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SO WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT PROPHECY?

A large part of the Bible is prophecy. It doesn't really matter whether it is a full one third of the Bible or whether it is only about one fifth of the whole Bible ... either way it is A LARGE PART of the Bible.

When you consider that regarding some things doctrinal understanding is based on no more than five or perhaps ten different verses in the Bible, then you quickly realize that by devoting THOUSANDS of verses to prophecy, God was certainly placing a great deal of importance on prophecy. The importance of prophecy stands beyond question. Entire books of the Bible are devoted to prophecy.

Prophecy has always been a powerful attraction for numerous people. This has been true through the millennia. There is a fascination in knowing in advance what will happen. It can even be mentally intoxicating, giving those who think they know what will happen a feeling of power, almost like a sense of being in control of those events. This type of feeling has been evident on countless occasions in the speech clubs of God's Church (i.e. the Spokesmen's Clubs) when, in response to a question about the world's present problems, men would make statements like: "Boy, just wait until Christ returns and we will then be in charge. Why, we'll just go in there and straighten out this mess and we'll lay down the law and we'll ... (do this or that) ...".

That's the intoxicating effect of prophecy, anticipating and dwelling on THE POWER which we feel prophecy bestows on us.

So let's look a little more closely at this subject of prophecy.

WHAT DOES PROPHECY ACTUALLY DO?

Prophecy can do several different things. Notice what God tells us through the prophet Isaiah.

Remember the former things of old: for I [am] God, and [there is] none else; [I am] God, and [there is] none like me, DECLARING THE END FROM THE BEGINNING, AND FROM ANCIENT TIMES [THE THINGS] THAT ARE NOT [YET] DONE, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: (Isaiah 46:9-10)

By making prophecies in advance about certain things that will happen, God reveals that He is in full control of everything that takes place. Prophecies are one way God reveals His power.

Prophecies may do any of the following things:

- 1) They usually reveal WHAT will happen at some point in the future. This is the most basic ingredient of prophecy ... telling us about SOME EVENT that will occur.
- 2) In addition, prophecy may sometimes tell us WHEN this event will occur. This is usually the aspect we ourselves tend to get the most excited about. We are fascinated by the idea of knowing in advance WHEN something is scheduled to take place.
- 3) Further, prophecy may also sometimes tell us WHO will be involved in the process of the prophecy

being fulfilled. This aspect also has a great appeal to us ... the prospect of knowing who certain key role-players in the events ahead are going to be.

4) And sometimes a prophecy may even reveal HOW the things are going to be achieved that are predicted to occur.

Those are probably the main ingredients of prophecies ... the WHAT, WHEN, WHO and HOW.

So now understand the following:

The WHAT of prophecy is generally easy to understand. It is the basic component of the prophecy, usually presented in plain terms or in terms that are explained in the same context. Frequently, when it is included, the HOW is also spelled out in specific terms that are easy to understand. In many other cases the HOW is not mentioned, and then it is obviously more difficult.

But it is the WHEN and the WHO that is almost always presented in some coded form! Often code names are presented for those who will be involved in the prophecies being fulfilled. And the starting times for those prophecies are likewise often coded.

Thus we may know the WHAT and the HOW, and then we SPECULATE about the WHEN and the WHO of prophecy!

ANOTHER PURPOSE FOR PROPHECIES

Notice what God tells us through the prophet Amos.

Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but HE REVEALETH HIS SECRET unto his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7)

By presenting prophecies in a way where they (almost always) contain an element of coding, God controls who will understand the prophecies. Unless God reveals the coding He employed to one of His servants, the fulfillment of the prophecy remains a mystery. In this way God controls exactly who will understand and who will not understand. Unless God makes known the coding, the prophecy as a whole remains sealed. As Isaiah recorded:

And the vision of all is become unto you AS THE WORDS OF A BOOK THAT IS SEALED, which [men] deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for IT [IS] SEALED: (Isaiah 29:11)

In the previous chapter Isaiah had asked a question.

