comes into the world, He will guide into all truth and will show (lit. disclose) them "things to come." With the Spirit present and willing to teach us, we ought to be willing to listen to His teaching.

Eschatology is of inestimable value and importance, furthermore, because of the testimony it yields to the omniscience and omnipotence of our God. When Isaiah was exhorting Israel in Babylon to see that their God was greater and mightier than the gods of Babylon, even though the Babylonians had taken Israel captive from their land, he pointed out among other things that the gods of heathen Babylon were totally incapable of showing and declaring future events to prove their claim to worship. But, on the other hand, the true God can say, "Before they spring forth I tell you of them" (Isa. 42:9). Again and again God is represented by the prophet as saying, "Yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it" (Isa. 46:11).

Another reason for the significance attached to eschatology is that it is an indispensable ally of a normal Christian walk and service. As in former times, much is heard these days in religious circles, of the great task lying before the Church of bringing in the kingdom. Such energy is misdirected, and were better utilized along lines consonant with the eternal purposes of God in Christ Jesus for this present age. Others are laboring in the Church to make the world a better place in which to live, to mitigate as far as possible the line of cleavage and separation between the Church and the world. The result is a Satanic social gospel and a situation in which the Church is to be found in the world and the world in the Church. Eschatology furnishes the answer to the question as to the work of the believer in this age.

But there is more than this. A knowledge of prophecy, particularly of the imminent return of the Lord, is conducive to a proper Christian walk. Values are seen in their relative importance. There is not a dissipating of purpose and energy between the things of this world and those of heaven. A wise teacher once attributed the suffering and misery of man to the fact that he has one foot in the finite and one in the infinite, with the result that he is torn asunder between two worlds. Many Christians are attempting to walk with Christ, while they consort with the world. The cause is often to be found in their lack of knowledge of prophetic things, which would have a strong tendency to draw their eyes from the things of this world, and to fix them upon Christ and His future purposes.

Quite a substantial benefit that accrues to those who study the prophetic word is that of comfort. When believers at Thessalonica were mourning for their loved ones as those who

have no hope, Paul directs their attention to one eschatological event in the possibly near future. At another time when these same Christians are perplexed as to the meaning of their present sufferings in the faith, Paul points out to them clearly and convincingly that their fears are unfounded, and that they do well to rest in the security which God has provided for them in a coming day. And it has ever been thus. Church history recounts time and again instances where groups during the Middle Ages found comfort and consolation in the contemplation of the millennial hope, notwithstanding the fact that most of the time their conceptions were grossly materialistic. Assuredly, he spoke wisely who aptly said, "Only he who knows prophecy can dwell in the calm of eternity now."

Probably the most cogent reason for the importance of eschatological study is to be seen in the position or place of the present age. In his valuable work, The Progress of Dogma, James Orr shows with his usual ability and clarity that Christian doctrine has not only a chronological development, but a logical one as well. For instance, it follows the accepted lines of systematic theology: first, Bibliology (the fixing and defining of the canon of Scripture); then, Theology Proper (Arian, Nestorian, Eutychian, Monophysite, and Monothelite controversies); then, anthropology (Pelagian controversy); and so on.

Has it ever struck you, then . . . what a singular parallel there is between the historical course of dogma, on the one hand, and the scientific order of the textbooks on systematic theology on the other? The history of dogma . . . is simply the system of theology spread out through the centuries--theology, as Plato would say, "writ large"--and this not only as regards its general subject-matter, but even as respects the definite succession of its parts. The temporal and logical order correspond. The articulation of the system in your textbooks is the very articulation of the system in its development in history. Take, for example, any accredited theological textbook, and observe the order of its treatment. What we ordinarily find is something like this. Its opening sections are probably occupied with matters of Theological Prolegomena--with apologetics, the general idea of religion, revelation, the relation of faith to reason, Holy Scripture, and the like. Then follow the great divisions of the theological system--Theology proper, or the doctrine of God; Anthropology, or the doctrine of man, including sin (sometimes a separate division); Christology, or the doctrine of the Person of Christ; Soteriology (objective), or the doctrine of the work of Christ, especially the (p. 22) Atonement; Subjective Soteriology, or the doctrine of the application of redemption (Justification, Regeneration, etc.); finally, Eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things. If now, planting yourself at the close of the Apostolic Age, you cast your eye down the course of the succeeding centuries, you find, taking as an easy guide the great historical controversies of the Church, that what you have is simply the projection of this logical system on the vast temporal screen.¹

What now shall I say of the remaining branch of the theological system, the Eschatological? An Eschatology, indeed, there was in the early Church,

but it was not theologically conceived; and a Mythical Eschatology there was in the Mediaeval Church--an Eschatology of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory . . . But the Reformation swept this away, and, with its sharply contrasted states of bliss and woe, can hardly be said to have put anything in its place, or even to have faced very distinctly the difficulties of the problem, as these force themselves upon the modern mind, with its larger outlook on the ways of God and providence. Probably I am not mistaken in thinking that . . . the modern mind has given itself with special earnestness to eschatological questions, moved thereto, perhaps, by the solemn impression that on it the ends of the world have come, and that some great crisis in the history of human affairs is approaching.²

Such has been the case until now there are before the minds of men who are studying the Scriptures, the great themes of predictive prophecy as never before.

