

Prophecies for Troubled Times

We live in troubled times. War, civil unrest, and pandemic have all taken their toll on our nerves and our resources in the past few years. Many are wondering whether this is a lead up to the end times. I have had people ask me: Are we headed to Gog and Magog? That has set me to studying the scriptures to find other troubled times and see what God had to say about those situations, and to try to figure out whether we are, in fact, headed into the final chapter in God's Kingdom Plan.

The Bible informs us that the lands of Judah and Israel in the late 800s and 700s BC were in trouble. Civil unrest was rampant, the rich were exploiting the poor, dishonesty in business was the name of the game, political instability seemed the order of the day, and religious speculation caught all parts of the land into its icy grip. Sounds almost modern, doesn't it?

Let's look back into a bit of the background for what had brought God's people to their knees. The information that has been most helpful for me is found in Alfred Edersheim's BIBLE HISTORY: OLD TESTAMENT (Hendrickson 1995), and in Douglas, THE NEW BIBLE DICTIONARY (Eerdmans 1962).

Following the glorious reign of Solomon, where the land reached its greatest extent, and where the magnificent temple to Jehovah was built, and where trade with the then-known world brought luxuries and new staples into the land, the country fell apart. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, took a hard line with the people, taxing them to the limit and demanding extra service from each citizen. Jeroboam, a nobleman from the north and a palace official in Solomon's court, who had fled Solomon's wrath to Egypt, turned the ten northern tribes against this excessive oppression, splitting off from Judah and Benjamin, which remained in history as the land of Judah, keeping the worship of Jehovah in the temple in Jerusalem, along with the kingly line of David. Jeroboam I, knowing that religion tends to unite people of a nation, created calf gods with shrines in Bethel and Dan, instituting a hybrid Jewish-heathen religion that represented Jehovah as an animal, as Egypt had done, so that his breakoff nation would not be tempted to attend the regular feasts in Jerusalem and return to their heritage in politics and religion.

As the northern kingdom progressed in its agricultural, trading and military exploits, Samaria became a prosperous city, well fortified against attack by foreign armies, and well situated along major trading routes in the Galilean hills. The rich tribal nobles exploited their poor compatriots, as is evidenced by Ahab's taking Naboth's vineyard for his own garden plot. Jezebel continued to exert her considerable influence over the religious activities and precepts of the country. She

actively opposed the messages of Elijah and of the schools of the Sons of the Prophets, until a palace official named Obadiah was forced to hide one hundred of them in caves to keep her from annihilating them. Elijah was in hiding with a widow in Zarapeth, near Tyre, until he appeared to Ahab to announce the coming of rain, and to challenge the king to a showdown on Mount Carmel. All the religious leaders Jezebel had appointed were slain, and Elijah ran in triumph before the chariot of the king to Jezreel, where he heard that Jezebel was out for his head. He fled in despair to Mount Horeb, the sacred mountain of Moses in the Sinai Peninsula, where God renewed his calling and comforted his soul.

A lesser-known prophet in the north, Micaiah, son of Imlah, was called upon by Ahab when he and Jehoshaphat were trying to decide whether to attack Aram to free Ramoth Gilead from Syria. He and Zedekiah son of Nenaanah squared off before both kings, declaring their view of what was going to happen, if they went to war. Zedekiah put on a helmet of horns to indicate that so they would gore the enemy. Micaiah, came in and, contrary to what he had done before, proclaimed victory to Ahab. The king, knowing that this was a jesting taunt, demanded a truthful answer, to which the prophet of God replied (I Kings 22:17):

I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'"

He continued by a parable in which he told the king that he was believing a lying spirit, and that this would bring about certain destruction. Zedekiah slapped him, and then Micaiah foretold of his opponent's death. Ahab was killed by a random arrow that pierced his armour. Jehoshaphat continued to reign in Jerusalem and sought to expand his trade by building a fleet of merchant ships, as Solomon had done, but because of a sudden storm in the harbour, they never sailed. God's plan was not to be thwarted, no matter how powerful or how weak the human factors in it proved to be.