Whom shall He (i.e. God) teach knowledge? and whom shall He make to understand doctrine? [them that are] weaned from the milk, [and] drawn from the breasts. (Isaiah 28:9)

The question is: exactly how is God going to reveal His secrets to His servants? How is He going to give them understanding? The next verse provides the answer.

For precept [must be] upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, [and] there a little: (Isaiah 28:10)

The way God will very often reveal His secrets to His servants is by enabling them to CORRECTLY put various Scriptures together. God will GIVE this understanding so that His servants can, AT THE APPROPRIATE TIME "rightly divide" and also "rightly put together" the Scriptures.

For example, when the time was right, God opened Daniel's understanding to the fact that the Babylonian captivity was coming to an end. It was in the first year of Darius the Mede, and not before then, that God gave Daniel the understanding that 70 years were to be accomplished. This had been recorded in the writings of Jeremiah all along, but Daniel only understood this when God wanted him to understand this. Notice:

IN THE FIRST YEAR OF DARIUS the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans; In the first year of his reign I DANIEL UNDERSTOOD BY BOOKS the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. (Daniel 9:1-2)

And while God gave Daniel understanding of SOME things, God kept the understanding of other things hidden from Daniel, even when Daniel himself was the human instrument through whom God revealed these prophecies. Notice:

AND I HEARD, BUT I UNDERSTOOD NOT: then said I, O my Lord, what [shall be] the end of these [things]? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for THE WORDS [ARE] CLOSED UP AND SEALED TILL THE TIME OF THE END. (Daniel 12:8-9)

Again, God was making the point that HE CONTROLS who will understand and who will not understand how and when these prophecies would be fulfilled. The keys to understanding these prophecies would be sealed until God Himself would make those keys available.

Now while prophecy is without question a major part of the Word of God, it is by no means the most important part of God's revelation to us.

The Apostle Paul explained the following:

Charity never faileth: but WHETHER [THERE BE] PROPHECIES, THEY SHALL FAIL; whether [there be] tongues, they shall cease; whether [there be] knowledge, it shall VANISH AWAY. (1 Corinthians 13:8)

The Greek verb here translated as "fail" is "katargeo". It is used twice in this verse, and the second time it is translated as "vanish away". This verb literally means: to render idle, inactive, inoperative, etc..

So Paul is not trying to say that the prophecies shall "fail" in the sense of being proved wrong. Rather, he means that they only have a limited life-span; then they will vanish away and become inoperative. The same is true for certain knowledge. Once we have progressed to the time of the New Jerusalem and God has given us a new and pure language, then certain knowledge will no longer be relevant and it will simply "vanish away".

The point Paul was making about prophecies is this: they have no permanence. Once they have been fulfilled, they are past tense. And once God's plan has been achieved, then the prophecies that laid out in advance various steps in that plan will no longer be relevant. So the knowledge of them will vanish away.

But by contrast: learning to think like God thinks, developing the mind of God so we may live by God's standards, coming to value as important the things God values, and developing an outgoing concern for the welfare of others ... those are things that will endure for ever. It follows that it is far more important for us to use the Bible to understand the mind of God and what is pleasing to God, than it is to understand prophecies. However much importance may be attached to correct prophetic understanding, learning to live Christianity is MORE important.

SO WHAT ABOUT UNDERSTANDING PROPHECY?

It should be quite clear that in giving prophecies it was NOT God's intention that people who are clever would figure out answers that would be hidden from those with a lesser intellect. Correctly understanding the prophecies of the Bible has nothing to do with a high I.Q. or with a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. It has nothing to do with possessing skills in mathematics and in working out complicated calculations.

Understand this!

The very fact that God included an element of coding in many of the prophecies should make clear that God intended TO CONTROL who would understand, and who would not understand. Such understanding MUST be given by God! Without explicit revelation from God no amount of mathematical brilliance will correctly understand prophecies, which God does not yet want understood correctly. There simply is no such thing as people somehow stumbling across the correct understanding of prophecies which God has decided should still be sealed! See again Daniel 12:9. If God has sealed it, then it is a waste of time for anyone to think that he can "break the seal" or "crack the code".

