

Hope for a Hopeless World

The marvellous message of the Bible

OPEN a newspaper these days, listen to the news on radio or TV, and invariably you get the impression of trouble. Our world is torn by *strife* ó strife between political parties; strife between ethnic factions; strife between nations. It is beset by problems ó hunger, pollution of land and water, and ever present violence; problems of society, revealed by increasing crime rates and over-crowded prisons; by hospitals filled with patients, many of whom are there because of mental stress; and by an alarming number of victims of drug abuse and alcoholism. Looming over all is the frequent threat of economic crisis, with widespread unemployment and material hardship. The õunder-developed nationsö are in debt to the world banks (that is, chiefly those of America and Western Europe) to staggering sums running into billions of dollars, with no prospect of ever being able to repay the loans.

21st century world trouble

But there is one feature above all which reveals the hopelessness of the world's condition. If a visitor from another planet were to come and examine affairs on earth, he would find the human race divided into nations, all insisting on preserving their distinct identity. Within nations, religious and racial groups compete with one another ó or indulge in outright conflict. Cries of peace are matched with strident calls for war, as new alignments between nations allow oppressed minorities to claim their ãrightsø

Much has been made of the ãendø of the Cold War, of disarmament by the former superpowers, and the removal of the threat of nuclear attack. Yet the world is still spending vast sums on arms. If our visitor asked why nations are doing this, he would be told it was õfor defenceö. If he asked, õDefence against whom?ö, he would learn that it was out of fear of other nations. In other words the nations are spending fantastic sums of money every year in creating the power to frighten and destroy *because they cannot trust one another*. Here is the core of the problem. And *no one knows how to stop it!* There is no prospect at all of this immense burden being lifted. And meanwhile the development of ever-more terrifying nuclear weapons goes on í No wonder feelings of pessimism and hopelessness are widespread today. And this is the õadvancedö and õcivilizedö 21st century!

Past optimism

But in the late 19th century there was a very different impression around. It was an age of optimism, of great development in many ways. Increased scientific knowledge resulted in spectacular technical progress through inventions. Industrial production was rising, bringing greater wealth. Education was being made available to all sections of society, and important results were predicted. As men and women became better educated, so it was argued, they would choose more noble pursuits and take pleasure in literature and in arts like music and painting. The result would be a higher moral tone in society, with improved behaviour resulting eventually in world peace.

Politicians promised a new social order of justice and equality for all. As wealth became better distributed, people would be better off and so would no longer envy one another. õBanish poverty and youöll banish crimeö was one of the watch cries of the 19th century. So

the finest powers of the human mind would be developed and peace would be preserved among the nations. Church leaders boldly joined in and confidently predicted that in process of time all nations would accept the Gospel of Christ. The world would be conquered by preaching.

The events of the twentieth century (Winston Churchill) came as a shock! The dream faded under the impact of two world wars and the ever-present threat of new and even more deadly weapons. H. G. Wells, that apostle of evolutionary progress, expressed his disillusion in two books published at the end of his life, *Mind at the End of its Tether* and *The Fate of Homo Sapiens*. In them he declares that there is no hope for humanity: "There is nothing but the dark. And that was in 1945, before the first atomic bomb was dropped! How the hopes of mankind have been shown to be vain: first, the belief that the Christian religion would unify the world – long since abandoned; then the expectation that political progress by the growth of democracy would bring peace – few believe that today; then the hope that science would be the means of changing the world for the better – and the results of scientific ingenuity have proved the sharpest of double-edged weapons. There is no substantial hope left of a thorough world change.

The source of hope

But there is one source amongst us which has never misled us by encouraging false expectations. It is the Bible. Throughout the Bible human history is seen as ending in a great climax, frequently called "the time of the end" or "the last days", and certain passages tell us quite clearly what those "last days" will be like. One of the clearest and most striking is in Luke 21. The disciples asked Jesus what would be the sign of his coming (they meant his return to the earth) and of "the end of the world" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus replies with a description of conditions which his followers would experience after his ascension to heaven. Then he speaks particularly of the Jewish people:

"They (the Jews) shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles (nations), until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." (Luke 21:24)

This is a most remarkable prophecy, all in one verse. Look what it says:

1. The Jews were to suffer severely as a result of war. Forty years after Jesus' ascension to heaven, in AD 70, the Roman armies invaded Judaea, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, burnt the temple, and expelled the Jews.
2. Jews were driven into all the nations of the earth where for centuries they were persecuted; whole communities were sometimes exterminated.
3. For centuries the city of Jerusalem fell under various national powers: the Romans, the Arabs, the Turks, and latterly the British.
4. But the words of Jesus foretell an end to this domination by the nations. In 1948 the nation of Israel was re-established as a State in the land of Palestine; in 1967 Israel recovered control of the city of Jerusalem, which has become their national capital again.

