

2003 In Review

The Year In Prophecy

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Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Introduction

The past year has been full of news of great interest to those who study the Scriptures and understand the significance of what is happening in the world. Still, Jesus has not yet returned, and many ask the question Peter first recorded:

They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." 2 Peter 3:3

And, as Peter then explained, such scoffers are deliberately ignorant of the facts, and they are like the people of Noah's day, who were still in unbelief when the Flood suddenly destroyed them.

Jesus Himself said that it was not the disciples' business to know the day or the hour of His return. (Matthew 24:36; 25:13) But, He did say that we should be able to recognize the signs of the times.

When evening comes, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red," and in the morning, "Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Matthew 16:2-3

Like the people of the First Century, who recognized Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, we are seeing the fulfillment of ancient prophecies before our very eyes. And though Christians of all ages have had reason to believe that Jesus would soon return, our generation has the most extraordinary evidence of all. The rebirth of the nation of Israel was prophesied in great detail in Ezekiel, chapters 36 and 37. In 1948, this prophecy was fulfilled, and the world witnessed something that had never happened in history. A people who had been scattered for more than two thousand years was brought back from all over the world to reestablish their own country. Israel is symbolized by the fig tree in Jesus' great message on the Mt. of Olives.

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Matthew 24:32-35

This report will be in two parts. First, we offer a basic outline of the future to serve as a grid for evaluating the year's events, and a list of "Signs of the Times" to clarify the major areas of fulfillment to keep in mind. In the Second section we will summarize events and trends that point to the fulfillment of these things.

PART 1 – REVIEW

Outline of the Future

Jesus' major message on the future is found in Matthew chapters 24 and 25 and Luke chapter 21. According to His teaching, there are four phases of history still ahead of us:

1 - The Beginning of Birth Pains – Matthew 24:4-8; Luke 21:8-11

Whole books have been written about each of these periods of time. To express it very simply, The Beginning of Birth Pains is the time from the rebirth of Israel until the start of The Tribulation. Most popular prophecy scholars believe that the Rapture of the Church – the time when Christ returns for the Church – will take place just before the Tribulation. This can be shown in many ways, but especially by the fact that, in the Book of Revelation, where “church” is mentioned repeatedly in the first three chapters, it is not found at all in chapters 4 through 20, which encompass the entire period of judgment.

2 - The Tribulation – Matthew 24:9-14; Luke 21:12-19

The Tribulation is the first part of a seven-year period of time marked by a peace treaty for Israel, brokered by Antichrist, the evil world leader who will emerge in the last days.

He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing [of the temple] he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him. Daniel 9:27

This peace treaty may well be the result of a great war against Israel, described in the Book of Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39. And that war, apparently led by Russia and her allies, including much of the Muslim world, will take place during a period of false peace.

After many days you [Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal] will be called to arms. In future years you will invade a land that has recovered from war, whose people were gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate. They had been brought out from the nations, and now all of them live in safety. Ezekiel 38:8

The Apostle Paul also alludes to this time. When people say, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly (1 Thessalonians 5:3). Israel has not been at peace with most of its neighbors since the day it became a nation in 1948. The current escalation of hostilities with the Palestinians in the land is cause for great efforts to bring about peace there. When it does finally come, it could set the stage for this great war. It is also called the War of Gog and Magog, and is very different than the Battle of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation. It is most likely the same as the war of the Second Seal, at the beginning of the Tribulation (Revelation 6:3-4). This would all fit, because Antichrist will be on the scene by then, having been introduced by the First Seal (Revelation 6:1-2) as a rider on a white horse.

The word “tribulation” is the Greek word *thlipsis*, found in verse 9. It is translated “to be persecuted” in the New International Version. The church will be gone, but the many new

believers in Christ will be persecuted and driven underground because of their unpopular belief. There will be a One-World Religion, including false Christians, who never gave their lives to Christ, but these new Christians will not associate with them or their false beliefs.

3 - The Great Tribulation – Matthew 24:15-28; Luke 21:20-27

The Great Tribulation is the second half of these seven years, which Jesus said starts with “the Abomination of Desolation,” He characterized it as “great distress [*thlipsis*/ tribulation], unequaled from the beginning of the world until now-and never to be equaled again.” This is the time when Antichrist will declare himself to be god, will set up an apparently living image of himself in the Temple, and institute the “Mark of the Beast” world economic dictatorship. Revelation 13 gives details of his activities during this time. At that point there will be a virtual One-World Government. This period is brought to an end by the glorious return of Christ – His second coming. He will destroy Antichrist’s forces at the Battle of Armageddon, which is described in Revelation 19:11-21.