There is only one way to correctly understand the prophecies of the Bible. That understanding must be GIVEN by God! Once God has "given" that understanding, then it can certainly be published and made available to other people. But it first had to be given by God to some person.

When Daniel, for example, needed to understand certain things, that understanding was GIVEN to him (see Daniel 2:19). Similarly, just before the Day of Pentecost (in 30 or 31 A.D.) the Apostle Peter was GIVEN the understanding that certain parts of Psalm 69 and Psalm 109 applied to Judas Iscariot (see Acts 1:20). Peter's prophetic understanding, as evidenced in this verse, was not based on a diligent study of the Book of Psalms. God GAVE Peter the understanding which God wanted to make known at that specific time. God enabled Peter to correctly "divide" the Scriptures.

The understanding that there will be a New Jerusalem was likewise GIVEN to Abraham (see Hebrews 11:10). The same goes for Paul ... the prophetic understanding Paul had was GIVEN to him, when he had visions of being in the third heaven (see 2 Corinthians 12:2).

Correct prophetic understanding is always the result of divine revelation and NEVER THE RESULT OF PRECISE MATHEMATICAL CALCULATIONS. Oh yes, mathematical calculations may come into the picture, but the original understanding must be given by God. It cannot be based on mathematical calculations alone!

PROPHETIC FULFILLMENTS ... PAST AND FUTURE

It is a futile exercise to pronounce what percentage of biblical prophecies applies to the past as seen

from today, and what percentage applies to the time yet future. Percentages have nothing to do with the real question ... they are just sometimes used to "load the deck". The facts are: there ARE prophecies which have already been fulfilled! And there ARE prophecies which clearly apply to a time yet future! And there ARE prophecies which will have more than one fulfillment! Percentages don't change these facts in any way.

Remember that the WHAT of prophecy is usually the clearest part. God has predicted something that will happen. When we look at prophecies that have already been fulfilled (e.g. those pertaining to Christ's first coming), then it is fairly easy to understand the literal fulfillment. It is all in the past. Any relevant calculations are fairly easy to identify. When we look at prophecies, the fulfillment of which is still future, then we are usually speculating. In such cases our own biases often prevent us from seeing the true picture.

So how much value can we attach to the explanations for prophecies that are put forward by various biblical commentators? If they are commenting on prophecies that we understand have been fulfilled already, then they "MAY" be correct in their views, though not necessarily so. But if they are commenting about yet future fulfillments of prophecies, then we may as well throw their opinions out of the window! They will be worthless!

Can we understand this?

Scholars and biblical commentators cannot figure out yet future fulfillments of prophecies without direct revelation from God. Isaiah 55:8 is as true for biblical commentators as it is for everyone else who does not have God's Spirit. As Isaiah wrote:

For my thoughts [are] not your thoughts, neither [are] your ways my ways, saith the LORD.
(Isaiah 55:8)

The most critical criterion for a correct understanding of yet future prophetic fulfillments is that this kind of understanding is given by God ONLY to His servants! This is made clear in the Old Testament.

Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but HE REVEALETH HIS SECRET UNTO HIS SERVANTS
the prophets. (Amos 3:7)

And it is repeated very emphatically at the start of the closing prophecies of the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, TO SHEW UNTO HIS SERVANTS
THINGS WHICH MUST SHORTLY COME TO PASS; and he sent and signified [it] by his angel
unto his servant John: (Revelation 1:1)

There are any number of people who have tried their hand at explaining the Book of Revelation. Some have produced long books and elaborate and impressive charts ... but the opening verse of this book makes quite clear that ONLY THE SERVANTS OF GOD would be given a correct understanding of this book! So a very basic question to ask before examining any explanation of the Book of Revelation (the same is also true for any other yet unfulfilled prophecies) is this: Is this explanation being presented by a true servant of God or not? If the explanation has not come from a true servant of God ... THEN REVELATION 1:1 TELLS YOU TO REJECT IT AS A WASTE OF TIME!

This verse makes quite clear that the Book of Revelation was NOT given to the world to give THEM understanding of yet future events! It was SPECIFICALLY given to help the true servants of God understand things that lie ahead! The same point was made in Amos 3:7.