In other words this remarkable prophecy of Jesus has actually been fulfilled in modern times. How important then must be *what he says next*:

“And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth, distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after (expectation of, RV) those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.” (verses 25,26)

This is a striking picture of a world in distress. “Ah”, say some, “but clearly it is figurative, not literal. Just look at those allusions to the sun, moon, stars, sea and waves, and powers of heaven”. Very well, let us remove from Jesus’ words everything that could possibly be figurative and read what is left:

“ upon the earth, distress of nations with perplexity | men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for expectation of the things which are coming on the earth.”

This is not a figurative description. It is fearfully literal: it has to do with nations, men’s hearts, fear, and perplexity, because of dreadful events. Remarkably the second word for “earth” literally means “the *inhabited* earth” – nothing figurative about that. And his term “perplexity” implies “at one’s wits’ end” –

Now there is no escaping the conclusion to be drawn from this part of Jesus’ discourse: at a time when the domination of Jerusalem by the nations comes to an end, mankind upon the earth is to experience worldwide distress, fear and perplexity. And this is exactly what has happened before our eyes.

In the late 19th century the “wisest” of men were quite deceived about the course of world developments of the following century, and beyond to our age. They were completely mistaken. Yet here is Jesus, *speaking 2,000 years ago*, giving us a true picture of the course of events; and the Bible records it for us. The Bible has been right in this vital matter of the future of mankind when little more than a century ago the most learned men were quite wrong. Let us just store that fact in our minds for the moment while we consider further matters of the same sort.

A world problem

For centuries the problem of nations living together upon the earth was seen as a *local* one. It was sufficient for a nation to live at peace with its immediate neighbours (though this often did not happen). But the problem has been growing over the years and in the last 50 years or so has become acute. At last it has come to be realized that the problem of human society on earth is not a national, or a regional, but a *world problem*.

The first serious effort to cope with it was the formation of the League of Nations, set up in the 1920s as a result of the shattering experience of the First World War (1914-18). Nations were to solve all disputes in future by peaceful discussion and not by war. Hopes were high, but after only a few years those hopes were dashed by the rise of the armed dictatorships of Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany. The horrors of the Second World War (1939-45) revived the sense of urgent need for some kind of world control, but the United Nations Organization was born more in pious hope than in buoyant optimism, and its career has shown that it is powerless to prevent armed conflict, if one of the major world powers is determined to pursue its own aims.

And yet a world power is clearly what is needed, to deal with all nations, to compel the rebellious to act for the common good; to deal with worldwide problems like hunger and pollution; and above all to check the growth in the power of the nations' weapons which pose an ever-increasing threat to human life on the earth. One authority for the whole planet — that was the idea which led to the propaganda for 'World Government' in the 1950s. But the point to remember is this: the realization that human problems need a *world* solution has only arisen in the last 50 years or so. And it is not regarded with much optimism. Bertrand Russell gave in the 1950s a series of radio talks on 'World Government', in which he said that if mankind did not develop a system of world control, with effective powers, within 50 years, it would perish. He added, 'I very much fear it will perish'. Asked why, he replied, 'Because of men's anarchic passions', that is their inability to control their own desires. The years since Russell's pronouncements have done nothing to offer humanity any hope.

And yet there *is* hope. For there is one source which has from the beginning seen human life on earth as creating a world problem demanding a world solution — the Bible. The Bible says that mankind has been given power to control the affairs of the world, but only for a limited time. When the 'time of the end' comes, the control of the world will be taken from men, for 'the kingdom is the Lord's: and he is the ruler over the nations' (Psalm 22:28). When the future King of the earth is established, 'all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him' (Psalm 72:11). So 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11:9). The world problem, foreseen as such in the Bible from the beginning, will receive a world solution — the only way of solving it. How did the Bible writers, sometimes writing over 2,500 years ago, know this, when only 100 years ago the most informed of men were quite wrong in their forecasts about the future of the earth? How can this be? Again the reader is asked to store this point in his mind, while we consider still another matter.

