

Signs That the Coming of Christ is Near

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TO look for signs of the coming of God's Kingdom on earth is not a fanciful pastime; it is the sober attitude of those who will be faithful to the words of Jesus. For he said that just as men knew summer was near when the fig tree put forth its leaves, so they might know that the world's summer, the Kingdom of God, was near when they saw "these things coming to pass" (Luke 21:29-31). So it is not only good sense but keeping good faith with Christ to look for signs that the dark and storm will soon pass. Did he not say: "When these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28)?

1. Distress and fear among nations.

With one beautiful exception, "these things" of which Jesus spoke were not pleasant things. In easily understood figurative speech drawn from the visible world of nature, he had told of signs in the sun, moon and stars of men's social and political world -- the ruling powers of state and church; he had described the distress and perplexity among nations resulting from vast, restless upheavals of men like the roaring, heaving billows of the sea: he had foretold an atmosphere of frustration, fear, failing of heart in expectation of the things coming on the world.

2. The Return of the Jews.

The exception was not so much stated as very clearly implied: "And they (i.e., the Jews) shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). We are entirely in harmony with other prophecy if we understand this to mean that as those "times" drew to an end there would be a return from captivity and a rising again of Jerusalem from her downtrodden state. Ezekiel, foretelling a last invasion of Palestine from the North, describes colonists regathered and settled in the land:

"In the latter years, thou (the northern invader) shall come into the land that is brought back from the sword and is gathered out of many people, against the mountains of Israel, which have been always waste, but it is brought forth out of the nations, and they shall dwell safely all of them ... the land of unwall'd villages. . . the desolate places now inhabited ... the people gathered out of the nations which have gotten cattle and goods and dwell in the midst of the land" (Ezek. 38:8,11,12).

In his 37th chapter he had already given a vivid picture of national revival among the scattered and disorganized sons of Israel as one of the features of these last times. How clearly these forecasts are being fulfilled in our own day needs no emphasis. From 1918 onwards Jews have been returning and new life has come to the land. Since the State of Israel sprang into being in 1948, hosts of returning exiles have been received, and marvels have been accomplished in developing the country.

3. War and Preparation for War.

It is not only Christ's words which show that this sign of Jewish return to Palestine would come in a time of world distress. Ezekiel, Joel and Revelation all tell of a time of piling armaments and a mounting flood of war.

"Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war; wake up the mighty men, . . . beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears ... the day of the Lord is near" (Joel 3:9,10,15). "Gather them together to the war of the great day of God Almighty." -- "Behold, I come as a thief" (Rev. 16:14,15).

Further, the war would converge upon a point in the Near East, for it is said:

"Behold, in those days, and at that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land" (Joel 3:1-2).

"And he gathered them together into the place which is called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon" (Rev. 16:16).

No longer can it be said: "There have always been wars and troubles; this age is no different from others". War in our day has been spread over the world in a deluge. No other time in history -- not even the era of Napoleon -- can compare with this enormous and horrid extension of conflict. The war of 1939-45 brought the Near East once more into the centre of world affairs. It ranged the nations round that centre as a further conspicuous stage in that process of "gathering together" which can be traced so clearly from 1914. Since then tension has grown between East and West, the powers of the land and the powers of the seas; and more and more clearly the Middle East is seen as the focal point of coming conflict.

4. Development in the Middle East.

The prophecy of Ezekiel 38 shows that in the last days merchant and maritime peoples having dominions associated with them would be in a position to challenge invaders of Palestine. That the British Empire is indicated in that description was perceived by students

as far back as 1848: seventy years afterwards Britain received the Palestine Mandate, and while she has now withdrawn she is, along with the U.S.A., still deeply involved in the affairs of the Middle East. Another power is no less clearly identified, which will come as an aggressor from the north with a confederacy of peoples. In the light of that prophecy students have long expected the increase in Russian power and in her interest in the Near East which we now see.

The points here briefly made are enough to show that the days in which we live correspond to the signs given by Jesus and the prophets which would precede his coming. To have watched in the light of the prophets fifty years of such turmoils as we have seen is to be convinced that the Lord's coming cannot be long delayed. His message for such a time is: "Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame".