

SIGNS OF THE TIMES
Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Many Christians today believe there are signs pointing to an imminent rapture of the church. However, the rapture is a signless event; thus, there are not and never will develop signs of the time indicating that the rapture is near. This is true because the rapture is imminent, it could happen at any moment and no prophesied event must take place in order for the rapture to then occur. It is impossible for an imminent event to have signs. If signs are related to an event then it would indicate that it was near or not near, and thus could not happen until after the signs were present. Thus, signs would have to precede the event, which would mean that the event could not happen at any moment until after the signs appeared. Since the rapture is said in the New Testament to be an event that could occur at any moment (1 Cor. 1:7; 16:22; Phil. 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thess. 1:10; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28; Jam. 5:7-9; 1 Pet. 1:13; Jude 21; Rev. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20) then it cannot be related to any signs at all. However, as I shall show later, this does not mean that there are not signs of the time that do relate to other aspects of God's plan.

Some wonder if there are signs indicating the end of the church age in which we currently live. It would be too strong to say there are signs of the end of the church age. Instead, the Bible indicates what the condition of the church will be like, the general course of the age, and then warns about some general trends toward the later part of the church age. The primary sign of the later days of the church age is an increase in apostasy within the professing church (1 Tim. 4:1-5; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 2 Pet. 2:1-9; 3:1-13; Jude 3-23).

STAGE SETTING

The present church age is not a time in which Bible prophecy is being fulfilled. Bible prophecy relates to a time after the rapture (the seven-year tribulation period). However, this does not mean God is not preparing the world for that future time during the present church age—in fact, He is. But this is not “fulfillment” of Bible prophecy. So while prophecy is not being fulfilled in our day, it does not follow that we cannot track “general trends” in current preparation for the coming tribulation, especially since it follows the rapture. I call this approach “stage-setting.” Just as many people set their clothes out the night before they wear them the following day, so in the same sense is God preparing the world for the certain fulfillment of prophecy in a future time.

Dr. John Walvoord explains:

But if there are no signs for the Rapture itself, what are the legitimate grounds for believing that the Rapture could be especially near of this generation?

The answer is not found in any prophetic events predicted before the Rapture but in understanding the events that will follow the Rapture. Just as history was prepared for Christ's first coming, in a similar way history is preparing for the events leading up to His Second Coming. . . . If this is the case, it leads to the inevitable conclusion that the Rapture may be excitingly near.¹

The Bible provides detailed prophecy about the seven-year tribulation. In fact, Revelation 4—19 gives a detailed, sequential outline of the major players and events.

Using Revelation as a framework, a Bible student is able to harmonize the hundreds of other biblical passages that speak of the seven-year tribulation into a clear model of the next time period for planet earth. With such a template to guide us, we can see that already God is preparing or setting the stage of the world in which the great drama of the tribulation will unfold. In this way this future time casts shadows of expectation in our own day so that current events provide discernible signs of the times.

I remember an illustration of stage setting given by the late John F. Walvoord, who was most likely the greatest prophecy scholar of the twentieth century when he said, "When you are in the mall and you see the decorations for Christmas, you know that Thanksgiving is near." In this illustration, Thanksgiving is analogous to the rapture, which in this illustration is signless. Christmas represents that which comes after Thanksgiving, which is the tribulation. This would mean in the illustration that obviously the rapture is near since there are signs developing in our day relating to what will take place after the rapture. So there are signs relating to an approaching tribulation period, but no signs for the rapture since our Lord has never given any. Jesus wants us to always be waiting for Him. We are waiting every second of every day since we know not when He may come, but we also see the stage being set for what will take place after the rapture and it heightens our anticipation of seeing our Lord face-to-face.

THE SUPER-SIGN OF THE END TIMES

I believe that Israel is God's "super-sign" of the end times. God's plan for history always moves forward in relation to what He is doing with Israel. Thus, the fact that Israel has been and continues to be reconstituted as a nation is prophetically significant. Were Israel not a nation again it would be impossible for events of the end-time to occur since so many of them take place in that tiny country or in reference to her. But she has returned and so it is that all other major aspects of Bible prophecy are also being prepared for the grand finale of history.

