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There is a large body of prophetic information in the Bible which reveals major events in the world before, during and after the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. These signs of the times help us understand the unfolding of God's divine plan for humanity, so we can be better prepared for future events.

The Lord expects us to heed these signs, as their message is just as obvious as the signs of nature: "When you see a cloud rising out of the west, immediately you say, A shower is coming; and so it is. And when you see the south wind blow, you say, There will be hot weather; and there is. Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?" (Luke 12:54-56). The Israelis know that when clouds gather from the Mediterranean Sea in the west, rain is coming. When a strong southerly wind blows across the plains of the hot Negev desert, they know that it will be a very hot day.

The signs of the times refer to important things that happen in the world, which are indicators of contemporary and future events. Those who fail to interpret the signs of the times are branded as hypocrites – spiritually blinded people who are ignorant of what the Lord is communicating to them through the very obvious fulfilling of biblical prophecies.

Although there will definitely be a surprise element in the time of the rapture, we nevertheless have various signs indicating its nearness. Referring to certain signs which He mentioned in His Prophetic Discourse, the Lord Jesus said: "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28). There are various signs indicating the nearness of the end of this dispensation, among which the following are the most important:

1. The restoration of Israel

The Lord said that, "in the latter days," He would gather the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone (Hos. 3:5; Ezek. 37:21). A very important aspect of their restoration is the status of the city of Jerusalem. According to Luke 21:24, Jerusalem would be

trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. The physical recapturing of biblical Jerusalem (the Old City) occurred in 1967 in the Six Day War, which was a prelude to its political restoration as Israel eternal and indivisible capital city in August 1980. The latter event inaugurated the terminal generation of the present dispensation. According to the Bible, there will be a great end-time struggle for the control of Jerusalem (Zech. 12:2-3; 14:2) because Jesus Christ will return to this city at His Second Coming (Zech. 14:4-5). His enemies will await Him here, but the ensuing battle will lead to their utter destruction (Zech. 14:12-13).

2. The Russo-Arab invasion of Israel

In Ezekiel 38 and 39, a Russo-Arab invasion of Israel is described. The prince of Russia is called Gog and his country Magog. These are ancient names for modern Russia, as they refer to the large area to the north of the Caucasian Mountains and the Black Sea. God says to the end-time prince of Gog: "I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws, and lead you out, with all your army... Persia, Ethiopia and Libya are with them... Gomer and all its troops [probably referring to Germany]; the house of Togarmah from the far north and all its troops [a reference to modern Turkey]... Prepare yourself and be ready, you and all your companies that are gathered about you... In the latter years you will come into the land of those... gathered from many peoples on the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate; they were brought out of the nations... You will come up against My people Israel like a cloud, to cover the land. It will be in the latter days that I will bring you against my land" (Ezek. 38:4-8,16). In the next chapter, The Lord describes the destruction of Gog and his hordes during this invasion: "You shall fall upon the mountains of Israel, you and all your troops, and the people who are with you" (Ezek. 39:4). In the light of this prophecy, it is important to note the rising political tensions in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, as it will lead to the big war predicted by Ezekiel, in which at least six countries will participate. God's intervention will lead to the defeat of the invading forces.

3. The restoration of Babylon

Revelation 18 refers to a metropolis with the name of Babylon. It is the same city that existed in ancient times, but in the end-time it will be restored to its former glory. As the birthplace of the Ancient World's pagan religion, this city must again emerge as the seat of a false universal religion. Babylon is situated on the banks of the Euphrates River in Iraq. In September 1987, the first part of the restored city was inaugurated, but building projects were subsequently abandoned because of the Gulf War. Included in the first phase of the reconstruction of the old city is the southern palace of King Nebuchadnezzar. This part of the palace includes the famous

throne-room where the writing appeared on the wall during the last night of King Belshazzar's reign. Among the other reconstructed buildings is the gateway to the temple of Ishtar. Hotels and tourist facilities have also been erected on the outskirts of the city.

It is no coincidence that two of the last six chapters of the Bible are devoted to Babylon. In Revelation 17, mystical Babylon is described and identified as the mother of harlots. This is an indication that all the false religions that originated from Babylon will be organised into a single ecumenical body in the end-time. Their final abode will be the restored city of Babylon. The revived commercial city of Babylon is described in Revelation 18. Various authors have indicated that Babylon will have to be restored before its final destruction, which will happen in one hour with fire (Rev. 18:8).

