

# LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS EDITOR

( 7844 Grimsby Circle, Harrisburg, N.C. 28075)

OCTOBER 2006

## UNDERSTANDING PROPHECY

The current craze for the Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins heretical series *Left Behind* has sold more than sixty million copies. In the 1970's Hal Lindsey's apocalyptic blueprint for our future, *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the best-selling work of non-fiction (using the term non-fiction very loosely) in the English language. When we add to this the many soothsayers of the second advent predicting and setting dates for the second coming and the end of time it is no surprise to see so many Christians confused when it comes to biblical prophecy. Each flare-up in the Middle East births a rash of prophecy books and sermons on the subject. With so much confusion relative to prophesies there are many who do not want to even try to understand anything connected with prophesy. John opens the book of Revelation with these words: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it, for the time is near". If this book and other biblical prophesies cannot be understood then how are we "blessed" if we read and hear, and how can we "heed" the things written if they are beyond our understanding? Paul Boyer, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, in his book *Prophets of the Apocalypse*, estimates that there are some eight million biblical prophecy buffs today. Their message is captivating and their writings are being gobbled up from bookstores all over the nation. With boldness and apparent precision these contemporary religious prognosticators flood the airways and pulpits with their ridiculous and sometimes downright funny predictions of the fulfillment of prophecy in our day.

Is there any way the serious Christian can, in spite of all the self proclaimed prophets and their best selling books, come to an understanding on how to view biblical prophecy? I think there is. The best way to understand Scripture is to let Scripture interpret Scripture. They are their own best interpreters. How are we to understand such statements of Jesus in speaking of the judgment of God upon Jerusalem in Matthew 24:29 that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky and the powers of the heavens will be shaken"? Or the prophesy in Revelation 6:12-14: "there was a great earthquake, and sun became black as sackcloth and the moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth...and the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places"? When we read of the prophesies in the Old Testament of God's judgments upon the nations we find the prophets using a prophetic imagery depicting a collapsing universe in order to vividly describe his coming judgments. Prophesying the fall of Babylon, Isaiah wrote: "the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light, the sun will be

dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light...I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken from its place' (Isa. 13;10, 13). God's judgment of Edom is described as "all the host of heaven will wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; all the hosts will also wither away as a leaf withers from the vine or as one withers from a fig tree" (Isa. 34:4). Amos foretold the doom of Samaria in these words: "And it will come about in that day declares the Lord God, that I shall make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight" (Amos 8:9). Ezekiel predicted the judgment on Egypt by God saying: "and when I extinguish you, I will cover the heavens, and darken their stars, I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the shining lights of the heavens I will darken over you and will set darkness in your land" (Ezek. 32:7,8). The New Testament uses the same stirring language and figurative imagery the prophets of the Old Testament used in describing the judgments of God. We must point out that none of these events *literally* took place. The prophetic terminology used in the New Testament would be readily understood by the people of that day who were familiar with this prophetic way of describing God's judgment.

A familiar passage that has been interpreted in various ways by commentators can be understood by examining the Old Testament prophesy from which it is taken is Acts 2:19,20. Peter is quoting from Joel chapter 2 concerning what will happen before the day of the Lord comes. We have little trouble understanding verses 17 and 18 concerning the coming of the Spirit, but verses 19 and 20 give us some difficulty. "And I will grant wonders in the sky above, and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come". To understand this verse we need to consult Joel 2:28-32 from which the prophesy is taken. Peter quotes Joel verbatim through half of verse 32, which states: "for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as the Lord has said, even among the survivors whom the Lord calls" Peter, in using this scripture to explain the happenings of that day, saw no need of quoting these words, but they give us an explanation of the whole passage. Who were the ones "on Mount Zion and Jerusalem" who would "escape"? Jesus said in Matthew 24:15,16 that when they saw the events of the destruction of Jerusalem beginning to take place "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" and Luke 21:21: "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city". Joel is prophesying that some would escape this destruction. So the conclusion is that Acts 2:19,20 is referring, in the prophetic language of the Old Testament, to

the destruction of Jerusalem. The great and glorious day of the Lord was the end of the Old Covenant system.