The southern kingdom continued to have descendants of David on the throne until the Exile into Babylon, while the northern kingdom had one dynasty after another, the changes often brought about with violence. The northern kingdom sought the help of the great powers forming around them. First it was Aram (Syria), then Egypt, then Assyria. In each case, their loyalty was rewarded with deceit and finally conquest. The southern kingdom remained true to Jehovah until they, too, asked Assyria for help against the belligerent and growing northern kingdom, which was fast becoming a vast empire.

Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, the princess from Tyre, introduced Baal worship into the northern kingdom, along with the vile worship of Asherah. It did not take long

until Elijah thought he was the only one in the whole land who had remained true to his God. Jehovah, however, informed him that seven thousand had not bowed the knee to Baal. Baal and Asherah worship was introduced to the southern kingdom when Athaliah, a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, was married to the southern ruler designate, Joram. This set the stage for Isaiah to come on the scene as a priestly prophet in Jerusalem under four monarchs from Azariah (Uzziah) through Jotham and Ahaz to Hezekiah.

This might be a good time to review the prophetic history, especially in the northern kingdom, which had gone heathen immediately as it was created, under Jeroboam I. At first it was Elijah, then Elisha, during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah, that warned kings and people in signal ways that Jehovah was not happy with their defection from Him to worshiping idols. Amos came up from Tekoa, in the south kingdom, to warn Samaria of impending judgment, followed by Jonah, Nahum, Joel, and Habakkuk. Their prophesies were directed at the world around them and the world next door. Nahum goes to great lengths to prophesy the doom of Nineveh, which was just on the ascendancy. Joel paints a dismal picture of swarms of locusts devouring the verdant land of Judah, but then turns his attention to a time when God will pour out His Spirit upon His people with dramatic effects (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21). Jonah became somewhat of a court prophet to Jeroboam II, possibly a cabinet minister, prophesying that Jeroboam would extend the boundaries of Israel vastly, taking back much of the land that had been lost to Syria under past monarchs. His calling to go to Nineveh, the up-and-coming new ruling city of the world, to condemn their sinfulness, is a well-known story. Nineveh's repentance at this time was temporary, as they came in the next generation to besiege Samaria and destroy it, taking its people captive to areas across the Euphrates. Jesus used this incident in one of His responses to the Pharisees, who asked for a sign of His authority (Matthew 12:39-41):

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

Much took place during Isaiah's office as prophet in Jerusalem. First, several other prophets, Amos, Hosea and Micah, were concurrent with him in the southern kingdom. Amos graphically condemned the secularism of the wealthy northerners and their repression of the poor among them, as well as their transposition of the worship of Jehovah into that of Baal, Asherah and the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, which God condemned with all His might. Hosea's graphic object lesson failed

to convince the Jews about their need to keep their relationship with Jehovah clean and pure. All of the prophets vacillated between condemnation for their people's infidelity, with impending judgment coming soon, and a look to better days ahead. Isaiah is the evangelist of the Old Testament, for he introduces Jesus as Messiah more clearly than anyone else. Perhaps his message has some bearing on our troubled times today.

Micah came near the end of Isaiah's time, and he added some graphically clear details to the overarching prophesies of the great prophet, such as the location of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem.

Our religious views seem to be influenced greatly by the political, economic and social milieu in which we generate them. Each generation seems to have to learn how to deal with its beliefs about God, morals and expression on its own. Not only is there rebellion on the part of teenagers to their parents' values, but usually also to their religious beliefs. Parents seek to instill in their children the basics of their own religious values, but each child must accept these for themselves. That means that godly parents may have a child or children that do not follow their beliefs or their way of expressing them. Still, God has commanded parents to teach their children these truths, so that they can teach them to their children when they have them, etc. If we accept Jesus' statement that the way is straitened and the gate narrow, then we realize that the majority of our young people will not necessarily follow in their parents' ways and beliefs. Each generation seems to need its own prophets, reacting to the situation that presents itself in their age. Jesus said that there would be wars and rumours of wars to the end, and earthquakes in diverse places, so we should not be surprised when we have wars and natural disasters to deal with in each generation. Faith marches on, in spite of these setbacks and challenges. Even COVID was not a surprise to our God, who is sovereign over all.