Present developments in Iraq are leading up to this country's rapid internationalisation. If the emerging new world order is to succeed, it will have to succeed in establishing peace in Iraq. This may well be the beginning of Babylon's important end-time role.

4. The Revived Roman Empire

The ancient Roman Empire also has to re-emerge in the end-time as a power-base for the Antichrist. In the image of Daniel (Dan. 2:31-45), the Roman Empire is represented by the legs and ten toes. In the night visions of Daniel, the vicious beast with ten horns on its head also depict the Roman Empire, from which the Antichrist will come forth (Dan. 7:7-8,19-26). The symbolism of the beast with the ten horns is also found in Revelation 13:1-2, which describes the Antichrist. From these prophecies it is evident that the Roman Empire will arise again. It is important to keep in mind that this was a Mediterranean empire, comprising countries from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, The Middle East and North Africa. Countries from Western and Eastern Europe have already been incorporated into the expanded European Union, and it is significant that negotiations with Turkey will soon begin with a view to joining the Union. Israel has also indicated interest for membership. Europe is already the major economic power in the world, and is set to assume leadership functions in various other spheres of world affairs.

5. The New World Order

The Antichrist will be the head of a new world order which includes all nations. Revelation 13:7

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says that he will gain political power over all the world: "He was given authority over every tribe, tongue and nation." As world messiah, he will also enjoy the religious worship of all people: "And all the world marvelled and followed the beast... the worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like the beast?" (Rev. 13:3-4). Furthermore, he will unite the world economically by controlling all financial transactions in a future cashless economy: "And he causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666" (Rev. 13:16-18). His global empire will, therefore, be characterised by political, religious and economic unity. His subjects will be viewed as planetary citizens, rather than members of specific nations. Religious differences will be superseded by members of all religious groups who worship him as their common messiah.

6. The Interfaith Movement

The interfaith gospel of synthesising all religions is based on the concept of universalism, i.e. that all religions worship the same God and can therefore join hands in unity. The Ecumenical and Interfaith Movements are based on this idea and they are actively pursuing the objective of establishing global religious organisations to unify humanity at the spiritual level. They maintain that the achievement of a mystical brotherhood of members of all faiths holds the key to global reconciliation and peace. As the religions of the world move ever closer to each other, it is obvious that ecumenical Christianity has to make self-destructive compromises with other religions to achieve unity. Many theologians have adulterated the Christian faith to such an extent that biblical truths have been distorted beyond recognition.

The Bible calls the end-time union of the false religions "Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth" (Rev. 17:5). She is recognised and carried by the Antichrist because of her usefulness to him. It is very obvious that the Interfaith Movement of false religions is preparing the world for the coming false Christ, the Antichrist, who will rule the world for seven years.

7. Religious deception

Heretical teachings will have disastrous consequences in many nominal Christian churches. We have been warned against this: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Thess. 4:1).

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In the end-time, there will be a high popular demand for false teachings: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Blinded congregations will always find false teachers who are willing to take the lead in wrong teachings. Peter says: "There shall be false teachers among you, who [secretly] shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways (2 Pet. 2:1-2).

When the Lord Jesus was asked about the signs of His Second Coming, he mentioned religious deception as the single most important sign: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, I am the Christ [meaning 'I am the Anointed of the Lord'] and will deceive many... Then many false prophets will arise and deceive many... [they will] show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:4-5,11,24; cf. Matt. 7:21-23).

8. Moral decline

Serious moral decline will occur in the end-time: "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away" (2 Tim. 3:1-5). Many Christians will also be detrimentally influenced by this rising tide of immorality: "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12). The Living Bible says: Sin will be rampant everywhere and will cool the love of many. Christians must guard against the rising tide of immorality.

