

2004 In Review

The Year In Prophecy

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Introduction

The year ended with a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami. Many are asking if this is the fulfillment of any specific prophecy. We will consider this question in the light of Jesus' own teaching about the future.

There have been many other significant developments this year that relate to prophecy. Those will be addressed in the second half of this review.

As always, we do not attempt to set dates, or go beyond what the Scriptures teach, but it is becoming increasingly clear that prophecy is being fulfilled right before our eyes!

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

The most striking prophecy fulfilled in our generation is the rebirth of the nation of Israel in 1948. This had been predicted in great detail in Ezekiel, chapters 36 and 37. 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

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

On the Mt. of Olives Jesus taught his disciples about the future. He indicated that there are several stages that the Earth must experience. See the Appendix: Outline of the Future. The first of these phases is what Jesus called the “beginning of birth pains.” This refers to the generation that sees these things beginning to come to pass. We are surely part of that generation! Let us consider some of the things Jesus listed as signs during this period of time, according to Matthew 24:3-8, and Luke 21:8-11.

Wars and Rumors of Wars

Nuclear proliferation was a big issue this year, with North Korea continuing to flaunt its nuclear program, and Iran pushing ahead to finish the development of atomic weapons with the help of Russia. Both Israel and the United States have warned Iran that they will not be allowed to reach that goal, but they seem determined, and are working on adapting their ballistic missiles so that they can deliver nuclear warheads. They also threatened to “wipe Israel off the map” if Israel tries a preemptive strike to stop the development of their nuclear plant.

Of course, the War on Terrorism has continued, with a relatively stabilized Afghanistan, and a very unstable situation in Iraq, where insurgents are killing coalition and Iraqi forces on a regular basis. In the United States, there have not been new terrorist attacks, but there is always concern that something is about to happen. Osama bin Laden is still at large, and his new ally, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is the chief suspect in several Iraqi bombings and is responsible for the beheading of several foreigners there.

Israel and the Palestinians entered a fourth year of fighting, though the separation wall or fence that Israel has been constructing has resulted in a decrease of deadly homicide bombers in Israeli areas.

Russia may have taken a step back toward the Cold War with the announcement that they have developed a "hypersonic flying vehicle" that is able to maneuver between space and the earth's atmosphere. This missile would be able to penetrate any missile defense system that the U.S. plans to build.

As always, there are many civil wars raging in different parts of the world.

Earthquakes

There has been an ongoing question among prophecy scholars about the relevance of recent earthquake activity, but this recent great quake (measuring 9.0 magnitude) in the Indian Ocean, and the ensuing tsunamis, is too great to ignore. It caused unimaginable death figures from eleven nations in Asia and Africa. Some are calling it the greatest known natural disaster. The death toll had passed 140,000 by the end of the year and is still climbing. There is no reason to relate this catastrophe to the fulfillment of a

particular prophecy or to see it as an act of judgment, but it does at least call attention to the fact that Jesus said there would be great earthquakes in these last days.

According to Revelation 6:14; 16:18-20, a very great earthquake will occur as part of the Battle of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation period. During this earthquake every mountain will be shaken down and every island will sink.

Plagues

Plagues, mentioned by Jesus as one of the signs of this age, become a major cause of death during the Tribulation.

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

- Revelation 6:7-8 (NIV)

The specter of runaway disease is also a serious current concern. The Asian tsunami disaster may cause uncontrollable outbreaks of infections in the affected area because of lack of sanitation and contamination of the water. Cholera, typhoid, malaria, chicken pox and other disease could cause as many deaths as have already been reported by the initial catastrophe. Millions of people are homeless and living in substandard conditions because of the tsunami.

AIDS is still a growing problem all over the world. Over 20 million people have died in a little more than two decades. Today 38 million people are infected with HIV worldwide. Nearly half are women, and half are between the ages of 15 and 24.

Once-conquered diseases such as Tuberculosis are making a comeback because of drug-resistant strains.

The threat of biological warfare is still an issue as the War on Terrorism continues. Anthrax and Smallpox are often mentioned as possible plagues that could be released by terrorists.