As the two rival nations wrestled for political and economic control of the area, religious impact suffered first in the northern kingdom and later, in the southern. Finally, God allowed the Assyrian empire to grow and extend to take in more territory than had ever been controlled by any one nation. Finally, in 725 BC, Shalmaneser V laid siege to Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom, and in 722 BC, his successor, Sargon II, captured the fortified city, taking its inhabitants into captivity and scattering them throughout his realm. This practice of removing the conquered people began with Assyria and carried over into Babylonia. Others from previously conquered parts of the realm were transplanted into the newly conquered lands. These foreigners intermarried with the remaining folk in each land, creating new mixed populations, which were less likely to rebel against the power of Assyria. In the northern kingdom, the city of Samaria gave its name to the mixed-race people that came to be known as Samaritans. Sargon II sent an

Israelite priest to instruct the people in the "religion of the land," so that the people would be protected from wild beasts and other elements that would prey upon the weakened population. This created a religion that mixed Jewish teachings with superstitious practices, to which the New Testament story of Jesus with the woman at the well (John 4) refers.

After Samaria fell, the Assyrian forces under Sennacherib moved toward Egypt and Philistia, then into the southern kingdom, taking several of the main walled and fortified cities, including the strongest, Lachish, near Philistia. Finally, Jerusalem was besieged in Hezekiah's day. This story is related for us in Isaiah 36-37, ending in the death angel's claiming 185,000 Assyrian soldiers at the gate of Jerusalem, following a prayer by Hezekiah and Isaiah for God to act on their behalf. Sennacherib returned, defeated and dejected, to Nineveh, where sometime later two of his sons slew him to put a brother, Ezarhaddon, on the throne of Assyria. Things rapidly went downhill for the Assyrians after that, and Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, defeated the Assyrian forces in 612 BC, as prophesied by Nahum and Zephaniah, becoming the new ruler of the whole Middle East, and soon passing on this distinction to his son, Nebuchadnezzar.

Egypt, which had been the world's leading power, often called upon to protect Israel, until the ascendancy of Assyria, waned in influence over Israel and Judah during this time, and was finally overcome by the new world powers. It is not heard from again until its revival under the Greek Ptolemies and ending with the final ruler, Cleopatra, as prophesied by Daniel.

It was during these troubled times that Isaiah and his colleagues ministered, either in the northern kingdom or the southern, or both, but for what purpose is recorded for us along with the record of Isaiah's call and commission in Isaiah 6:

Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?"

And he answered:

"Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant,

Until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,

Until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.

And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste.

But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.

Isaiah, as also the other prophets before him and following him, did not receive the 'cushy' calling that many pastors and evangelists today are hoping for. His was to be a time of prophesying to the southern tribes that were going downhill, and the northern kingdom that was falling apart spiritually, economically and politically,

with the southern kingdom rapidly following suit. It was left to Jeremiah to lament the final death-throes of the nation of Judah and the city of Jerusalem, and to Daniel and Ezekiel, the prophets of the Exile, to prophesy the beginnings of the rebirth of the nation, in order to fulfill the purposes of the Kingdom of God on earth. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied in the time of rebirth after Cyrus the Persian issued the decree that Jerusalem could be rebuilt, and Malachi closed out the time of the prophets with a final message of hope for the future of the Jews.

Where does all of that leave us today? We see our politics of democracy threatened; we see a pandemic taking one after another of our friends or family; we see our economy putting all of us into despair, and we see our family values crumbling, while our sense of spirituality is becoming more and more eclectic.

Let's take these one at a time. First, our politics:

We North Americans, especially the USA and Canada, pride ourselves in our forms of democracy, which most Christians believe were based on biblical values. If we go back in history, our founding fathers did have a measure of biblical faith, based within the social values of the day. Whether that translates into the Fundamentalist faith of our parents' generation is questionable, as it tended more toward Unitarianism than Fundamentalism. But let's at least give them credit for putting an occasional biblical phrase into our founding documents to tantalize citizens to become loyal to the state, and to give some assurance to those citizens that we were not going in the direction of secular nations around the world, as France at the time was going. Even the British North America Act declares Canada to be a "dominion from sea to sea" (Psalm 72:8), so we call ourselves the Dominion of Canada today.

