

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Now consider the subject of the signs of the times. Remarks on this subject are too often made which betray a want of intelligent comprehension of the natures of the signs that are according to Scripture to indicate the „time of the end.“ A careless reading of our Lord’s prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives seems to be the cause of much of this misapprehension. His predictions of wars and rumors of wars, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes, are quoted as if they and such like things were to be the signs of the end of the age. A little accurate attention to the order of his statements would at once show that, so far from this being the case, he mentions these as the characteristic and common events of the entire interval prior to his coming. Wars and calamities, persecution and apostasy, martyrdom, treachery, abounding iniquity, Gospel preaching, the fall of Jerusalem, the great tribulation of Israel, which has, as we know, extended over 1,800 years; all these things were to fill the interval, not to be signs of the immediate proximity of the second advent. How could things of common, constant occurrence be in themselves signs of any uncommon and unique crisis? What commoner all through the ages than wars and rumors of wars, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes? These, as marking the course of the age, can never indicate its close. What, then, are the signs we should expect?

Many who perceive the folly of thus looking at every great natural calamity as a sign go to an opposite extreme, and expect wonderful, unprecedented, supernatural and impossible signs, basing their expectations on a literal interpretation of the symbolic hieroglyphics of the Apocalypse. Such signs would be so grotesque and absurd in character that it is an insult to human intelligence, not to say to divine revelation, to assert that they are to be expected. There is one simple and all-sufficient answer to this childish conception of the signs of the last days. Our Lord and his Apostles alike furnish the reply.

Our Lord says: „And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was *in the days* of Lot, they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be *in the day* when the Son of man is revealed.“ (Luke 17:26-30.) And the Apostle continues thus: „For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night; for when they shall say, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escape.“ (1 Thess. 5:2,3.)

If any such signs, as are imagined by some, were to precede the advent, the state of society predicted in these passages could not by any possibility exist. If monstrous, unheard-of, supernatural, portentous events were to transpire, would they not be telegraphed the same day all over a startled world, and produce such a sense of alarm and expectation that buying and selling, planting and building, and marrying and giving in marriage, would all be arrested together, and „peace and safety” would be far from any one’s lips or thoughts? And if one of the Apocalyptic prodigies is to be thus fulfilled, all of course must be so. Conceive a succession of such supernatural prodigies, and a world asleep in fancied security, and overtaken by sudden destruction. No, there was nothing special to alarm the antediluvians before the day that Noah entered into the ark; nothing special to startle the men of Sodom ere the fire from heaven fell; and like as it was in those days, so will it be in these. All going on just as usual, no single sign to attract the world’s attention. „None of the wicked shall understand” the true state of affairs, only the „wise” enlightened by the word of prophecy.

It will be objected, perhaps, but if the signs of the times, which we are expected to recognize, are neither ordinary natural events nor extraordinary unnatural ones, what are they? Scripture abundantly answers this inquiry. They are special, but perfectly natural events, occurring in a predicted order and at a predicted time, and various and widely differing events occurring in combination. They are not sudden, startling, newly-produced phenomena, but definite stages in long progressing movements, whose history was written twenty-five centuries ago.

As to political signs, allow me to make a few simple suggestions. I met a gentleman who has long been a Christian, a student of God’s Word, a worker in his service, and he said he had bestowed little time on the subject of prophecy. Now there may be many such: let me refer, for the sake of such, to a great political chart of the world’s history contained in Dan. 2, and especially as compared with Dan. 7. There

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we have in brief the history of the last twenty-five centuries.

Let me suggest that Daniel is the introduction to John, the book of John the completion of Daniel. Daniel is first John; John is second Daniel. They are two parts of the same book, they treat of one subject, use the same symbols, employ the same hieroglyphics, and speak of the same course of events. These two books contain a series of visions in which the same ground is to a certain extent traversed again and again. The first vision in these two books is the simplest and most comprehensive. In that well-known vision, the fourfold image, representing the course of four great world-empires, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, we have a chart of Gentile history.

And using the word chart reminds me of a very simple illustration that may be of value to some on the question of signs, and the point we have reached in the history of the world. Suppose you cross the ocean, and, traveling for many days or weeks, you reach a certain point of the voyage still out of sight of land, when one day you hear a rumor that the ship is approaching the port to which you are bound. You go to the captain, and inquire. „Yes, it is; we should sight the land at three o'clock this afternoon.” „How do you know?” The captain unrolls his chart, and says, „There is the port; there is our present position.” He lays his finger on the exact point reached by the ship. „How do you know we are there?” „Do you see that line drawn across the chart? that is our course: we have followed it; we are just there, and will sight land at three o'clock.” You ask for evidence to reassure yourself and strengthen your expectation it shall be as he says. You ask for further light on the subject, for you cannot understand how he can be so sure. „Well, our voyage has run along such and such a course, we have come so many miles, the ship has kept the track marked there; on the way we have passed certain points, certain headlands, indicated there, as Ceylon, Adent and so forth, just as they are marked in the chart. Now the distance from Ceylon to the port we are making is so and so many miles; we have just run within twenty miles of it, and by three o'clock we will make the rest. The chart with the reckoning of time and distance shows exactly where we are.” As he predicts so it comes to pass.