Genetically modified plants and creatures pose a real threat to the world's health if something goes wrong with any of the current experiments. Scientists are developing such things as silkworms that produce pharmaceuticals instead of silk, and mosquitoes capable of delivering vaccines, instead of disease.

In another alarming development, researchers are warning that cell mutation, leading to cancer, could be caused by the use of cell phones.

Influenza could also cause another global pandemic at some future time. The World Health Organization estimates from two million to 50 million people could die from the next great outbreak.

OTHER MAJOR PROPHETIC DEVELOPMENTS OF 2004

Potential for Peace in Israel

The struggle between Israelis and Palestinians has not been as obvious this year to the casual observer, but the tensions still remain and several homicide attacks have taken place in Israel.

During the year, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has pursued two tactics that may contribute to the long-desired peace process in the Holy Land. One of his administration's objectives is the erection of a monumental security fence or wall between Israeli communities and those of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank areas. This is a very unpopular activity, not only with the Palestinians, but among Arab and European nations. It has, however, significantly reduced the number of terrorist attacks against Israelis.

The International Court of Justice ruled that the wall Israel has been building is illegal according to international law. However, this judgment is a non-binding legal opinion.

Sharon's other effort is the gradual unilateral withdrawal of Israelis from Palestinian areas. This is unpopular with many Israelis, and is used as propaganda by Palestinians, claiming it as a victory for their cause.

The biggest news of the year in the area is the death of Yasser Arafat on Nov. 11th. Arafat had become a major obstacle to any peace process in the area. He wanted to exterminate the Jewish people, and was responsible for more Jewish deaths than any person since Adolph Hitler. He was also responsible for the death of thousands of Christians, and did his own Palestinian people a great disservice by leading them into terrorism when they could have had peace. While most world leaders were mourning his death, President Bush said that he hoped peace could now be achieved. He offered hopes that a separate Palestinian state would be formed as a result.

President Bush told reporters for an Israeli newspaper that he would make peace between Israel and the Palestinians a top priority of his second term.

Even Israeli Prime Minister Sharon called 2005 a "year of great opportunity." He said he would continue the pullout from Gaza, and that this action could lead to future peace talks and a separate Palestinian state.

Palestinians are scheduled to vote for a new Prime Minister on January 9th. The front-runner for the position is Mahmoud Abbas. It remains to be seen whether Hamas and other militants will have a big effect on the elections. If Abbas is elected, it is likely that a renewed effort for peace will take place.

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 discussion of Russia that follows.

Realignment of Russia

2004 was a significant year for developments in Russia. The country has enjoyed freedom and democracy for more than a decade now, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but there are signs that it is becoming a more totalitarian state again, possibly setting the scene for a prophetic confrontation with Israel.

Putin's power and directions

In last year's prophetic review we mentioned that award-winning columnist William Saphire said that Russia's elections (December 2003) were politically corrupt, paving the way for Vladimir Putin's aspiration to become president for life. He concluded that Russia's short-lived experiment with democracy was all but dead.

In response to massacre of school children by Muslim terrorists this year, President Putin called for the strengthening of Russia's central government. This caused both former presidents of the country, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Boris Yeltsin, to warn the Russian people not to allow the loss of their hard-earned democracy.

Putin has continued to preside over the slow erosion of new freedoms in Russia, taking over news outlets so that freedom of the press is stifled. As noted above, he has led Russia forward in development of a new class of ballistic missiles. Most recently Russia bought up a giant oil company, curtailing free enterprise.

Struggle with former Soviet Union countries

Russian leaders are not pleased with the absorption of former Soviet Union countries into the European Union. They are interfering with the growth of democracy in these countries, as illustrated by the fraudulent elections in Ukraine, where an attempt was made to establish a puppet leader that would bow to Russia's wishes. Fortunately for the Ukrainians, the elections were declared invalid, and the country went on to elect a champion of freedom.

Animosity toward the U.S./ Alignment with China and the Muslim world

Russia has been very critical of the U.S. actions in Iraq. At the same time, they have cultivated relationships with China, which is still a Communist country. They conducted joint military exercises with China toward the end of the year.

Russia has a very long-standing special relationship with Iran, and has been building a nuclear reactor for them at Bushehr. They also have strong ties with many Islamic countries including some that were part of the old Soviet Union.