The question of royalty was fundamental in the thinking of those founding fathers in both the USA and Canada, and incidentally, France, at that time. Royalty was seen as a by-product of the Middle Ages, when Divine Right of kings was the philosophy that drove politics. In the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries, this was not seen in as positive a light as it had been several centuries before, when Louis XIV centralized all power under his wing, and the Holy Roman Emperor did the same in his realm. The Church, which had gained vast political power at the crumbling of the Roman Empire, had also gained nearly a third of all the land of Europe, including fabulous wealth in both commerce and art.

Interestingly, at the same time as this was happening in the palaces of Europe, the French Philosophes were issuing an encyclopedia of worldly knowledge that challenged almost everything the Church had taught and was practising, as well as the way in which royalty maintained its hold on the country. The Church's hold on

people was resented by the aristocracy, because they were envious of the wealth that their religious counterparts flaunted. Americans who also thought that British royalty was misusing their colonies on the Atlantic coast of North America visited these thinkers in France to share views, and it was these men who then pre-empted the French Revolution by staging the American Revolution. Each case led to abolishing of their respective crowns and the setting up of a republican form of government.

Canada, in the meantime, had clearly become a British colony with the Battle of the Heights of Abraham in Quebec City going to Wolf instead of Montcalm in 1759. The Treaty of Paris awarded vast tracts of land in northern and central North America that had been explored and settled by France, to Great Britain. Confederation in 1867 simply recognized this acquisition and built its foundation on British parliamentarianism, with Queen Victoria as the titular head. Canadians still maintain that relationship through the Governor General, who represents the crown as the titular head of Canadian government. Canadians recently celebrated with Queen Elizabeth II her seventieth jubilee as our queen, along with many others in the British Commonwealth of Nations, which still spans the globe. At the same time, some members of the Commonwealth have indicated that they are no longer submitting to the sovereignty of the queen and are becoming republics, independent of all overarching authority.

All this was happening as the Church was undergoing one of the strongest attacks it had ever endured, even stronger than in the Reformation. The very foundations of Christendom were being attacked by thinkers like Voltaire, d'Alambert and Diderot. Not only was the lordship of the pope under attack; the very doctrinal basis of Christianity was questioned. No longer was it fashionable to believe in the Virgin Birth, the Inspiration of the Scriptures, or the authority of the Church. Man could easily get along without God; after all, man had become a learned creature with an active brain and could determine his own future.

German theologians from this philosophical beginning developed the principle of Higher Criticism that attacked the veracity of the Bible as the Word of God and every cardinal doctrine of the Church. Other theologians in other countries followed suit, and many denominations 'went liberal.' No longer was sin the chief enemy; church members were introduced to a gospel of grace regardless of belief or actions which kept the local church in the centre of the social and sometimes political life of the community, as it had been in the past, now as a social impetus instead of a moral compass. The State Church in European countries became even more actively the State Church, dictating the morals and the social fibres of society in every village and level of society. In some cases, individual pastors were quite

evangelical, in others, quite liberal, in their theology, and some denominations were more affected by one or the other approaches than the others.

The twentieth century saw a reaction against these tendencies to water down the cardinal teachings of the churches, and Evangelical Fundamentalism drew clear and sometimes harsh lines against such liberal theological concepts. One product of this new/old theology was that it was often delivered in very unloving and dynamic tones. The author and many others grew up in this atmosphere, where black was very black and white was very white, and there could be no challenge to that. Evangelistic meetings and revival meetings were the norm, and God did answer with some amazing conversions and societal upheavals, and we mostly went out of the meetings with an overwhelming sense of guilt, regardless of our spiritual condition.