That is not to say that we in God's Church are not likely to also come up with wrong explanations for prophetic events. We too can be wrong in our understanding, and frequently we ARE wrong in our speculations about prophecies. That's the record of the Church in the present age ... that we have been WRONG in our application of the prophecies. But in cases like that it does not make sense to then go to those who are not even God's people for a supposedly better or more accurate explanation. The correct explanation has to always, in some way, come from God's true servants.

So here is the point to keep in mind:

With all the prophecies which apply to the future we simply have to wait until God chooses to REVEAL exactly how those prophecies are going to be fulfilled. We can guess and we can speculate, based on the details God inspired to be recorded; but until God Himself chooses to make known the exact details of the fulfillment, we are not really going to get it right. No amount of poring over prophetic charts will provide the right answer until God decides the time for understanding is right.

SOME SPECIFICS

Let's look at a few of the things people today would really like to "KNOW" regarding the prophesied events ahead:

Question: Who will be the two witnesses?

Answer: I don't have the foggiest idea! And neither do you! If you think you do know, it is either your speculation or wishful thinking.

Question: When will the great tribulation start?

Answer: I have no idea at all! I know we should be in the place of safety by then, but that doesn't really tell you what you want to know.

Question: Where will the place of safety be?

Answer: I suspect it might be in the area of Petra, basically because I don't have any better idea. But I really don't know for sure at all! And neither do you.

Question: How will we get to the place of safety?

Answer: I don't have even the vaguest hint of an idea as to how God will get us there! Any number of analogies that people can present don't really prove anything at all.

Question: How will we survive and what will we do at the place of safety?

Answer: God will take care of us. Apart from that I know nothing else that will happen there.

Question: Who will be the human leader of the "beast power"?

Answer: I don't know. I don't believe God has revealed that thus far.

Question: Who will be the "false prophet"?

Answer: Again, I don't really know. I suspect it will be a Pope, but whether it will be the present Pope or someone else, I have no way of knowing at this stage.

Question: Which ten nations will be combined under the leadership of "the beast"?

Answer: I don't know! It isn't really spelled out in the Bible.

Question: When will the 1260, 1290 and 1335 days start or end?

Answer: I don't know! We'll have to wait and see.

Question: Which nations will make up the army of 200 million in Revelation chapter 9?

Answer: I don't know! It is not spelled out in great detail.

Question: How long before the return of Christ will the two witnesses be killed?

Answer: That's one I can answer. It will be exactly three and one half days (i.e. 84 hours) before the return of Christ (see Revelation 11:11-15).

Question: Exactly what is "the abomination of desolation"?

Answer: I suspect that it has something to do with the armies of the beast power, but I don't really have a clear idea at all.

Question: Will the Jews institute animal sacrifices before the great tribulation starts?

Answer: I don't know!

Question: Will the great tribulation involve nuclear warfare?

Answer: I don't know! Time will tell.

Question: Will Christ return on a Day of Trumpets?

Answer: Possibly! The symbolism certainly makes sense, but I don't really know for sure. Put it this way: I already KNOW the dates for the Day of Trumpets for any given year. So IF Jesus Christ DOES return on a Day of Trumpets, then we already KNOW "the day" ... it is just the year we are uncertain about. But in that case "the day" has been fixed, and we have known it for over 20 years already ... it is just "the year" we don't know. Speaking for myself, at this stage I am not sure that I actually know "the day" either.

Question: Who is "the Elijah" before the dreadful day of the LORD (see Malachi 4:5)?

Answer: I don't know! I don't believe that Mr. Armstrong filled the role referred to in Malachi 4:5. He died over 10 years ago, and that "dreadful day" isn't here yet.

Question: Who will sit on the British throne when the tribulation starts?

Answer: I don't know!

Question: Will the Jews build a temple in Jerusalem?

Answer: I don't really know! It is not really clear to me.

Question: How many Laodiceans will come to true repentance during the great tribulation? Any specific percentage?