As noted in the appendix below, 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).

Viewing this prophecy through the lens of current events, it is likely that once there is finally a negotiated peace in Israel – a luxury they have never had since their inception as a nation in 1948 – something will provoke Russia and her allies to attack Israel.

While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:3 NIV

When this future war takes place, God will intervene, making it short and disastrous for Israel's enemies (Ezekiel 38:17-23). This war is probably the same as the one described by the opening of the second seal in Revelation 6. It could be the event that leads to a negotiated seven-year peace treaty between Antichrist and Israel. The Tribulation period will take place during these seven years.

The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. 27 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...

- Daniel 9:26-27 (NIV)

The last three and one-half years will be the Great Tribulation, during which Antichrist will reign as economic dictator of the world. Jesus spoke of this "abomination of desolation" in Matthew 24:15-25, and John wrote about it, explaining the "mark of the beast," in Revelation, chapter 13.

The Continued Rise of European Influence and Power

This past year was a very big one for the European Union, which is emerging as the prime contender for Daniel's ancient prophecies about a final world government before the establishment of Messiah's reign on Earth (Daniel 2:36-45; 9:24-27).

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. As The European Union rises to challenge the U.S. for world dominance, it fits this picture perfectly.

Expansion of the size of the European Union

On April 30 ten new nations became part of the European Union, making it the largest trading bloc in the world with a population of 455 million in 25 states. Eight of them were former communist states (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). The BBC's Tim Franks said that some enthusiasts described the enlargement as a millennial event, comparable to the creation of great empires.

European Constitution Adopted in Rome

On September 29th the new European Union constitution was signed in the same room where the Treaty of Rome had been signed to establish the EU in 1957. There had been a long fight over whether or not to include mention of Europe's Christian roots in the constitution. In the end they agreed to not to mention it. The 25 member nations must now ratify the constitution.

Economic growth – strength of the Euro

The Euro has continued to gain strength against the dollar, and has become the preferred currency in many places, including oil-rich Arab countries.

Military alliances

Jack Kinsella, editor of the Omega Letter, points out that even though there are now many member states in the European Union (EU), there are still only 10 in the Western European Union. They are the first ten of the member states and the most powerful ones as well. The WEU is, as of 2004, a ten-nation core of powerful European states in charge of maintaining Europe's military security. It controls NATO, the world's most powerful military alliance, and it insists on retaining a separate identity to keep its voice from being diluted by that of the greater EU. In the light of Biblical prophecy that the final world government would begin with "ten kings," this is a most interesting fact.

Anti-U.S. sentiment

It is painfully obvious that most of Europe is developing an anti-U.S. and anti-Semitic attitude. There is an evident desire among some of these countries to challenge the super-power status of the U.S. The War on Terrorism is seen as an American vs. Arab conflict, giving Europe greater influence in the Islamic world.

Weakness of the U.N.

The U.N. has proven itself incapable of governing the world, and is racked with serious new scandals and charges of corruption. This lends additional prestige to the European Union, as a potentially better arbiter of peace in the Middle East than either the U.S. or the U.N.

Technological Revolution

In a sense, the world has been prepared for Antichrist's worldwide economic dictatorship for many years already. Revelation 13 tells of the time, at the mid-point of the Tribulation (and beginning of the "Great Tribulation"), that he will insist on being worshipped. Those who agree will receive a mark on their right hand or forehead that demonstrates their allegiance to him, and allows them to participate in the world's markets. Those who refuse will not be allowed to buy or sell in the open market. They will be driven underground, and if caught, will be put to death. Super high-speed computers, such as IBM's Blue Gene/L are theoretically capable of processing credit information about each person on Earth in less than a second. Satellite communications and broadband Internet can handle the necessary flow of information. Even the smallest of vendors are now able to obtain interactive credit and debit card processors.

In Daniel 12:4 we read that in the last days knowledge will increase, and people will run back and forth. This is undoubtedly a reference to the information explosion and the use of the Internet in our generation. Information devices continue to get much faster and much smaller with every passing year. Two major developments of this past year are of special interest. Both of them are improvements of earlier devices that will make it easier for the whole world to be controlled by electronic transactions. They are wireless communications and radio frequency identification (RFID) devices.

