

The Beginning is Near

End times Bible prophecy has been under attack for some time now. It isn't being attacked by skeptics and scoffers; it's being attacked by popular Christians.

Rick Warren wrote *The Purpose Driven Life*. It became and remains the bestselling hardcover non-fiction book in history with over 32 million sales. It is the second most translated book after the Bible.

In the book he states: "If you want Jesus to come back sooner, focus on fulfilling your mission, not figuring out prophecy." He goes on to characterize prophecy as a "distraction" and says that anyone who lets himself get involved in distractions like studying prophecy "is not fit for the kingdom of God."

In his book, *Speaking My Mind*, Tony Campolo writes, "Rigid Christians who believe in the possibility of Jesus' soon return are a real problem for the whole world."

Brian McLaren, writing in *Sojourners* magazine in April of 2009, stated that any theology that stresses a special end time role for Israel is: "Terrible... deadly... distorted... biblically unfaithful... and morally and ethically harmful."

Calvary Chapel's used to be known for their emphasis on the unfulfilled end times prophecies. Sadly, even among our tribe, enthusiasm is waning.

I freely admit that some, even many, of those who emphasize prophecy do so sensationally, making outrageous claims and predictions.

A lot of the sights I visit, to see what is happening prophetically, have story-after-story about conservative politics.

Criticize them - *not* the Bible. Seriously; it isn't the fault of prophecy that some people mishandle it. To ignore it is just as bad - maybe even worse.

I'm a member of a discussion group of pastors, many of them Calvary's, who think that our weekly series on prophecy is absurd.

I'm not sensitive to it... But I thought it might be a good idea to list some of the reasons why an emphasis on Bible prophecy is not only biblical but immensely practical.

I want to (briefly) mention five reasons why the study of prophecy is something good.

#1 As I tell you nearly every Sunday, fully 30% of the Bible consists of prophecy. One source is *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* by J. Barton Payne. He says there are 1,239 prophecies in the Old Testament and 578 prophecies in the New Testament for a total of 1,817. These prophecies are contained in 8,352 of the Bible's verses. Since there are 31,124 verses in the Bible, the 8,352 verses that contain prophecy constitute 26.8 percent of the Bible's volume.

Dr. Hugh Ross says, "Approximately 2500 prophecies appear in the pages of the Bible, about 2000 of which already have been fulfilled to the letter - no errors. (The remaining 500 or so reach into the future and may be seen unfolding as days go by)."

Of those, about 500 end times prophecies remain unfulfilled.

Prophecy isn't confined to a few 'prophetic' books. It permeates the entire Bible. For example the apostle Paul spent three weeks establishing a church in Thessalonica. Since he was with them so briefly, you'd think he'd have a lot of practical instruction that he'd want to impart in any letters to them. Things like church government and liturgy.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, every chapter references the return of Jesus. It works out to once every thirteen verses.

Chapter four, of course, has Paul's clearest teaching on the resurrection and rapture of the church.

Second Thessalonians has a long section on the Day of the Lord, and the antichrist.

The apostle Peter wrote extensively in his letters about the end times.

The last book of the Bible, The Revelation of Jesus Christ, is fully prophetic. It promises a blessing just for reading it:

Rev 1:3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.

It ends with Jesus promising He is coming:

Rev 22:12 "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.

Those who want to push prophecy aside can only do so by ignoring huge sections of scripture in just about every book of the Bible.

#2 Jesus is the subject of Bible prophecy. When the apostle John fell down before an angel, he said, "See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10).

In Luke 24:44 we read,

Luk 24:44 Then [Jesus] 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."

In Hebrews 10:7 Jesus said of Himself, "BEHOLD, I HAVE COME - IN THE VOLUME OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME - TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.' "

If you want to know Jesus more, you're going to have to see Him in prophecy. Not just fulfilling past prophecies; but in how He will fulfill future prophecies.

You can even argue that unless you read and re-read the Revelation regularly, you won't know Jesus very well. I can say that because the word "revelation" in the book's title is the word *apocalypse*, which means the *revealing*.

If that's the book in which Jesus is revealed - we'd better read it and study it.