Applying this principle to the book of Revelation may help us better understand how to view prophecy. There is nothing in the book of Revelation that is not mentioned in other scriptures, and much of Revelation can be explained by comparing it with these scriptures. For example In Daniel 7 he is given a vision of four beasts. These beasts are said to be four kings (ver. 17) or kingdoms (ver. 23). They were seen in the king's vision of a great statue in chapter 2. Three of them are identified and called by name: Babylon (2:38), the Medes and Persians (8:20) and Greece (8:21). The fourth kingdom is not named but it follows the Grecian empire in history so it must be Rome. If they are so identified in Daniel can we not conclude the beasts of Revelation are also kingdoms? John sees two beasts in Revelation and one of them is identified as a false prophet (a religious kingdom). The two kingdoms in power at this time were Rome and apostate Judaism. (If we accept the fact that the book was written before the fall of Jerusalem and not in 90 AD). We can identify the harlot woman in chapter 17 and 18 by comparing scripture with scripture. The woman is called "Babylon the Great" and is described with the words "whore, abominations, naked, oil, fine linen, decked, silk, fine flour, crown, jewels, gold, silver, mother, blood, filthiness and fornication". These exact same terms are used in Ezekiel 16 and 23 to describe Jerusalem under the judgment of God. Also the woman is called "the great city" (16:19; 17:18, 18:10, 26). "The great city" is identified in chapter 11:8 as "where the Lord was crucified". This means the woman, the great city, was Jerusalem. Sometimes the prophesy itself will give us an understanding of its meaning. (As Daniel was told the beasts represents four kings). The seven stars and the seven golden lampstands are said to be seven churches and the angels (messengers) of the churches (1:20). The lake of fire is said to be the second death (20:14) the city in chapter 21 is said to be the bride, the wife of the Lamb (ver.9).

We conclude with Paul's word in I Thessalonians 4:18. After describing the return of the Lord, he writes, "Therefore comfort one another with these words". Prophecy can be misused and abused in a number of ways but the date setters and the modern prognosticators and their wild interpretations should not keep us from understanding that prophesy is a part of God's divine revelation and is given for our learning and admonition.

## HOW HONEST CONCERN FOR THE CHURCH CAN DEVELOPE INTO FALSE DOCTRINE

One of the most interesting and most emphasized teachings in both Testaments, overlooked, ignored and neglected by the modern church is the teaching and warnings concerning false prophets and false doctrine. The prophetic books of the Old Testament abound with warnings against false prophets and false teaching. Jeremiah and Ezekiel are especially adamant in warning the people and especially the kings against believing false teaching. It was a sin so serious that God demanded the death penalty for those who were guilty of this

rebellious act (Deut. 13:1-10). Both Jesus and the Apostles continue this warning in the New Testament. Jesus calls them "ravenous wolves" (Mt. 7:15) and Paul says they are "servants of Satan" and that they are "enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly and whose glory is their shame, who set their minds on earthly things" (Phil.3:18-20), and they are "deceitful workers, disguising themselves as Apostles of Christ" (II Cor. 11:13,14). Peter gives over a large part of his second epistle to the description of and warnings against false teachers (II Peter 2) and John identifies them as being of the anti-Christ (I John 4:1-3). Jude writes only one chapter in his epistle and it consists of descriptions of and warning against false teachers. The book of Revelation pictures the false prophets as beasts and is a chronicle of the battle between what is true and false.

In the history of the church after the passing of the Apostles we find much false doctrine developing. Much of the teaching and actions that developed during this period was not a deliberate attempt to deceive people into that which was false. Rather it developed in an attempt to insure unity in the church and keep everything free from the many heresies which had been prevalent since the time of the Apostles. For example the rise of the monarchical episcopate, that is, making the office of the bishop (elder in the N.T.) more than it had been during the time of the Apostles. An example of this is seen in the teachings of Ignatius of Antioch, one of the early "church fathers". He was not just one of a number of bishops or elders in the church in Antioch, he somehow became *the* Bishop of Antioch. In his writings he made a distinction between the "bishop" and the "elder" whereas in the N.T. the terms are used interchangeably. Under his influence it became common throughout Christendom for a city to have one Bishop. For example in his letter to the Philadelphians he wrote: "in the absence of the bishop undertake nothing" (*J.B. Lightfoot's: translations of his letters*). Eventually this doctrine led to the establishment of Roman Catholicism. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* states: "The whole system of Catholic doctrine may be discovered in the course of his seven epistles". Here is a case where the false teaching of Catholicism can be traced back to an honest effort of a man who wanted to protect the unity of the church. The efforts of Ignatius were not to deliberately deceive people, rather to protect them from heresy. His devotion to his beliefs brought about his martyrdom sometime between AD 98 and 107.

In the July 2, 2006 issue of *Christian Standard* in an article entitled "How Do They Grow? Church Growth and Independent Christian Churches" states that "Christian churches are increasingly adopting the practices of the American market economy". They are "increasingly identifying with the evangelical community at large". The example here is the use of Rick Warren's *40 Days of Purpose* campaign in the churches. It further states "leadership of congregations has been gradually transferred from the eldership to the professional staff". (Shades of the monarchical episcopate). I am sure all this is coming about because of a sincere concern for the growth of the church, but like Ignatius' action this leads to false teaching which is a greater problem than the lack of growth.