

Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow

It seems almost impossible to believe that it's been twenty years since a governor from the little state of Arkansas was traveling the United States looking to win the presidency to the tune of Fleetwood Mac's lyrics of *"Don't Stop, Thinking About Tomorrow, Don't Stop, It will soon be here..."*

Yet, I believe that if we were honest, we'd have to admit that most Christians have done just that...we've stopped *"Thinking About Tomorrow"* at least as far as it relates to God's plan for this world and for eternity. We think a lot about tomorrow when it comes to the economy or the election or our job or what our kids are going to do, or our retirement plans. Yet, the average Christian rarely thinks about God's plan for tomorrow.

How do we know that? Because if we did, we'd live differently, our churches would be different, and it would radically change how we engage lost people, if we truly thought about tomorrow.

Friends, Jesus is coming again. He's **Coming Soon**. We don't know the day or hour, we do know that it's 2000 years sooner than it was! Did you know that 27% of our Bible concerns prophecy and 20% of its books are prophetic? The continued emphasis on tomorrow, on prophecy in Scripture is shown also by the many times the Christian is urged to watch for Christ's coming. Yet, one who's not interested in God's tomorrow or the prophetic portions of the Bible can hardly be expected to watch.

In the interest of full disclosure, we must admit that sadly Bible prophecy has suffered badly at the hands of friends and enemies alike. Some have a strong bias against supernaturalism and predictive prophecy. Consequently, they view Bible prophecy as nothing more than the fanciful expression of a someone's creative imagination or, sometimes, as history written under the guise of prophecy. Those with such an attitude will never hold God's prophetic Word in high esteem.

Yet, ironically, it's those who are strong believers in the prophetic Scriptures who perhaps have hurt it the most. With a newspaper in one hand and the book of Revelation (or some other prophetic book) in the other, they make sensational declarations about what most likely will take place. Though they deny that they themselves are predicting soon coming events, their pronouncements definitely have that impression. After decades of such proclamations through sermons, TV and radio programs, and books, many believers have become apathetic about the prophecies of the Bible. The attitude exists among many of God's people that, "when Jesus and the end times come, they will come, but in the meantime I have to live my life in the real world." Such an attitude is both wrong and unbiblical because Bible prophecy is for living in the real world right now, today!

The Scriptures testify to the critical importance of the doctrine of future things. For example, John prefaced the book of the Revelation with the encouragement that the person who knows prophetic truths and orders his life according to those truths will live better now. He is one who is blessed by God in the present. Please turn to Revelation 1:3 (p. 1018). I don't know about you but I want to be blessed. I want God's blessing on my life. I want God's blessing our church. Don't you want God's blessing on your life?

That's why we're beginning this new study, **Coming Soon**. If we want to be obedient, if we want God's blessing then we dare not **Stop Thinking About Tomorrow**. Tomorrow is as real to God as today or yesterday because God is eternal. Time designations have no meaning to Him. That's why God identified Himself to Moses as *"I AM"* (Ex. 3:14). He is forever in the present tense, the now.

Yet, biblical prophecy isn't designed to satisfy our curiosity about tomorrow, nor is it designed to fill our heads with information so we can get together and debate the details of God's plan. Gaining information has its place in the study of prophecy. It's vital that we understand as fully as we can what God is saying to us, but at the heart of God's purpose for prophecy is changing our hearts and affecting the way we live our lives.

Today as we begin our study of the wonderful and complex revelation of God concerning prophecy, I want to help you see how important prophecy is. The last chapter of the Bible says: *"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book"* (Revelation 22:18-19). This thing called prophecy is very serious business with God. Mess

with His prophetic Word and it will mess up your eternity. God's prophetic message is so important that God pronounced a curse on anyone who tampers with it.

Please understand, that doesn't mean that everyone is going to agree on every minute part of prophecy. There are various views within the Christian community about exactly when Jesus will come back and the shape His Kingdom will take. But these varied interpretations, if they remain within the sphere of orthodoxy, don't hinder us from gaining a broad understanding of God's tomorrow and what He has in store for His people and this world.

Today we want to lay a foundation for our series. So let's get started on this fascinating, awe-inspiring subject of prophecy and we want to do that by asking and seeking to answer some key questions about why we should even study prophecy, why we must not **Stop Thinking About Tomorrow**.

Question #1: What is Biblical prophecy? Let's start with the basics. The Bible does not give a "dictionary" definition of prophecy and we really don't expect it to. There are very few instances where the Bible says that such and such is, and then gives a definition. Rather, it's usually something that we must gather from all the Scriptures, and see its overall sense of the matter.

Let me share a very basic, simple definition of Biblical prophecy: **Prophecy is history written in advance by God**. It's 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 will, His plan—out of love.