The prophet Daniel was told at the end of his prophecy to close up and seal the words until the time of the end (12:9). The time of the end is, according to verse 4, to be characterized by two features. Many will run to and fro, and knowledge will be increased. It has been suggested that the prophet is foretelling the tremendous increase in travel and communication, and the growth in knowledge, which are so characteristic of this century. We are inclined to believe, however, that the meaning of the prophet is otherwise. Our interpretation of the passage on the basis of the Hebrew is: the time of the end is to be characterized by the perusal of the contents of the prophecy of Daniel (other prophecies are not necessarily excluded, because they would aid in the interpretation and understanding of this prophecy), and the knowledge of the contents of the Book of Daniel will be increased. Such is the case today and is ample reason that, since we are in the time of the end, much emphasis should be placed upon eschatology.

Since there are so many reasons that can be brought forth in favor of the necessity and significance of prophetic study, one would expect that eschatology would hold a prime place in works of theologies and in the curricula of theological seminaries. But, despite what we have said in regard to the increase in prophetic study in recent times, eschatology remains a much neglected field of theological study and research.

Furthermore, there is distinct peril in neglecting the study of prophecy. Neglect of prophecy results in:

DISOBEDIENCE TO THE LORD'S WILL

To neglect prophecy is to neglect large segments of the Word of God which we are commanded to preach in its entirety (II Tim. 4:1-4). In preaching Christ we must preach prophecy (Rev. 19:10). Prophetic truth throws light on all the other doctrines of the faith. Prophecy is part of the ministry of warning (II Tim. 3:15; I Thess. 5:1, 2) and the ministry of comfort (I Thess. 4:13). Paul's example: Acts 20:20, 27. To neglect prophecy is to fail to heed the charge to hearken to the prophetic Scriptures as a light in a dark place (II Pet. 1:19). See Luke 24:25: It is the prime, though not the only, cause of Israel's rejection of Christ.

A minister once went from a town into the backwoods to preach to the settlers, and had to return at night, when it was very dark. A backwoodsman provided him with a torch of pitch-pine wood. The minister, who had never seen anything like it, said, "It will soon burn out." "It will light you home," said the other. "The wind will blow it out," said the preacher. "It will light you home," was the answer again. "But what if it should rain?" "It will light you home," was the answer again. Contrary to the minister's fears, the little torch gave ample light all the way home. God's prophetic light is sufficient to light our pathway home to glory.

DISREGARD OF PROOF OF THE BIBLE'S DIVINE INSPIRATION

Read such passages as Isa. 45:21; 41:21-23; 46:9-13; Dan. 2:47; and II Pet. 1:20-21. God alone can predict; prediction is a miracle of utterance. These texts settle for all time the truth that the Bible is inspired of God. Prophecy is a confirmation of divine omniscience and omnipotence--His word relative to Moab, Edom, Assyria, Egypt, Syria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, Nineveh, Sodom, Gomorrah, Tyre, Sidon, Philistia; those concerning Christ, Israel, the Church, and the Gentiles. No movement of world importance, but what the Word has predicted it long beforehand: world conflicts; spiritual declension; rise of dictatorships; widespread fears and calamities.

ALTERATION OF THE CHURCH'S PREACHING

If the Church neglects prophecy, she will invariably fail to conform to God's revealed plan in her preaching. It will be "convert the world," "reform the social order," "bring in the kingdom," "do away with all war and lawlessness." Think of the effort expended to bring about world peace. God's purpose is found in Acts 15:14, 15, 16. The Lordship of Christ must be preached or man will try to be that Lord himself. Compare Hitler, Nietzsche, Stalin, and others. When prophecy is neglected, the Church invariably turns to a solely ethical interpretation of Christianity, and begins to stress morality instead of regeneration, new birth, and conversion. Never forget; just the preaching of morals does not bring about morality. We have had that kind of message in this country for some forty years, and the plane of morality today, according to secular estimates and authorities, is lower today than then (the Exchange Club in the East for the exchange of wives). When Christ's kingdom and coming are neglected or rejected, the result is a social gospel. Men put their energies into communal and world reform. Preaching then comes from the Sermon on the Mount, and not on the fact and accomplishment of the Cross. When the Cross is preached, society never fails to feel the effect of it. Dr. Walter Rauschenbush wrote this amazing statement: "The worst thing that could happen to God would be to remain an autocrat while the world is moving toward democracy. He would be dethroned with the rest of the rulers." He was a foremost social gospellizer. If the Church had kept in view the authority and coming of Christ, we should not be hearing a liberal theologian say: "Democracy demands a God with whom men can cooperate and not to whom they must submit."