Wanted – the leader

Nothing of any lasting value is ever created by the mass of mankind. It is done because a leader or leaders arise who guide and urge on the rest to achieve their ends. One of the simplest historical examples is the case of slavery in the dominions of the British Empire in the 19th century, when the British Parliament had debated the issue repeatedly and refused to take any step towards abolition — there were too many vested interests in the sugar plantations of Jamaica. Parliament was finally persuaded as a result of the devoted efforts of Wilberforce and his friends over a period of 30 years or more. Without the leader in the cause, nothing would have been done.

So the world urgently needs an outstanding leader capable of delivering the nations — all of them — out of the present crisis. Where is he to be found? Will any of the present leaders of the nations be able to command worldwide support? Who is there? The President of the United States? The President of Russia? The Prime Minister of Britain? The President of France? Just to consider these suggestions is to realize the total inadequacy of these politicians for the task. There is not a single leader in world politics capable of attracting the support of all the nations for the great task of reorganizing affairs on this earth. And without the right leader nothing will be done. Again, this is a matter which has only been realized in recent years, since the worldwide dimensions of the problem have become clear.

How remarkable then that in the Bible this problem has been foreseen. In the Bible the coming of the leader capable of leading all nations in peace and justice is clearly foretold. We

can find it outlined in what Paul said to the Athenians in Acts 17. He began by telling them that they were ignorant of the only true God who is Lord of heaven and earth, who had made of one blood all nations of the earth and had set the bounds of their habitations. For centuries men had worshipped idols, but these times of ignorance were coming to an end. God now commanded all men everywhere to repent – Paul refers to the proclamation of the Gospel; and then he adds this:

“Because God hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” (verses 30,31)

The general sense of this is clear: in the purpose of God there is a day to come when He will govern (as “judge” implies) the world – again the word used is that term which means “the inhabited earth”. This is a practical policy for the nations of the earth: they are to come under the control of a rule in righteousness – how much they need it! And the one who is to accomplish this for God is none other than the One who was raised from the dead, Jesus Christ.

What a leader!

But think for a moment what all this implies. For Jesus Christ, the divinely appointed ruler of the world, has been fully portrayed for us in the pages of the Bible. What a personality he is seen to be! In everything recorded of him there is devotion to truth and the rejection of deceit or lying of any kind. He is merciful in his dealings with his fellows, and compassionate towards the helpless and the hopeless. In all he says and does there is a moral courage which does not waver before opposition or even violence, and a self-sacrificing devotion to the welfare of humanity which is carried even to his death on the cross. Throughout it all Jesus makes honour to God and obedience to His will the principle of his living. In short, the man known as Jesus of Nazareth, who was Jesus the Son of God, is the most outstanding character in the whole of human history.

What finer leader could be found to guide the human race out of conditions of evil into peace and right ways before God and men? Who could be more trusted than he to make the right decisions? But the full marvel of the Bible’s forecast of the leader to come can only be appreciated when we remember that he has been raised from the dead, is possessed of immortality, and will not be removed by death! The trouble with human rulers is that after a time they vanish from the scene, and have to be replaced; and who can tell whether the replacements will be better, or worse, than their predecessors? But in the case of Jesus that obstacle will not arise. He is alive for evermore and will need no successors! And further, he will be equipped with all the power needed to see that his righteous policy is not thwarted or threatened by evil men. As he said to his disciples after his resurrection and just before his ascension to heaven: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18).

What a marvellous solution this will be for the ills of the nations! Not merely the coming of a leader, but of one fully equipped to meet all the demands of modern world conditions: the right policy for all men, the power to enforce it against the evil-minded, a rule not terminated by death – and a character of mercy, compassion and truth. These are the very qualities needed to solve the modern world crisis. And they have been foreseen in the Bible 2,000 years and more ago!

The Bible's prophecy

How can this be? How can the desperate condition of modern mankind, the worldwide nature of its problems, and the need for an upright leader equipped with life and power, have been foreseen in the writings of the Bible so long ago, when these things are not found in any other writing of any age and any nation or civilization? There is only one answer: *somebody must have known* long ago what conditions and needs would arise. But clearly no men could have known, for if they had, it would have appeared in their writings. But if it was *God* who knew, and if the Bible really is His word for mankind, then all is explained.