There are dozens of biblical passages that predict an end-time regathering of Israel back to her land. However, it is a common mistake to lump all of these passages into one fulfillment time frame, especially in relation to the modern state of Israel. Modern Israel is prophetically significant and is preparing the way for the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. But readers of God's Word need to be careful to distinguish which verses are being fulfilled in our day and which references await future fulfillment.

Hebrew Christian scholar Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum explains:

The re-establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 has not only thrown a wrench in amillennial thinking, but it has also thrown a chink in much of premillennial thinking. Amazingly, some premillennialists have concluded that the present state of Israel has nothing to do with the fulfillment of prophecy. For some reason the present state somehow does not fit their scheme of things, and so the present state becomes merely an accident of history. On what grounds is the present state of Israel so dismissed? The issue that bothers so many premillennialists is the fact that not only have the Jews returned in unbelief with regard to the person of Jesus, but the majority of the ones who have returned are not even Orthodox Jews. In fact the majority are atheists or agnostics. Certainly, then, Israel does not fit in with all those biblical passages dealing with the return. For it is a regenerated nation that the Bible speaks of, and the present state of Israel hardly fits that

picture. So on these grounds, the present state is dismissed as not being a fulfillment of prophecy.

However, the real problem is the failure to see that the prophets spoke of two international returns. First, there was to be a regathering in unbelief in preparation for judgment, namely the judgment of the tribulation. This was to be followed by a second world-wide regathering in faith in preparation for blessing, namely the blessings of the messianic age. Once it is recognized that the Bible speaks of two such regatherings, it is easy to see how the present state of Israel fits into prophecy.²

CONCLUSION

With Israel back in her land as a nation and in control of Jerusalem, the stage is set for the other players to align in preparation for their end-time roles. Only in the last sixty years has Globalism become a realistic option for mankind at the practical level. In fact, globalism is so widely held that the election of Donald Trump was seen internationally as a win for nationalism over the global world order. Revelation 17—18 indicates that Antichrist's global empire will revolve around political, economic, and religious issues. Scripture teaches that the Antichrist will rise to power out of a federation of nations that correlate in some way with the Roman Empire of two thousand years ago. One would have to be totally ignorant of developments within the world of our day to not admit that through the efforts of the European Union there is a coming together of that once great empire in our own day.

In conjunction with tribulation events, Ezekiel 38—39 teaches that there will be an invasion into Israel by a coalition lead by "Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal" (Ezek. 38:2). Gog appears to be modern Russia. Coalition partners in the invasion are Persia (modern Iran), Cush (Ethiopia), Put (Libya), and Gomer and Beth-togarmah (modern Turkey) (Ezek. 38:5-6). For the first time in history, Russia and Iran (Persia) have become very close with each other. Turkey is being rejected by Europe and is moving closer to the Islamic camp.

The Bible indicates that by the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation (most likely some time before that) there will be a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15-16; 2 Thess. 2:3-4; Rev. 11:1-12). Since Israel captured the old city of Jerusalem in 1967, increasingly efforts are underway to rebuild a Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. That Temple only has to be there by the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation for the Antichrist to defile it.

Babylon is depicted throughout the Bible as the focus of the kingdom of man that is set in opposition to God, Israel, and His plan for history. It is not surprising to realize that many biblical passages speak of an end-time role for Babylon as God's enemy (Rev. 14:8; 17—18). Babylon will be the headquarters for the Antichrist during the tribulation. Is Babylon being rebuilt in our day? Yes it is!

There are many more items that could be noted that are falling into place for the events of the tribulation. With the polarization currently existing throughout today's world, it is not hard to see this all coming together in the near future. Just think about what the mentality of the world will be like if all true Bible-believing Christians were removed in an instant, at the rapture. Today's world is certainly on a trajectory that is preparing the way for the global tyranny of the antichrist. These are signs of the times in which we live. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, revised (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 217.

²Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Press, 1982), p. 65.