Wireless communications take place on many levels already. Wireless local area networks allow businesses and even homes to connect multiple computers and peripherals without the use of cables. Wireless communications are also possible directly from one computer to another in the same location. Everyone is familiar with cell phones, and the fact that they can be connected to computers to provide limited Internet service. A "third generation" of cell phones (3G) is now available, and will become very popular in the near future. They can transmit digital photographs, video messaging, and improved Internet usage. These advanced devices will make it possible for people everywhere to be connected, and even to do financial transactions from their remote village kiosks.

Another wireless innovation is known as WiMAX. It is the wireless metropolitan area network (MAN) serving whole communities through antennas, which can be added to existing cell towers. They will allow high-speed connections to the Internet over distances of up to 30 miles. This will eliminate the need for telephone lines or fiber optics.

The other emerging technology is radio frequency identification (RFID). These are tiny inexpensive devices with antennas that respond to an electronic signal by returning an identification number. These can be small “printed” adhesive tags placed on products or they can be microchips designed for implanting under the skin of animals or humans.

Last year retailers like Wal-Mart and Target announced plans to use radio frequency identification tags on all products in the future. And IBM has developed computer tools to assist manufacturers and mid-sized retail stores to use the technology.

At the same time, many retail outlets are allowing customers to save money by checking out their own purchases. Scanners read bar codes or RFID signals to tally up the charges, and customers may use cash, credit card or even fingerprints in some cases to pay for the goods. A logical next step will be for an implanted chip to take the place of cards, which can be lost or stolen.

In October Applied Digital announced that it had received Food and Drug Administration approval for implanting its VeriChip in humans for medical purposes. The radio frequency identification device enables computer access to vital medical records for the patient. There are still physical issues to work out before the average person will accept this chip, but in time it will be accepted because of the health benefits, the convenience for financial transactions, and the additional security it will offer.

Whatever form this identification will take when Antichrist comes to power, it is a separate thing from the “Mark of The Beast.” As noted above, that mark is a sign of allegiance or worship of Antichrist. It will be his name or number. Of course, the personal identification device could be given at the same time.

The awful destruction caused by the earthquake and tsunami in Asia might also have an unexpected effect on the progress of technology. We saw this happen during the Y2K crisis, when there was widespread concern that computers would crash when we began a new millennium. All the old equipment was replaced before the deadline, and there was little difficulty. The result was an incredible upgrading of computers and communications equipment that is now being used for electronic commerce. The same thing might happen when billions of relief dollars are spent, not only to rebuild homes, but also to upgrade the superstructure of the entire area.

Apostasy and Revival in the U.S.

We can end our review on a good note. Apostasy, or the “falling away” of the Church (1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9) is still a problem, but there are also encouraging signs for believers.

World missions is growing by leaps and bounds, with thousands of people coming to know Christ every day, especially in emerging countries where Christianity has not been

strong in the past. In addition, there is good reason to believe that there is a kind of revival brewing here in the United States. We have had some extraordinary spiritual events lately. Mel Gibson's "The Passion of The Christ" had a great impact on the nation. Several dynamic Christian books were best sellers as well. The "Left Behind" series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins has made book history, and hundreds of churches used Rick Warren's "40 Days of Purpose" materials for spiritual mobilization of their congregations. The presidential election was hard-fought along clear moral lines, and the reelection of President Bush is widely interpreted as a victory for Bible-believing Christians. There seems to be a more wholesome climate in the land, and pollsters have released many encouraging statistics about the number of people who accept the Bible as true and trust in Christ for salvation.

Sometimes people ask why would God send revival in the last days. The Bible shows that He always gave believers a chance to repent, and he often allowed the worst of pagans that opportunity to repent as well, as in the case of Nineveh in Jonah's time.

Jesus taught that even during the Tribulation period the Gospel will be given to all nations before the end comes (Matthew 24:11-14). There will be both extremes at the end, but as the darkness becomes more intense, the light will seem all the brighter.

Conclusion

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 3:4

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.

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.

If we believe we are living in the last days, it ought to cause us to live holy and godly lives, and to tell everyone we can about the Gospel of Christ while there is still time!

Appendix: 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).