It seems to me that in a somewhat similar way God's servants and saints are guided by His wondrous and infallible Word. He has been pleased in the Book to give us a chart of history, not merely history still future, but history now past; and it has been unfolded to us, not in dim light, but in a broad, clear light, and part of the light, a most important part of it, is prophecy with reference to the political history of the world, with reference to the political history of the great Gentile powers. What a marvellous thing it is when we consider that twenty-five centuries ago, when the times of the Gentiles were beginning, when the Jewish subjection had commenced—for God has cast down the throne of David for a time, and set up the Gentile powers—that at that time, twenty-five centuries ago, the course of Gentile power should be clearly foreseen and distinctly foretold, written and marked out in God's holy Word! It is written and rewritten, prediction multiplied on prediction, and the whole thing laid bear and unfolded; and all history itself has run on these lines exactly as foretold.

I can only add on these signs, that each power has run its appointed course: the Babylonian empire rose, reached a certain point, and fell; the Medo-Persian empire succeeded, and reached a certain development, and also fell; the Grecian empire followed, and ruled and perished; then rose the Roman empire, passed through the course foretold, first united, then divided, just as indicated. Compare, I say, the Old Testament and New Testament predictions with the whole course of recorded history, and what do you see? History has run on the lines laid down; the predictions have been fulfilled, we know their fulfilment is sure. Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome Pagan, and

Rome Papal and persecuting all have come and gone, and here we are at the close of the last four empires; the next thing therefore to be expected is the manifestation, the shining forth of the kingdom of God which shall never end.

Of course the history of the Gentile world is a different thing from the history of the Christian Church. Take then the latter: a great deal is foretold with regard to the history of the Christian Church. That church was to grow, according to prophecy. Beginning with small things it was to attain to a wonderful extent. From a small seed it was to spring into a great tree, spreading out its branches in which the birds of the air were to come and build. This wonderful change is foretold by the Lord Himself, by Paul again and again, and by John in still greater detail: all this has taken place.

Now observe, further, the bearing of this on this signs of the times. As the Church in her infancy was told of her extension; as she at length reached maturity; as she who was so small became a great spreading tree, and as the birds of the air came and built in her branches; as all this has become history, as all has been fulfilled; so another event foretold has taken place. In the history of the Church there has been a great falling away from the faith, and that apostasy was distinctly foretold. I suggest, then, that this word of Paul to the Thessalonians, „That day shall not come except there come the falling away first” (the apostasy), is a most important sentence in connection with the question of ecclesiastical signs of our times. The subject there is ecclesiastical; the apostasy was to take place, not in the world, but in the Christian Church. Paul is writing of what is to take place in the Church, and of that pure and practical hope; and he is writing just there and then with reference to our gathering together to Him. And Paul says, „That day shall not come except there come the falling away first.” I believe that just as I accept any other statement of inspiration. Therefore I am forced to take this position; if that predicted falling away in the Christian Church has not taken place, it lies between us and our gathering together to Him.

But if, on the other hand, that predicted falling away has taken place, it does not lie between us and the coming of the Lord. If we compare this falling away in the Church with the passage with which you are familiar, „In the latter times some shall depart from the faith,” the word in the original Greek is the same as in the passage in Thessalonians. When we compare the two together, surely we cannot evade the conclusion that they refer to the same thing. Now, the falling away in 1 Tim. 4, is described as „Giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons ... forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats.” Reading that, we cannot fail to recognize the portrait.

Time would fail to do more than add this one thought by way of suggestion, that after the

declaration that the day shall not come except there come first the apostasy, there is added a very solemn declaration indeed, with reference to the one whom the Reformers recognized as the man of sin, whose manifestation is described. I rejoice I have learned to look, as I have done for thirty years, on Scripture in the light of history, and on history in the light of Scripture. And that doing so I can see the fulfillment of this prediction in accurate accordance with prophecy, a fulfillment recognized by the Reformers, though denied by the Papacy. And this very prophecy led to the Reformation, as they recognized the necessity of separating from the foretold apostasy. There is no time for further details, but let us search and see. Do not let us imagine we have reached a termination in the study of such things, but let us seek to advance in the understanding of them.—*H. G. Guinness.*

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