The conclusion from this is that we ought to treat the Bible seriously. For if it has proved so right in what it has said about events centuries before they happened, is it not highly likely to be right in its prophecies of events that have not yet come to pass? Common sense would suggest that we should note carefully what more it has to say about the future of the earth and mankind.

The early believers

There can be no doubt at all that the early believers in Christ ó the apostles and those who believed in their preaching ó expected that Jesus would personally return to the earth to carry out God's purpose with the nations. The New Testament has many passages which clearly express this idea. For instance, Jesus himself, after describing the conditions of distress, fear and perplexity which would come upon the inhabited earth, immediately adds this:

“Then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” (Luke 21:27)

The “Son of man” is a title Jesus frequently gave to himself. Notice that his coming to the world in distress is not to be so quiet that it will not be noticed; it will be spectacular, in “power and great glory”. Further, as the disciples stand on the Mount of Olives watching Jesus ascend to heaven, this is the message they receive:

“This *same* Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall *so come in like manner* as ye have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

There is no escaping the literal character of this declaration. It is *the same* Jesus as they had got to know again after his resurrection. His coming again would be *in the same way* as his departing. As he literally and personally went, so he will come. Hence their preaching and writings in the New Testament clearly express this expectation. We have looked at one passage already in Acts chapter 17, where Paul declares that Christ will be the appointed ruler of the nations. The Epistles of the New Testament frequently allude to the return of Christ to the earth. The two Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians contain such an allusion in every single chapter. Here is the first of them:

Paul rejoices with the believers in Thessalonica, that they had “turned unto God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and *to wait for his Son from heaven*, whom (God) raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.” (1 Thessalonians 1:9,10)

The Apostle Peter, addressing the inhabitants of Jerusalem shortly after Jesus ascended to heaven, had this to say to them:

“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; *and he shall send Jesus Christ* í whom the *heaven must receive until* the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:19-21)

This is a tremendous declaration of what God intends to do in the earth. Let us look carefully at what Peter says. Leaving for the moment the question of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, which deserves separate treatment, notice Peter’s insistence that there is hope for the future: “times of refreshing í times of restitution (restoration, RV) of all things” are to come. But where from? “From the presence of the Lord”, says Peter ó in other words, not from the resources of mankind, but from God. And how will these “refreshing times” come? “He (God) *shall send Jesus Christ*”, who incidentally had only a little while before ascended to heaven. But he is not to stay there for ever. “The heaven” receives him only *until* the times of restoration of all things. The general message is clear: the new age of “refreshing” and “restoration” for the earth will come about by God sending His Son back again when the right moment in His purpose has come. The personal return of Jesus thus became a vital point in the preaching of his apostles, as the writings of the New Testament clearly demonstrate.

The value of the prophecies

But Peter has added one more important piece of information. These “times of restoration of all things” had already been revealed: God had “spoken (of them) by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” What is Peter referring to? There can be no doubt about the answer. “The prophets” were the chosen men through whom God spoke to His people in Old Testament times. Their writings existed in Peter’s day; the same ones exist in ours in the books of the Old Testament. In them, says Peter, you will find what God has already revealed. So when we turn to Old Testament prophecy for information about what God intends to do in the earth, and among the nations, we are not wasting our time ó so says Peter.

So what do the prophecies say? That is expressed in many fascinating details, but the general message is this: human history is, despite appearances to the contrary, under the control of God. He has given to mankind the power to dominate the earth ó but *not for ever*. Humanity would become corrupted and so demonstrate that men and women can neither govern themselves nor save the world from destruction. The time will come when God will intervene in human affairs, and by His own power will set up His own government of the world, to establish right and peace among men, upon the basis of honour to His Name.

The simplest and yet most comprehensive example of this is to be found in the second chapter of the prophecy of Daniel. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, sees in a vision a great human image made up of different metals: head of gold, breast and arms of silver, etc. He then sees a “great stone” fall upon the feet of the image, grind all its components to powder, and then itself fill the whole earth. The prophet Daniel explains what it means. The great image represents the kingdoms of men: Nebuchadnezzar is told that the head of gold represents his Babylonian empire; that the remaining parts of the image denote the empires which were to follow his; and it is not difficult to perceive a prophecy of the rise ó and fall ó of the empires of Persia, Greece and Rome. In the “last” stage of development, the feet of the image are a mixture of iron and clay. They represent a weak stage when the nations would “not cleave together”, a remarkable prophecy of the divided state of the nations of Europe ever since the overthrow of Roman power in the 5th century AD.