Now that definition is a little bit too narrow, in that prophecy can be looked at from a wider perspective than history written in advance by God. 2 Peter 1 is one of the most seminal scriptures on prophecy in the whole Bible. Please turn to 2 Peter 1:19-21 (p. 1018). *"And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."* That's the Bible's definition of prophecy. Peter implies here that prophecy is anything spoken or written, under the inspiration of God. So prophecy is anything and everything spoken or written under the inspiration of God. It is God breathed—God inspired—words.

This is why you find history, wisdom, and Christian living as well as predictions in the books of the prophets. For example, in the book of Jeremiah the *prophet*, you'll find prayers, history, current events of the time. You'll 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. Prophecy is much wider and broader subject than just foretelling what's over the next horizon. It's also speaking out. Prophecy is not a one-dimensional subject, where we normally thought of it as only predicting future events.

For our purposes in this study, biblical prophecy is the prediction of future events. It's what's coming on God's calendar, based on what's written in God's Word. Such passages are widely distributed throughout the Bible. Those most often cited are from Ezekiel, Daniel, Matthew, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Revelation. Biblical prophecy has descriptions of global politics, natural disasters, the future of the nation of Israel, the coming of a Messiah and a Messianic Kingdom, and the ultimate destiny of humankind. It's about the words that we throw around so casually in the Church: the Rapture, the Tribulation, Armageddon, God's Judgment.

True Biblical prophets and prophecy then are special and supernatural revelation received from God and recorded as part of Scripture.

Question #2: Can we interpret prophecy accurately? Many of you know that Jane works from home selling books online. Every now and then I try to help her. Some time ago we got this book, I believe it's Russian and I've tried to list it. So far I'm batting zero. I can't even figure out what the title is. A lot of Christians are like that when it comes to prophecy. Too many of them view prophecy with confusion, trepidation or cynicism. Some are convinced that prophecy is so complicated that only those with special gifts of insight or intellect can make sense of the intricate details, such as ten-horned beasts and locusts that resemble horses but have the faces of men. Others have been exposed to enough bizarre interpretations and failed predictions that they've retreated into "eschatological agnosticism," pleading ignorance on prophetic matters. And that's understandable for the person who once was totally persuaded that the Rapture was going to happen by a certain date or a prominent politician was the Antichrist. Yet, as we approach the subject of interpreting the prophetic Scriptures, we need to remember several things that the Bible has clearly said.

a. Prophecy was given by God to be understood. The Apostle John, for example, began the book of Revelation with the declaration that this book was "*the revelation of Jesus Christ*" (Rev. 1:1). The word "*revelation*" simply means unveiling. It was an unveiling of truth about the future work of Jesus the King and Judge. The Lord has revealed prophetic truth so that we'll be changed by it. This presupposes that truth can be understood. If the prophetic Word is important to the Lord, it must be important to us as well.

b. God has given us help in understanding His prophetic Word. When we're born into the family of God we are anointed by the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27). This anointing gives us the capacity to understand the truth of God. Prior to our conversion we had darkened minds with no real capacity to understand messages from God. Now we not only have a new capacity to understand God's truth, but the Holy Spirit is committed to illuminating the truth of God so that we can understand it.

c. We must then interpret the prophetic passage literally. Of all the rules for interpreting prophecy, this is the most important. But, when we speak of interpreting literally, what do we really mean, since it is obvious to everyone that many prophetic portions are loaded with symbols and figures of speech?

We interpret literally when we approach the words of a Scripture passage in the same basic way that we would any other literature or any ordinary conversation. For example, if I told you that I just saw three brown dogs in the alley, you'd interpret that statement literally. You wouldn't seek to find some hidden meaning in my comment but would assume that I saw three (not five) brown (not black) dogs (not cats) in the alley (not in the park). Not to interpret literally in everyday life would render our communication confusing and fundamentally useless. Our approach to the prophetic Word is very similar.

The literal method of interpretation is that method that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage. The technical term is that it's called the grammatical-historical method to emphasize that the meaning is to be determined by both grammatical and historical considerations.

In order to determine the normal and customary usages of Bible language, it's necessary to consider the accepted rules of grammar and rhetoric, as well as the factual historical and cultural data of Bible times. Literal interpretation assumes that, since God wants His revelation understood by people, He based His revelatory communication on the normal rules of human communication. It understands that in normal communication and in the Scriptures, figures of speech are valuable as communication devices.

If I were to say to you, "I was sitting in the backyard the other evening and there were millions of mosquitoes out there," you'd immediately recognize "millions" as a figure of speech.