4 - After the Tribulation – Matthew 24:29-31; Luke 21:28

When Christ returns, it will be as King of Kings, and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16). He will set up a righteous kingdom for one thousand years (Revelation 20:1-8), and after that, He will preside over the final judgments (Revelation 20:9-15), then usher in “a new heaven and a new earth.” (Revelation 21:1 and the rest of chapters 21 and 22).

PART 2

MAJOR EVENTS AND TRENDS - 2003

Major players on the world scene

Israel

Events in Israel are always of the greatest importance. In the earlier part of the year Israel was on high alert because of the war in Iraq. There was concern that Saddam Hussein would attack the country in a final act of hatred for the Jewish people. As it turned out, Israel was not attacked.

This has been an especially bloody year of terrorist attacks in Israel, and of major attempts from many quarters to broker a lasting peace for the Middle East. Representatives of a "Quartet" of world leaders (The U.S., Russia, the U.N., and The European Union) proposed the "Road Map" peace plan that would result in a Palestinian state by 2005. In May the Israeli Cabinet narrowly approved the concept, but not the actual wording of the document. This was the first time the government of Israel officially approved the eventual acceptance of a separate Palestinian state.

Yasser Arafat was effectively sidelined during the whole year, since the U.S. and Israel refused to include him in peace talks. Arafat reluctantly appointed a Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas, to lead the Palestinians and represent them in diplomatic discussions. Unfortunately, Arafat and Abbas did not agree on key issues, so the new Prime Minister was unable to exert the leadership that would have produced peace. The Islamic militant group Hamas took advantage of the stalemate; sponsoring many suicide attacks against Israelis. One especially bloody bus bombing in June killed 28 people. In less than an hour Israel responded with air strikes in a Gaza City neighborhood, killing two senior Hamas operatives. Israel began to target individual Hamas leaders, striking them with precision guided missiles in their homes, or even on the streets of Gaza in broad daylight. Hamas, in turn, vowed to "tear Israel to pieces."

In June there was a short-lived truce, with both sides trying to show good faith for the "Road Map" plan, but within a few weeks the cycle of violence had resumed and some were saying that the plan was dead. The four architects of the plan met again in September to try to revive it. An especially bloody suicide bombing in Haifa led to an air strike by Israel of a suspected terrorist training camp in Syria.

Late in the year, unofficial representatives from Israel, the Palestinians, and self-appointed dignitaries from several nations proposed another peace plan. It was called the "Geneva Accord," and was the result of two years of secret negotiations. The heart of the plan was a compromise: Palestinians would give up the right of refugees to return, and Israel would surrender sovereignty of the Temple Mount. Ariel Sharon was opposed to it, and Yasser Arafat did not endorse it.

There was serious talk about expelling Yasser Arafat from the country, but by the end of the year, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said that expelling him "would not be good for Israel".

At the end of the year there is still no resolution to the struggle, but there is great desire by world leaders to keep trying to bring about peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Temporary peace is a possibility at any time. Once that happens, prophecy watchers will turn their attention to the possibility of the great war of Ezekiel 38 and 39 described in the outline of the Tribulation above.

The European Union

It was a year of significant progress for the European Union,. The Euro, their new currency, has gained wide acceptance, they have made great strides toward a joint foreign policy, defense, and judicial union. Europe enjoys a 25-35 per cent share of the global economy, and plans to accept many additional member nations next year, resulting in a population of 450 million.

In May, a 105-member committee drafted a proposed constitution for the European Union. The proposal is being discussed vigorously, and may be adopted next year. It calls for a EU President, replacing the current six-month rotating presidency, and a foreign minister to represent the union internationally. It would have a binding bill of rights, and would be a union of sovereign nation states. It would retain the name "European Union" instead of "United Europe," or "United States of Europe."

Most European countries were unwilling to assist the United States in the War in Iraq. France and Germany are natural leaders of the European Union. Both of them opposed the war, causing a strain between the U.S. and Europe. The EU also challenged the U.S. by developing The Galileo global satellite system, and by befriending China and other nations that have strained relations with America.

According to Daniel's prophecies, Antichrist will come from a final form of the old Roman Empire, one that is partly iron, like the old empire, and partly clay (Daniel 2:36-45; 9:24-27). As The European Union rises to challenge the U.S. for world dominance, it fits this picture perfectly.

The United Nations

Following several years of growing prestige, the United Nations has lost some of its relevance because of its inaction on the Iraq issue. The United States tried to obtain backing for this phase of the War on Terror, but the world organization became paralyzed, unable to either support or condemn the action. It may still be a major player in the prophecies of a One-World Government.