The sixties, however, saw a counter-revolution happening. That is, some saw it, but most did not. It was too subtle for most Christians, who went blithely on their way, thinking in clear black and white, and worshipping in the tried and true way of most evangelicals, or in the liturgical way to which they had become accustomed. Some attributes of this new thinking were that our worship changed to a more personal, less doctrinal, genre. The author was billeted in a home where a new wave of evangelical fervour had been introduced recently through the new Charismatic movement in her church.

Another phenomenon was that our pastors and evangelists no longer preached 'hell fire and brimstone' messages, but appealed more to the personal and inner desires of the congregation for union with God in a powerful way. In another sense, the time when "you're worth it" became the byword in society, not just for a make-up company, but for every young person seeking to reach his/her full potential. Everyone was suddenly capable of become the super hero of which every child dreamt. The will of God needed to fit into that concept, in order for the Christian young person to feel completely fulfilled in life.

Electronic recording made marvelous strides during the sixties, and it became the vogue for every church service to have someone sing or play one of the new special numbers that were offered by Singspiration and other publishing venues. Favorites was a series of books that featured the latest of these, and radio programs became the venue for these new songs to be publicized.

The charismatic movement brought a radical change in hymnody and worship, and music companies published the new contemporary gospel songs that were developed by this or that influential church worship leader, or were sung by new

genre of Christian recording artists. The recording industry grew by giant leaps as technology upon technology became part of everyday life.

Young people distrusted anyone that seemed to them to depict the old values. Pastors no longer appeared in stiff business suits and starched collars, but wore street clothes popular in their peer group. Organs, and even pianos, disappeared from churches. Instead, electronic keyboards, electronic amplifiers and drum sets graced the platform. Older Christians objected, but younger ones 'won the battle.' One by one, the Christian artists, by now national heroes, decided they could broaden their ministry by including 'moral songs' in their repertoire and taking their concerts to the clubs and stages of the world, where they reached high quotas of adherents and awards. The author faced this phenomenon within his own missionary organization, where the sons of the founders took on the new approach in opposition to their fathers.

No longer was it fashionable to have the oldest men in the congregation as elders and deacons, but middle-aged businessmen were called upon to guide the church into 'meaningful worship.' Influence upon the community, and upon missions in general, was sometimes more socially-oriented than spiritually oriented. "In the world, but not of the world" has become a war cry to some, and a questionable term to others, or is skewed by others to mean whatever suits the situation of the day.

Is this good, or is it bad? That depends mostly on your age. Older Christians tend to feel ignored in their desires to see it the way it once was, where they could understand the words, and the beat was comprehensible even to the unmusical ear. They knew the hymns by heart, and these spoke to them in ways that contemporary songs just don't. They grew up being taught that rock and roll music was of the devil, and when, horror of horrors, they saw it come into the church, with the drum set representing darkest Africa and demon worship. After enduring this spiritual torture, they listened to an entertaining, light-hearted homily based on jokes and popular newscasts, with a mild application of some seemingly unrelated scripture to clinch the message. Few in the congregation, it was often felt, actually knew their Bibles at all, and hardly anyone brought a Bible to church. For some reason, the younger set seemed glued to their cellphones during the Bible readings.

Let's look at it from the younger generation's point of view. That would represent those born after 1970, for the most part. They grew up in the era of pop music, which was available first on the radio – every teenager had a head banger on his/her shoulder – and then on the Walkman, finally on mp3 devices and blue tooth. As technology progressed by vast leaps and bounds, church also changed, and Bible apps made it possible to get every imaginable translation on your

cellphone, as well as YouTube songs and messages from anywhere in the world. Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and any number of other platforms have made communication with anyone in the world possible instantaneously, whether individually or in groups. It is this rapid and inevitable change that has revolutionized worship today.

Once the church had influence on the morals and the politics of our democratic society. Until the Second World War it was generally accepted that the moral values of Judeo-Christianity were those that became the cornerstone of civil law and order. The Church, taking the Bible as its basis, determined what was right and what was wrong, and laws reflected these values. Public schools read a Bible verse each morning and repeated the Lord's Prayer, before singing the national anthem. Preachers did not have to explain basic Bible stories or key verses: everyone knew them, and even those that did not believe or practise these teachings were able to tell a straying believer when he/she was out of place or was transgressing his own teachings.