Answer: I don't have any idea how many. The Bible gives no indication of any specific percentage in this regard. The references to "50%" are NOT references to how many people will actually repent; they refer to something else.

Question: So how many people will there be at the place of safety?

Answer: I have no idea! Any figures are only pure speculation.

Question: Who is "the king of the south" today?

Answer: I don't know!

Question: Will there be an economic crash before the great tribulation starts?

Answer: Very possibly, but I don't really know.

etc.

These are some of the questions pertaining to the prophesied events ahead, to which people would like to have answers. While I have briefly referred to my own opinions in a couple of the answers, I have not really given you my own ideas. I have only given you what I "KNOW", or to be more accurate, I have told you that I DON'T KNOW. At this stage I don't really know the answers to all these questions (except for one).

And other people don't really know the answers either. Oh yes, we can have many opinions, and even strong feelings, about some of these questions. But unless God specifically REVEALS the answers to us, we will just be groping in the dark. And in His own time God WILL reveal the answers ... that's what Amos 3:7 tells us. But until then we need to recognize our limitations. We need to beware of interpreting everything from OUR perspective.

SOME DIFFICULTIES IN CORRECTLY UNDERSTANDING PROPHECIES

I suppose that it all basically goes back to what Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 8:1.

Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. KNOWLEDGE PUFFETH UP, but charity edifieth. (1 Corinthians 8:1)

That's right! Knowledge easily tends to make us feel that we are somehow "more important". Recall that it was, after all, a tree of "KNOWLEDGE" that provided the first temptation for mankind. And the thought of understanding prophecies, which have hitherto been sealed, can be as enticing as anything else in this regard.

So consider the following things:

1) It is a natural tendency for us to view everything from our specific vantage point in history. The early Christians in the first century A.D. did the same thing.

2) This approach distorts our objectivity. Prophetic statements are interpreted to fit the present conditions evident around us.

3) Thus those leaders who are presently prominent are seen as the people referred to in prophecies. This applies both, to people within the Church and to people outside of the Church.

Thus, if you have been in contact with the Church of God since the 1950's, you will know that at various times the Church believed that the following people fitted the following prophetic positions:

- Adolf Hitler would be "the beast";
- Marshall Tito would be "the beast";
- Franz Josef Strauss would be "the beast";
- various different popes would be "the false prophet";
- Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong would be "Elijah";
- Mr. Armstrong would be the leader of "the two witnesses";
- Garner Ted Armstrong would be "the second witness"; etc..

NONE OF THESE IDEAS HAVE PROVED TO BE CORRECT! But in many cases people have stubbornly clung to these ideas. The first one mentioned is of interest; it illustrates how people can block out reality in order to hold to their own ideas when it comes to prophecy.

Adolf Hitler had been dead for well over ten years when various ministers in God's Church were still convinced that he would be "the beast". They thought this because of Adolf Hitler's perverse and depraved leadership during World War II. He was precisely the type of leader needed to start the great tribulation. Hitler simply "HAD TO BE" the man! Therefore it was not difficult for them to convince themselves that Hitler was somehow hiding in the jungles of South America, just biding his time. THE MAN HAD DIED WELL OVER A DECADE BEFORE ... but in their eyes it was quite plausible that he was hiding somewhere!

We have the same thing today. Mr. Armstrong died over ten years ago ... but there are thousands of people who still reason that Mr. Armstrong somehow MUST HAVE BEEN "Elijah"! Mr. Armstrong died over ten years ago, and "the great and dreadful day of the LORD" has not yet come (see Malachi 4:5) ... but people will cling to their belief anyway.

4) New facts and changed circumstances are interpreted in such a way that they do not threaten the previously established view. It is not the calculation that is wrong; it is just that some minor detail was overlooked and so we need a minor modification in our ideas; etc.. It is not acknowledged that the changed circumstances (e.g. Mr. Armstrong having died, etc.) actually SHATTER any possibility of our previous ideas having been correct.