Russia and Her Allies

Russia began the year with alternative plans to oust Saddam Hussein in order to avert a U.S. invasion of Iraq, and thus protect their special interests in the country. They did not follow

through with this plan, but they were not supportive of the war as it developed. After the war President Putin criticized other nations for allowing the U.S. to act without U.N. approval

Russia and China have been supplying "dual use" materials and technologies, especially to Iran. These products are officially peaceful, but they are also useful for building weapons of mass destruction. Israeli intelligence sources claim that Russia will complete the construction of Iran's Bushehr nuclear plant next year. Iran says that it will not be finished until 2006.

Of even greater concern, Russia's slide from democracy, has been evident this year. President Putin took over control of major news media in the country, and seized the political opposition's source of funds. Award-winning columnist William Saphire says that Russia's December elections were politically corrupt, and have paved the way for Vladimir Putin's takeover next spring as president-for-life. He concludes that Russia's short-lived experiment with democracy is all but dead.

Russia's military aspirations are certainly not dead. Early this year they said they would complete development of the Iskander-E short-range surface-to-air missile this year. It is designed to defeat U.S. missile defense systems. And, at the end of the year, Russia deployed improved Topol-M missiles, which they describe as "The most advanced state-of-the-art missile in the world." These missiles can still be launched from silos even after a nearby nuclear explosion, and are capable of hitting targets more than 6,000 miles away!

As noted above, in the outline of the Tribulation, Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39 indicate that Russia will lead a war against Israel. The names of her allies in those chapters may be identified by the migration of Noah's family members after the Flood (Genesis 10). Those allies are identified by Biblical scholars as nations close to Russia today, and key Islamic nations, including Iran (Persia) and Libya (Put). These alliances are being strengthened today, with the possible exception of Libya.

Early in the year, President Bush said that once Saddam Hussein was out of the way, the War on Terrorism would turn toward Iran, Syria, and Libya. However, just this December, Libya's president, Muammar Gaddafi said his country was ready to give up development of weapons of mass destruction, allow international monitoring of its facilities, and play its role in building a world free from all forms of terrorism. Time will tell, but the odds are against Gaddafi being sincere in this matter.

Babylon/ Iraq

In March, the deadline for Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq passed, and the long-expected attack began to depose him. Some aspects of the war were quite intense, being described as "shock and awe." At the same time, targets were very specific, and collateral damage was kept to a minimum. The assault began on March 19th, and by May 2, President Bush said we had prevailed. Complete victory was not declared because of the long task ahead, finding Saddam Hussein and his associates, establishing peace and a new government. During the course of the year many fights took place between Hussein loyalists and coalition forces, with a loss of lives on both sides. A major development, just before the end of the year, was the discovery and

capture of Saddam Hussein from a “spider hole” in the ground under a farm near his hometown of Tikrit.

Great expense and effort are going into the rebuilding of the country, even while we still fight pockets of resistance.

Old Testament prophecies of the utter destruction of Babylon (Isaiah chapters 13 and 14; and Jeremiah chapters 50 and 51) have never yet been fulfilled. This calls for possible rebuilding and eventual destruction. Some people imagine the possibility of Iraq’s Babylon becoming the world capital, but there are many problems with this view, and it is better to understand Babylon the Great (Revelation chapters 17 and 18) as a religious entity and a one-world government in the last days. In this case, the rebuilt country of Iraq, and possibly rebuilt city of Babylon will serve some other purpose, possibly a regional center for a world government. Tim LaHaye, coauthor of the best selling “Left Behind” series believes that it could emerge as a neutral world power.

The United States

The United States does not seem to be mentioned in Last Days prophecies. There are several possible reasons for this. One scenario is that the great war against Israel, which will involve fire and brimstone (Ezekiel 38 and 39), could be a nuclear exchange, in which case the U.S. might be drawn into a nuclear defense of Israel, and could be at least partially destroyed in the process.

Another possible future for the U.S. is to be absorbed by the world-government that is coming. In this scenario, we could be an important part of that government, but not a separate world power.

Major events and world conditions

Wars and rumors of wars

The general War on Terrorism, and the specific Iraq War were the big news of the year. (See Babylon/ Iraq above.) Terrorists struck at a variety of targets, and toward the end of the year, the U.S. was on “high alert” because of credible information that al Qaeda was planning a great event that would dwarf the 9-11 attacks. There is a general sense that we are making progress against terrorism, but that it will be a long, hard struggle ahead.

North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and restarted their nuclear power plant, with a view to producing nuclear weapons. The CIA warned that North Korea had an untested missile that might be capable of reaching the west coast of the U.S. with a nuclear payload. Strong warnings from the U.S., and harsh rhetoric from North Korea earlier in the year threatening World War III if the U.S. attacks, gradually gave way to talks between the nations most affected by the threat.

As mentioned above in the article about Russia, Iran is well advanced in its development of nuclear arms, and it is likely that if the U.S. or the U.N. cannot stop it, Israel will take unilateral action to keep the project from reaching completion.