It is now the civil liberties associations that have claimed the right to determine right and wrong for their use, and the church has been left wondering where everything went wrong. No longer does the Christian have a voice in whether homosexuality should be legalized or not, or whether abortion should be a woman's right, by nature of her being an individual human being, to make decisions over her body. It is now difficult for churches to have as one of their qualifications clear evidence that their members, and even their pastors and leadership, are straight in their sexual behaviours. This extends also to religious summer camp staff. The bylaws of the organization must make it clear that this requirement is part of being a member or being in charge. Christian universities have been taken to court because they did have this as a part of their requirements, and the authority to grant certain degrees was withheld, due to this clause. Civil liberties associations have become very powerful lobbyists for individual freedoms to be granted to all citizens, regardless of their beliefs or practices. Because we are in democratic countries, the majority is always deemed to be right, and we derive our moral compass from the state, rather than from the church or the Bible.

That leads me to my question: Can Christianity survive democracy?

That may shock some of you, as we have mostly grown up in democratically-governed countries, and you may even think that this form of government is ordained by God. May I remind you that democracy is never mentioned in the Bible. There is an allusion to a form of democracy in the book of Acts, where the congregation named several people to become deacons, but in the end, they were chosen by lot from among those names put forward. My studies in the times of the

prophets has given me the realization that I had been taught that the biblical form of government was based on a king who governed as directed by God. In the northern kingdom of Israel, every king to a man was declared to have done evil, and led the land into corruption and finally, into exile. The southern kings were declared to be good, or not, depending on whether they furthered the worship of Jehovah in the temple, or promoted the worship of Baal, Asherah, or the heavenly host on the hilltops or under spreading trees. Some even went so far as to sacrifice their children in the fire to Molech. Therefore, we tend to think that we need someone powerful, who can stanch the inroads of wickedness that are making our land dangerous for Christians.

Democracy, by its very nature, is rule by majority vote. If the majority thinks that abortion is a right that every woman has over her body, then that becomes right, and Christians can whimper all they want, or even attack the seat of government, but it doesn't make it wrong. That is because we have derived our moral compass from the state, rather than from God. Democracy does that, because the majority of our compatriots do not take their moral compass from God, but from society around them. Whether we like it or not, Christians are no longer in the majority in our North American countries. As long as Canada and the USA accepted only immigrants from Europe, they were fairly assured that these people would accept the Christian precepts as law, and abide by them. The vast numbers of refugees and immigrants from other parts of the world have brought in other religious convictions, some of which coincide with Christian values, and some which are diametrically opposed. Muslims, for example, have sought to introduce Shariah Law into Canada. As their numbers grow, these kinds of changes could become a moot question for those who seek to uphold Christian values.

That is why I sometimes wonder whether Christianity as we know it can survive democracy. Perhaps it is only the forms of Christianity, or the practical out-workings of our faith that I am thinking about. I know that in the end, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, but before He returns to rule in power, what is our response to be? Will our democratic governments eventually shut down the churches and cause true believers to go underground, as they have done in some restrictive countries already?

My readings have taken me to the book of Jeremiah, where the abject prophet had to declare to Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, that his end was near and that there was no possibility of turning around now. God had decided, and that was final. I have realized that my Jeremiads probably will also fall on deaf ears, so I decided to avoid the slime pit that Jeremiah ended up in, and the trip to Egypt with the ones Nebuchadnezzar left to try to keep things together in what was left of Jerusalem.

Just as the prophets turn from the disillusionment and horror of the wars around them to a brighter day ahead, I have learned to look beyond the morass of democratically-decided morals to a time when the King of Kings and Lord of Lords will set it all aright. May that day come soon, and while democracy still rules in our country. I refuse to think that our majority would vote in a dictator as leader, but sometimes I wonder. In the meantime, I will seek to keep our churches free of government interference that limits their ability to preach the entire Word of God.