5) The events occurring around us are interpreted as being the things the Bible makes reference to. We "watch" world events to see if anything that is happening could possibly be a fulfillment of something we are anticipating will happen. When wars break out, we anticipate who will win, based on our

interpretation of prophecies. When new leaders assume offices of prominence, we scrutinize them to see if they are perhaps "THE" leaders needed for end time events.

6) All along we are not really open to an objective assessment of the facts that confront us. Instead we "INTERPRET" the facts to make sure they are compatible with the way we see things. Facts that contradict our ideas are either rejected or modified, to allow us to hold to our cherished ideas (e.g. "well, I just KNOW that Hitler is still hiding somewhere down there in South America. After all, they never DID see his corpse, right? Of course, he made it look like he committed suicide .. what else do you expect?" etc.).

THE REAL PROBLEM

The real problem with all of this is very simple. We have assumed that we can "work it all out", based on the clues that the prophecies provide. We have not waited for God to "REVEAL" the details of exactly how the prophecy will work out, and who will be the people involved. And once we have accepted a false prophetic idea, then it is extremely difficult to get rid of that false idea. Mr. Armstrong explained this point many, many times. For example, in the "Author's Statement" of "Mystery of the Ages" Mr. Armstrong wrote:

"I have often said it is much more difficult to unlearn an erroneous supposed truth than it is to learn a new truth." (page xiii)

As long as God does not reveal how and when and by whom a prophecy will be fulfilled, the clues God has provided in the Bible are simply not enough for giving us a correct understanding. It is only once God has "made known" His secret that we can understand a prophecy correctly.

The Apostle Paul had diligently studied the Scriptures, including the prophecies, long before he was called into God's Church. Yet he NEVER COULD correctly understand the prophecies that speak about the Messiah! It wasn't possible until God "revealed" a correct understanding to him. Notice what he said in Ephesians.

How that BY REVELATION HE MADE KNOWN UNTO ME the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which IN OTHER AGES WAS NOT MADE KNOWN unto the sons of men, as IT IS NOW REVEALED UNTO HIS HOLY APOSTLES AND PROPHETS by the Spirit; (Ephesians 3:3-5)

Having all of the prophecies in the Old Testament simply wasn't enough! God still had to "reveal" and "make known" exactly what those prophecies mean. And notice: Paul was referring to making known WHAT the prophecies mean; he was not referring to WHEN they would be fulfilled or WHO would be involved in such fulfillment.

For example: you could have spent years studying the Book of Psalms. But unless God REVEALED it to you, you would never have understood that Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8, both quoted by Peter in Acts 1:20, refer to Judas Iscariot. That is something God had to reveal!

So what do you know about prophecy? How much prophecy do you really understand?

Well, for those prophecies which have already been fulfilled, our understanding may be quite good. For those prophecies that apply to the distant future (how people will live during the millennium and the period following the second resurrection, what things will be like when the New Jerusalem comes down

from heaven, etc.) our understanding may be as good as can be expected.

But for those prophecies that pertain to the immediate future (i.e. between now and the second coming of Christ) our understanding is probably not nearly as good as we might be inclined to think. There are many gaps, as far as specific details are concerned. And trying to guess at possible answers for those gaps only complicates the issue ... it will become difficult to unlearn those wrong guesses.

Understand that there are many details, which you and I would like to know, which God has simply NOT YET revealed. Let's wait for God to do so in His own time. And God will do that. As Jesus Christ said:

FOR NOTHING IS SECRET, THAT SHALL NOT BE MADE MANIFEST; neither [any thing] hid, that shall not be known and come abroad. (Luke 8:17)

So don't get too hung up about prophecy! Rather focus your attention on "the more excellent way" (see 1 Corinthians 12:31), learning to think like God, and developing an attitude of genuine concern for other people. Yes, prophecy IS important. But correct understanding of prophecy always remains contingent on God revealing such understanding to His servants. Until then correct understanding will escape us. And when all is said and done, understanding prophecies still is only "the outside of the cup"; it never does become a part of "the inside" which God wants us to examine. See Matthew 23:25-26. And see my article titled "Just How Important Are 'The Right Doctrines'?".

In His own time God will reveal the answers to all the questions I posed earlier in this article.

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