Language is God's gift to man. God planned it so that language is fully capable of communicating to us all that God wanted to say. In the Bible, God communicates His message to us in language that conveys actual truth to our minds. In other words, God is revealing things to us in the Bible, not hiding them from us. This is true of the prophetic portions as well as of others.

d. We must interpret prophecy by comparing one prophecy with another. This principle was stated by Peter, "*knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own*

interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). In other words, no prophecy is to be interpreted by itself, but in the light of all that God has spoken on the subject. Every prophecy is part of the total picture. God did not give all prophetic information to any individual prophet. Rather, through many authors over a period of centuries the prophetic picture developed and became more complete. No single prophet received the entire picture; rather, the plan unfolds piece by piece, without contradiction, to reveal the complete and perfect picture. If difficulties of interpretation arise, they're not contradictions, for the Bible is a harmonious and consistent whole.

e. We must remember that sometimes future events are mingled together in a prophecy. In other words, sometimes two future events are predicted one right after the other, but their fulfillment may be separated by many years (or centuries). Often events connected with the first and second comings of Christ, for example, are found in the writings of the same prophet, even though their fulfillment has already been separated by nearly 2,000 years (Isa. 9:6-8 and 61:1, 2). All the predicted events either have been or will be fulfilled literally, even though the prophet may not have seen the time gaps involved between their fulfillments.

f. We must remember that sometimes there's a double reference. A prophecy may have a double fulfillment—one in the immediate circumstances and time of the prophet, and another in the distant future. Isaiah 7:14 is an instance of this, "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*" Apparently some child born in the time of King Ahaz (Isaiah 7:1) was a sign to him, yet this great prophecy was not completely fulfilled until Christ was born.

Often God used this principle, giving both a near and far view in the same prophecy, so that the fulfillment of the one would be assurance of the fulfillment of the other, future one. But notice again, both near and far fulfillments are literal. Literal interpretation is the key to understanding all the Bible, including prophecy.

g. We must interpret the prophetic passage with sanctified common sense.

Jesus spoke of the scribes and Pharisees as "*straining gnats and swallowing camels*" (Matthew 23:24). Prophecy provides a pretext for those who wish to practice this. We're guilty of this abuse whenever we focus on the minutia of prophecy and overlook the message. It's the clear and emphatic message of prophecy that is paramount, not the minutia.

Let me give you an example. A common sport among some Christians is to play the game of "Who's who in prophecy." Is the antichrist the head of the UN? Is a powerful computer in Europe a part of the satanic program? Of course Satan is constantly grooming a man for the job, but it doesn't benefit us to speculate. The same can be said for date setting. This practice has only served to make Christians a joke. The words of Peter should serve to warn us about the dangers of speculation or, in his words, "*private interpretations*" Every eschatological position, whether right or wrong, has its own forms of applicational heresy. Wrong doctrine leads to wrong practice, it's true, but right doctrine can also lead to wrong practice if we're not careful.

Question #3: Why should we study Biblical prophecy? When I was in high school, I had a hard time understanding why it mattered that $x + y = z$. I'm sure that I'm not the last student to ask why I had to study Algebra. Yet, without Algebra, we wouldn't have many things that we take for granted; computers, TVs, video games, essentially electronics of any kind. Without Algebra we'd still be in the Dark Ages. Algebra is a major part of our lives. The very fact that prophecy is a major portion of our love letter from God is reason enough to study it...yet, let me suggest some other reasons.

a. Biblical prophecy reminds us that if we can trust God in the past, we can trust Him in the future. Over 300 prophecies foretold the coming Messiah, hundreds of years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus fulfilled all of these prophecies. Of those prophecies, there are over 100 that only Jesus could have fulfilled. So if we can trust God about the past, we can trust Him for the future. Fulfilled prophecy authenticates the Word of God. Our Lord staked His entire ministry and message on His ability to fulfill the prophecy that He would rise again from the grave (Matthew 12:38-40;

27:63). In both the Gospels and Acts the message of the gospel was proclaimed on the basis of the authentication of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection in fulfillment of prophecy. Prophecy is a powerful authentication of the Word of God.

How sure can we be that Christ will return to earth? As sure as we are that He came to this earth as a baby in Bethlehem, suffered, died, and was raised from His grave. Keep in mind that there was a time when the death and resurrection of Jesus was prophecy. Today, of course, it is history. Just so, the return of Christ is prophecy today but it will be history at some future date. The fact that He is coming is just as certain as the fact that He already came! All true prophecies eventually become true history.

Prophecy then gives credibility to the proclamation of the gospel. If one would dispute the Word of God he (or she) must first disprove the Bible's claim of fulfilled prophecy.

b. Biblical prophecy reminds us that God is sovereign, that in a world that seems out of control, He is in complete control. Alfred Hitchcock, the famed movie director and master of suspense, told a parable about the unknown. He said, "There once was a king who was granted two wishes. His first was to see the future. But when he saw all that lay ahead -- the beauty and the pain - - he immediately asked for his second wish; that the future be hidden." And then Alfred Hitchcock said this, "*I thank Heaven that tomorrow does not belong to any man. It belongs to God.*"

In a chaotic world that's so completely in the grip of evil, we need to remember that our God sovereignly controls it all. The prophet Isaiah declared that the powerful Creator of this world is not at all impressed with the supposedly great power of men and nations (Isa. 40:12-26). In fact, he asserted that God regards them as dust on the scales, as a drop from a bucket, as nothing and meaningless. Our God is the king of the universe, who reigns both now and in the future (Ps. 2).