As mentioned before, Russia has announced it has bigger and better missile systems than anyone else. And the U.S. is planning new weapons program, called Falcon (Force Application and Launch from the Continental US) that might take 25 years to develop, but it will be able to drop weapons from space at lightning speed from its own territory. Such weapons would free the U.S. from the need for military bases in uncooperative countries. With the next seven years the U.S. will develop a cheaper "global reach" weapons system relying on expendable rocket boosters that will take a warhead into space and drop it over its target.

Giving a new meaning to "Rumors of war," the Internet can now be used for Cyber warfare. Hackers can paralyze or commandeer key computer operations via the Internet, and presumably do more damage than by using bombs.

Earthquakes

Toward the end of the year, earthquakes captured attention, because of an especially bad casualty count (30,000 and counting) in the Iran quake, and because of the increased frequency of major earthquakes – 12 in just a few days. There is a difference of opinion among Bible scholars about the significance of today's earthquake patterns. In any case, people are very aware of earthquake activity. The Bible predicts the worst earthquake of all at the end of the Great Tribulation, when every mountain will be shaken down and every island will sink (Revelation 6:14; 16:18-20)

Pestilences/ Plagues

Terrorism has caused governments to be on guard for biological and chemical attacks. No such attacks were known to happen in 2003, but there were many biological scares during the year. SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) a new deadly disease appeared in China in April, quickly multiplied there and spread to other Eastern cities and on to Toronto, Canada.

AIDS continues to grow. In 2003 about 5 million were infected, and 3 million died. AIDS is the number one cause of death in Africa, and the fourth cause of death worldwide

Old diseases, such as Malaria, continue to exact a huge toll of human lives. Some 3000 African children die from malaria each day. This is equal to one every 30 seconds. Influenza is a perennial problem, but this year's strain hit earlier and harder than usual, reaching epidemic proportions just before the end of the year. On average, 36,000 Americans die from the flu each year.

New drug-resistant strains of Tuberculosis are still a problem, as are the occasional outbreaks of Ebola, Monkey Pox, and other exotic diseases.

The U.S. is still dealing with its first case of Mad Cow disease, which only came to light a few weeks before the end of the year.

Apostasy

Apostasy, or the “falling away” of the Church (1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9) is also, sadly, a big story for the year. The Episcopal Church has installed the first-ever homosexual Bishop, causing a wave of reaction among church leaders. In November, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that homosexual couples have the right to marry. California legislators are pushing for the same result. In Canada it is illegal to publicize the clear Biblical teaching against homosexuality.

Moral relativism, sometimes called Post-modernism has taken a great toll on the morals of today’s young people, teaching them that there are no absolutes, and actually encouraging them to experiment in all sorts of sexual activity. The latest craze in London is having sex with strangers in public places. Of course, sexually transmitted diseases are still rising. It is interesting that now, at the end of the year, just as Chuck Colson says people are beginning to swing away from Post-modern thinking because they have discovered it doesn’t work, pollster George Barna reports that the church is going out of its way to accommodate this wrong thinking.

There is good news on the horizon. As the darkness becomes worse, the light of the Gospel becomes brighter. There are signs that there may be a new revival may be coming! One example of this is the extraordinary response to Biola University’s “Defending The Faith” lecture series, attended by hundreds of young adults, who are eager to hear an intellectual presentation of the credibility of Christianity. Watch this movement! Another encouraging sign is the near release of Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion of The Christ.” Those who have seen it, from Billy Graham to the Pope say it is a powerful depiction of Christ’s suffering for us. J.P. Moreland of Biola University says it will cause everyone to consider the facts and make a decision about Christ. He urges Christians to be prepared to engage the culture when the film is released, on Feb. 25, 2004.

Technological progress leading to “The Mark of The Beast”

Technological advances during the year are very interesting. They are surely preparing the way for Antichrist’s economic dictatorship, which will take place at the midpoint of the seven years of Tribulation (This midpoint is the beginning of “The Great Tribulation.”)

Computers are still gaining speed and power. Battelle, the world's largest independent, nonprofit research organization, is building a supercomputer that will be 300 times faster than today’s biggest supercomputer in Japan, called Earth Simulator. A new, much faster Internet is being installed which has already sent a full-length DVD movie from Switzerland to California in about seven seconds. The proliferation of cell phones and wireless computer networking make it possible for financial transactions to take place nearly anywhere on the globe. Terrorism has

opened the door for implantable microchips in people. All of this will ultimately give Antichrist the ability to impose a “Mark of the Beast” economic dictatorship.

Look for a our complete report on this subject after our message at the Jan. 24th Prophecy Conference in the Ontario Convention Center.

Conclusion

What does it all mean? As always, the bottom line for this subject is Peter’s admonition in 2 Peter 3:11-13:

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.