#3 Fulfilled prophecies are a powerful testimony to the truth and accuracy of the Bible. Let me read to you this rather long, but exciting, quote:

It was prophesied in the Old Testament that Jesus would be born of the seed of Abraham, Jesse, and David.

He would be born of a virgin, called Emmanuel, born in Bethlehem. Great persons would come to adore Him, there would be the killing of children in Bethlehem. He would be called out of Egypt. He would be preceded by a forerunner. He would be anointed with the Holy Spirit. He'd be a prophet like Moses, a priest after the order is now Melchizedek. He would be entering into His public ministry in Galilee. He would be entering publicly into Jerusalem and come into the temple. He would live in poverty and meekness, tenderness, and compassion. He would be without the deceit, He'd be full of zeal, preaching with parables, working miracles, bearing reproach. He would be rejected by His own Jewish brethren.

The Jews and Gentiles would combined together against Him. He would be betrayed by a friend. His disciples would forsake Him. He would be sold for thirty pieces of silver. And that price would be given for a potter's field.

He would die with intense suffering yet be silent under that suffering. He would be struck on the cheek, His visage would be marred. He would be spit upon and scarred. His hands and His feet would be nailed to the cross. He would be forsaken by God, He would cry out, "My God My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He would be mocked. Gall and vinegar would be offered to Him. His garments would be parted. Lots would be cast for His clothing. He would be numbered among the transgressors. He would intercede for His murderers.

He would die but not a bone of His body would be broken. He would be pierced long before crucifixion would even ever be invented. He would be buried with the rich. His flesh would not see corruption. He would be raised from the dead. He would ascend back to the right hand of God the Father.

All of this was recorded hundreds of years before Jesus ever entered this world. And many of these prophecies are fulfilled not by His friends but by His enemies who stand to lose the most with their fulfillment. And many of these prophecies being fulfilled before He was born, while He's in His mother's womb, and while He is in the grave.

#4 Prophecy encourages holy living as a servant of the Lord. I've been quoting Romans 13:11 on Sundays,

Rom 13:11 And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

After a long section on the future, Peter asked,

2Pe 3:11 Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,
2Pe 3:12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?

John says,

1Jn 3:2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

1Jn 3:3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

The blessed hope of seeing Jesus at His return has a purifying effect on your walk. It encourages you to want to be more like Him day-by-day.

It's not so much that you are afraid He will come suddenly and catch you doing what is wrong. It is that you want to be ready for your heavenly Bridegroom. You want to live your best for Him.

#5 Bible prophecy presents hope - and our only hope - for the future.

People are fascinated with, but also afraid of, the future. Dystopian, apocalyptic stories are more popular than ever. Whether by nuclear strikes, or a super-virus, or alien invasion, there's a feeling of doomsday.

Brilliant physicist Steven Hawking died at age 76. He had a list of several ways the future could go. They're all doom and gloom.

Hawking theorized that humans would turn the planet into a giant ball of fire by 2600 due to overcrowding and energy consumption which will make Earth uninhabitable.

The scientist also claimed that the advent of artificial intelligence could be the "worst event in the history of our civilization."

He believed eventually AI will outpace our own intelligence and turn on us. "I fear that AI may replace humans altogether. If people design computer viruses, someone will design AI that replicates itself."

Speaking to the BBC as part of his 75th birthday celebrations he said: "I fear evolution has inbuilt greed and aggression to the human genome. "There is no sign of conflict lessening, and the development of militarized technology and weapons of mass destruction could make that disastrous. "The best hope for the survival of the human race might be independent colonies in space."

One more: He said that if we do not find another planet to live on in the next 100 years, climate change, over population, pandemics and our warring ways will get us in the end.

Do you realize that the Bible doesn't reveal the end of the world as such, but the redeeming of the world, so that righteousness can reign forever and ever? Our future is hopeful and the only hope.

Why would we quit emphasizing our future hope? Especially to a generation of people so empty of hope for the future?

There is an often quoted verse that describes people "who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (First Chronicles 12:32).

These are most obviously the end times. Understanding that, it is appropriate to emphasize Bible prophecy.

The beginning is near!