9. Natural disasters

In the end-time there will be a great increase in natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, severe floods and droughts, excessive high and low temperatures with a clear movement towards global warming, and the pollution of life-sustaining natural resources. The *tsunami*

in Southeast Asia on 26

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December 2004 was one of the worst natural disasters in recorded history. It was caused by a massive earthquake on the seabed. Natural disasters will greatly increase in the coming tribulation period and cause great panic among people: "And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken" (Luke 21:25-26). Revelation 16:18-21 describes the most destructive earthquake in human history, followed by the falling of hailstone of 50 kilogram. The Lord Jesus describes this time as a "great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world" (Matt. 24:21).

10. Famines and pestilences

In His review of the signs of the times, the Lord Jesus said: "And there will be famines [and] pestilences" (Matt. 24:7). They will be major causes of death in the great tribulation. Food will become very scarce and expensive. Famine is the inevitable aftermath of war, because thousands of economically active men are signed up for military service. Excessive military expenses can also cripple the economies of countries, while the destruction of infrastructure during wars inevitably contributes to food shortage, the displacement of people, and starvation. Medical services are also hampered by wars and difficult economic times, leading to poor healthcare and the inability to counter epidemics and pestilences. Certain diseases, such as HIV Aids, thrive in immoral societies and also account for increasing death tolls.

11. Wars

Christ said: "And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matt. 24:6-7). In Revelation, John said: "And another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword" (Rev. 6:4). The four horsemen of Revelation 6 represent ominous events that will occur in the coming tribulation period. The white horse depicts the rise of the Antichrist, the red horse war, the black horse famine, and the pale horse death. John says: "And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth" (Rev. 6:8). The staggering death toll of a quarter of the earth's population amounts to more than 1,5 billion deaths, which will far exceed the death toll of 52 million in World War II. Three of the big end-time wars described in the Bible are the Russo-Arab invasion of Israel (Ezek. 38-39), the Chinese invasion of various countries (Rev. 9:13-19), and the big world war of Armageddon. The development and accumulation of weapons of mass destruction is a sign that the world is

heading for a time of increased wars.

12. Word evangelism

One sign of the end-times which has a positive nature is that of word evangelism. Before the end comes, the gospel must be preached to all nations. The Lord Jesus said: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). All Christians should dedicate themselves to achieving this objective. In a parable, Christ says: "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that My house may be filled" (Luke 14:23). While preaching the gospel, we should not be distracted by the negative reaction of some people, as not all of them will repent. We should rather expect a spiritual and moral polarisation. In Revelation 22:11 the Living Bible says: "And when that time comes, all doing wrong will do it more and more; the vile will become more vile; good men will be better; those who are holy will continue on in greater holiness." Let all Christians proclaim the message of salvation, in season and out of season.

Conclusion

The signs of the times graphically illustrate the fact that the God of love, who wants to save all people, is also the God of wrath who will severely judge unrepentant sinners. We should not only emphasise certain attributes of God at the cost of others, as we may then end up with "another Jesus" who is an invention of the human mind (2 Cor. 11:4), and consequently not true to Scripture. God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Paul also says that "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9).

But what about those who reject God's offer of salvation? "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Heb. 2:3). Such people can expect retribution from God. Unfortunately, most people do reject the gospel message. The Lord Jesus Himself said that there are few who are saved: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). Why will they not be able to enter? Because of an unwillingness to part with their sins. John says: "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John. 3:19).

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During the coming tribulation, when the wrath of God will be poured out upon the world, most of the hardened sinners will become more wicked, to the extent of even cursing God because of all the plagues: "But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood... and they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (Rev. 9:20-21). For that reason, they leave a loving God no choice but to judge them.

Our command is to heed the signs of the times by facing the fact that the greatest part of the world population will become more evil, selfish, immoral, untrustworthy, violent and God-rejecting in the end-time. We must, at all times, refrain from joining the licentious crowds of the end-time. Paul says: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in licentiousness and lewdness, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts" (Rom. 13:12-14).

The world is heading for its darkest hour, and also a great tribulation which is unprecedented in its entire history (Matt. 24:21-22). But as in the times of Noah and Lot, the principle remains that God's wrath is never poured out over true believers. "Watch, therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke. 21:36). We are confident that we will not be on planet earth during the tribulation period.

Source: The Holy Bible, New King James Version, unless otherwise stated.

P.S. For supporting literature, please consult the website www.bibleguidance.co.za The author may be contacted at johan@bibleguidance.co.za

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