LOST MISSIONARY INTEREST AND ZEAL

When prophetic truth is soft-pedaled, then missions suffer. Soon we hear of attempts for world amalgamations of all religions. The Laymen's Inquiry and "Rethinking Missions" are

indicative of the havoc wrought. E. Stanley Jones wrote in his Christ's Alternative to Communism: "When the western world was sunk in armaments and the Church seemed a part of that war spirit, God reached out and laid hold of Mahatma Gandhi, and through him let us see some of the meanings underlying the Sermon on the Mount!" When the prophetic Word is laid aside, every straw is grasped at to spell out the coming of the kingdom of Christ. If the Church does not sound the alarm, the unsaved elements in the visible Church will sweep on to contribute their weight to the establishment of an anti-Christian kingdom on earth.

A Christian leader of China visited this country some years ago. One Sunday he spoke in a modernistic church in California. At the conclusion of the message a young college student asked this question: "Why should we export Christianity to China when you have Confucianism in your country?" The answer was, "There are three reasons. First of all, Confucius was a teacher, and Christ is a Savior. China needs a Savior more than she needs a teacher. In the second place, Confucius is dead, and Christ is alive. China needs a living Savior. In the third place, Confucius is some day going to stand before Christ to be judged by Him. China needs to know Christ as Savior before she meets Him as Judge." How true!

CHANGE IN THE CHURCH'S OUTLOOK AND TESTIMONY

As a matter of history, when the Church shut her mouth on prophecy, the Church became wedded to a worldly system and a dead Churchianity in the Middle Ages (it is still with us), emphasizing form and externalities to the detriment of the core of the matter. If the hope of the Lord's coming had been kept bright, the Church would have achieved a greater degree of unity, purity, and power. Many more would realize the truth and reliability of the whole Word, viewing the marvels of fulfilled prophecy. Its message to Israel would be more effective, being able to set events concerning her in the proper Scriptural light, relative to her glorious future (Isa. 60:1 ff.). This is still one of the best methods of winning Jews to Christ as Savior.

When the Church is lulled to sleep in these matters, it is disastrous. It is a standing reproach to the truth of the Word. A French dramatist read his latest production to a circle of critics, and while he was reading, one of the critics fell asleep. The reader stopped long enough to say, "How can you criticize my production when you are sound asleep?" Rubbing his eyes, the critic said, "I submit that sleep is a criticism." And so it is. If Christian truth is worth anything, it means everything, and a Christian asleep on the vital matter of prophecy is a perpetual argument against the truth. Prophecy will not put us to sleep but to work.

From the positive angle a study of the prophetic Scriptures will accomplish several things for the willing heart:

(1) It will bring us near to God (Gen. 18:17 and Jn. 15:14, 15). Friends, not servants, are told confidences. In prophecy God invites us into His deepest plans. What attitude is that which cares much for God to provide our daily need, but will not listen to Him disclose His plans?

(2) It affords a knowledge of world-wide purposes. What vast subjects are handled! The greatest in the world; the destiny of Israel, the nations, the Church, the goal of men: heaven or hell, the reign of Christ on earth. What a cure for narrow-mindedness or limited vision!

(3) It brightens hope (Rom. 8:24a). This element plays a large part in the believer's life. It has a relation to all he is, hopes to be, and will experience in realization. Faith looks up and back; love looks around; hope looks onward.

(4) It presents the words and speech of God, as does the rest of the Word (Deut. 29:29). God has spoken in prophecy. This is paramount. Whenever and wherever and however God speaks, it is our duty to listen and obey.

(5) It affords the true perspective of history (Rom. 11:36). Sometimes in the midst of the affairs of life our vision gets blurred and out of focus. It is prophecy that gives us the proper perspective of history. Only in its light can we know our day (II Pet. 1:19).

(6) It purifies the life (I Thess. 3:11-13; II Pet. 3:11, 14; I Jn. 3:1-3). It is a mighty force to shape the life in conformity with God's will for our sanctification. Chief Sekomi said to Livingstone in Africa, "I wish you would change my heart. Give me medicine to change it, for it is proud, proud and angry, angry always." He would not hear of God's way but wanted an outward means. God has provided cleansing by the blood of Christ in salvation and through the believer's experience. Prophetic truth is an aid to this end.

(7) It influences our service (I Thess. 2:19). All truth in the Word of God is meant in one way or other to influence or affect our service. If it has not or does not, we have misunderstood it or wilfully failed to apply it. If the study of prophecy has not and does not affect our service for God, we have not felt the full power and force of it. We have not permitted it to touch our lives.

DOCUMENTATION

1. James Orr, The Progress of Doctrine, p. 21.
2. Ibid., pp. 29, 30.