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SIGNS OF THE TIMES AND PROPHETIC FULFILLMENT

by Thomas Ice

Is Bible prophecy being fulfilled today? Are there signs of the times? Other than items relating to the current process of Israel's return to her land (Ezek. 20:33-38; 22:17-22; 36:22-24; 38—39; Isa. 11:11-12; Zeph. 2:1-2), I don't think Bible prophecy is being fulfilled during the church age in which we currently live. However, there are clear signs of the times that indicate we could be near the start of the tribulation and the Lord's Return. Let me explain.

THE RAPTURE

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.¹ 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, without warning (1 Corinthians 1:7; 16:22; Philippians 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:28; James 5:7-9; 1 Peter 1:13; Jude 21; Revelation 3:11; 22:7,12,17,20) then it cannot be related to any signs at all. However, this does not mean that there are not signs of the time that do relate to other aspects of God's plan.

THE CHURCH AGE

It would be too strong to say that 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.

Apart from a few exceptions, the church age is not a time of prophetic fulfillment. Instead, prophecy will be fulfilled after the rapture, in relation to God's dealing with the nation of Israel in the seven-year tribulation. The current church age in which believers live today does not have a specific prophetic countdown or timetable, as does Israel and her 70 weeks of years prophecy (Daniel 9:14-27). The New Testament does, however, provide general traits that characterize the church age as a time of growth through the preaching of the gospel, but at the same time a growing apostasy as the church increasingly departs from the faith.

Even specific prophecy that is fulfilled during the church age relates to God's prophetic plan for Israel and not directly to the church. For example, the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple in A.D. 70 relates to Israel (Matthew 23:38; Luke 19:43-44; 21:20-24). Thus it is not inconsistent that prophetic preparations

¹For more information on the rapture as an imminent event see Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *The Truth About The Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), pp. 33-36.

relating to Israel are already underway with the reestablishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 even though we still are living in the church age. Paul tells us in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.” The stage is being set for the next phase of God’s plan for history—the tribulation.

The church age is not characterized by historically verifiable prophetic events, except her beginning on the Day of Pentecost and her ending with the rapture. But the general course of this age has been prophesied and can provide a general overview of what can be expected during this age. The New Testament teaches us to expect that apostasy will characterize Christendom during the time when the rapture will take place. This common distinctive provides for believers today a general sign of the times.

ISRAEL

There are many signs relating to God’s end time program for Israel. However, we must be careful in how we see them relating to us today during the church age. Since Believers today live during the church age, which will end with the rapture of the church, prophetic signs relating to Israel are not being fulfilled in our day. Instead, what God is doing prophetically in our day is preparing the world or “stage-setting” for the time when He will begin His plan relating to Israel which will then involve the fulfillment of signs and times. Thus, when we see events happening in our day, they are not a fulfillment of Bible prophecy, instead, they are likely preparation for a future fulfillment during the tribulation. One major indicator that we are likely near the beginning of the tribulation is the clear fact that national Israel has been reconstituted after almost 2,000 year.

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 that 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 immediately follows the rapture. We 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.²

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.

NEWSPAPER EXEGESIS?

It is common for critics of those who believe that there are signs in our day of Christ's return to dismiss such a notion as "newspaper exegesis." By this the critics mean that human ideas, not the Bible, are the true source of such beliefs, such that they arise from a search of newspaper headlines rather than from exegesis (i.e., proper interpretation) of the biblical text. Is this true?

In some cases it would be true, but not necessarily in all. If one has first gone to Scripture and derived a sound model of end-time events and there is true correspondence with what is reported in the newspapers, then it can be valid. However, if one is genuinely attempting to fit into the Bible today's headlines, then that is wrong and could rightly be termed "newspaper exegesis."

Some prophecy teachers incorrectly teach that Bible prophecy is being "fulfilled" in our day. This is not the case, except in relation to the reestablishment of the modern state of Israel. Nevertheless, I do support the notion that there are signs of the times relating to the fact that God is setting the stage for a time of future fulfillment, after the rapture, during the tribulation. Thus, it is an overstatement to speak of prophecy being fulfilled in our day, but not wrong to speak of signs that God is preparing for fulfillment.

It is common for some prophecy teachers to go to a biblical passage, usually one that will be fulfilled during the tribulation, and find a similarity to that prophecy and something happening in our day. Just because something is similar, does not mean it is the same.

For example, years ago I remember reading in Isaiah 24:5a that the "earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, . . ." I had heard a lot in the early 1970's about how the earth was being polluted. I then suggested to a couple of friends that this was a prophecy of events taking place in our day. I made the connection based upon the idea of "pollution," without considering the biblical context of Isaiah 24. What is the contextual setting of Isaiah 24? It refers to events that will take place during the future tribulation period. Are we living in the tribulation period today? No! Thus, whatever was happening in current events at that time was not a fulfillment, nor was it related to Isaiah 24 just because I believed there was a point of similarity. If you examine most of the approaches in use today that claim fulfillment of prophecy relating to the tribulation with

²John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, revised (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 217.

events of our day, they take a similar approach and thus have made a similar mistake.

As I have noted before, there does not have to be actual fulfillment for a development to be a sign of the times. This can be so because there can be preparation for fulfillment. The preparation is not the fulfillment of a prophecy, but it does indicate that God is preparing to fulfill a prophecy in the near future. Such preparation for fulfillment is a sign of the times.

Dr. Walvoord echoes such a belief about current stage setting in preparation for fulfillment.

“ . . . in our day, . . . there has been a movement of God among Israel which has set the stage as never before for exactly that fulfillment which is predicted for the period immediately after the translation of the church. . . . More prophecies have either been fulfilled or prepared for fulfillment in our day than in all the previous centuries since the first of our era.”³

CONCLUSION

While no signs of the times specifically relate to the time of the rapture, this does not mean that there are not signs relating to God’s overall prophetic plan, specifically to His preparation of the world for the time of the tribulation which will start after the rapture. This approach has been illustrated as follows: If one sees signs that Christmas is coming (the tribulation) then Thanksgiving must be even closer (the rapture). I am excited when I survey current events that indicate that our Lord is indeed setting the state for the tribulation and His return. This means that the signless event of the rapture of the church is likely near. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

³John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1955), p. 16.