Though Satan is called the "*god of this world,*" he doesn't dictate what happens on this planet but remains unquestionably under the sovereign authority of God. Prophecy proclaims the power and sovereignty of God and reminds us that His sure purposes for the future will indeed come to pass. Neither people nor demons can thwart the plans of God Almighty. This great truth brings insight and comfort to the believer living in this hostile world.

c. Biblical prophecy reminds us that God is omniscient. Intrinsic in Biblical prophecy is the concept that God knows all things. His knowledge extends not only to things that will occur in the future, but also to all things that will not occur. Accordingly, His omniscience includes everything and all the possibilities of every event. Because God is omniscient, He knows all things, "*And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account*" (Heb. 4:13).

Foreknowledge means God knows what will actually happen. He knows the future in all its detail as clearly as He knows history or prophecies already fulfilled. No fact of the future, however minute, is outside of His knowledge. Still, prophecy does not reveal everything about the future, nor does it fully reveal all of God's intentions.

d. Biblical prophecy reminds us that God is good. Christians quite often live out their days in personal pain, with unresolved problems and in terribly unfair situations. Prophecy reminds us of the goodness of God by showing that God has already written the final chapter on the human condition, which presently includes suffering and pain. If this life and this world were all there was, or the best we had coming, we might rightly challenge the idea that God is good and loving.

Prophecy reveals with crystal clarity that the ending of the story is good for the children of God. We really do live happily ever after and it's a kind of good that we really can't fathom. The Apostle Paul, who endured incredible pain, suffering, and trouble proclaimed without any reservation, "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us*" (Rom. 8:18). Prophecy is a precious area of doctrine to the people of God who are suffering. Taking us Home is the ultimate good. It's in the Father's house that His children will experience full and unhindered fellowship and finally be free from death, pain, and the other ravages of sin. Prophecy shouts to us that God is good.

e. Biblical prophecy motivates us to live differently, to live for the real world and what really matters. I think that we'd all agree that the evangelical church in America desperately needs

holiness. In his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, Ron Sider writes, “*Scandalous behavior is rapidly destroying American Christianity. By their daily activity, most ‘Christians’ regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate allegiance to money, sex, and self-fulfillment.*” The findings in numerous national polls conducted by highly respected pollsters like Gallup and Barna are simply shocking. Survey after survey demonstrates that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the pagan world in general. Divorce is more common among “born-again” Christians than in the general American population. Just 6% of evangelicals tithe. White evangelicals are the most likely people to object to neighbours of another race. Josh McDowell has pointed out that the sexual promiscuity of evangelical youth is only a little less outrageous than that of their lost peers.

1 John 3:2-3 says, “*Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure.*” Our lack of knowledge and lack of interest in prophecy and the Lord’s return results in our focusing on this dying world and living for the kiddie meal junk of this temporal life.

1 John 2:3 says that everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself. In other words, the test of whether or not you truly understand the teaching of verse 2, of Christ’s return, will be evident in your practicing the truth of verse 3. If you understand that you are presently a child of God and that He’s coming back, when Jesus comes, you’ll be like Him, then you will be progressively purifying your life, just as Jesus is pure.

Sin is tenacious in its grip on us. It’s hard to let go of sin and not live for this temporary world but biblical prophecy is our motivation for purity. John says that our motivation should be that we are God’s beloved children and that Jesus is coming to make us pure. These facts should motivate us to purify our lives now.

Conclusion: To please God, we dare not stop “*Thinking About Tomorrow*” at least as far as it relates to God’s plan for this world and for eternity. Jesus Christ could return at any moment. It’s vital that we live for the real world and be prepared. Are you?

When Jimmy Carter was President, to promote his populist image, on several occasions he spent the night in the homes of common people. Of course, he didn’t drop in unannounced! Those people had fair warning that he was coming on a particular date, and I’m sure that they had to agree to the visit.

But, if you knew that the President would come at some unknown date to stay in your home, and that the news cameras would be there to broadcast the state of your living room to the entire world, I’ll bet that you’d be motivated to clean your house!

My friend, Jesus is coming. When you and I see Him in His glory, we will be like Him. If we have your hope fixed on Him, we’ll start cleaning our house now! We don’t want the Lord who is pure to come to a filthy house! Let’s be ready! We never know when the trumpet is going to sound! It could be today!