But the stone smites the image in its feet ó its divided state ó and destroys it; and the empires of men are overthrown and replaced by the stone which becomes ãa great mountain and fills the whole earthö (verse 35). Daniel then gives the meaning of this last development:

õIn the days of those kings (that is, the divided kingdoms) shall *the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed* í it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and *it shall stand* for ever.ö (verse 44)

Daniel concludes with these words:

õThe great God hath made known to the king *what shall come to pass hereafter*: the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure.ö (verse 45)

The reader is earnestly recommended to study the second chapter of Daniel for himself. The general message is clear: human empires will rise and fall; they will be replaced by national kingdoms divided amongst themselves; but the day will come when the God of heaven will take away their power and will set up His own kingdom in the earth. It is a kingdom which will last for ever. The message of Daniel is the forerunner of the New Testament teaching that Christ is to return to the earth to rule it for God (read again Acts 17:31).

There is an important conclusion to be drawn from this prophecy through Daniel: the peace, safety and welfare of mankind will not be achieved by human philosophy, social theory, political alliances and treaties, scientific development, or any other forms of ðhuman progressö. It will come about by the direct intervention of God in human affairs, in sending back to the earth His own Son to rule in His Name. This will occur at a time of worldwide trouble and fear, and will deliver mankind from the threat of self-destruction.

The kingdom of the future

When Christ has returned and re-established his Father's authority, what will the world be like? The prophets have much to tell us. We select one example.

The second chapter of Isaiah begins with a remarkable picture of nations living at peace under the rule of God. õIn the last daysö all nations will acknowledge the rule of the Lord:

õAnd many peoples shall say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.ö (verse 3)

Why should they do this? What is the reason for their unusual agreement?

õHe (God) will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law (the word means instruction, teaching) and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.ö (verse 3)

So the new centre of world government is to be Jerusalem, whence the rule for the nations will go forth. And what is to be the effect of the rule of God?

õAnd he (the Lord) shall judge between the nations, and shall reprove many peoples; and they (the nations) shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks.ö (verse 4)

The authority of the Lord will control the nations, who will no longer waste their strength and resources in creating weapons of war, but will devote them instead to the profitable activities of cultivation of the earth for their benefit. Then Isaiah concludes this section of his prophecy with the sublime words often echoed since with vague longing in times of international despair:

“Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (verse 4)

The ill-fated League of Nations, established after the First World War, was unable to achieve this. The sense of idealism did not last 20 years. It was replaced after the Second World War by the United Nations Organization, and inscribed on a wall outside the UN building in New York are these very words of the prophet Isaiah. But like the League before it, the UN has not been able to achieve this aim.

The word of God makes it clear that this state of peace among the nations, with the abandonment of war, will actually come to pass when the kingdom of God is established. It is *the* message of hope for the world.

Reflections

Let us sum up what we have said so far. The wisest of men, even in recent times, failed to foresee the world dimensions of the future problems which would perplex humanity. They prophesied peace and there came war. To this day they have no policy or plan capable of healing the strifes of the nations, and no power to coerce the rebellious. They have no leader able to influence the nations in the only way capable of solving world problems. They are overcome by a spirit of hopelessness. They have no solution.

But the writers of the Bible foresaw all these things. They foretold the coming of distress, perplexity and fear on a world scale. They declare that God has a purpose with the earth and with the human race. They describe to us in detail, first in prophecy in the centuries before Christ, then in the Gospels of the New Testament, the person and character of the One chosen to take over the government of the world for God. He is revealed as the ideal Ruler, and in power, to bring a real solution to the world problems which oppress humanity in this 21st century. These things were written centuries ago, and yet they are utterly and inevitably right for the very modern problems of our age.

How can these things be? There is only one reasonable explanation; no men could have known these things of themselves. But if God is behind the Bible, if its writers were His servants writing His words, as they all claimed to do, then we can understand it. The plain fact then emerges: there is no other book in the world like the Bible. There is none which more deserves, and earnestly requires, our sincere attention.

“What about me?”

The reader may well say at this point, “You have been talking about nations and the world, but *what about me?*”. A very reasonable question ó we are all quite rightly concerned about what will happen to us.

The Bible is just as clear and precise about the future of the individual man and woman as it is about the world. It analyses our human situation, points out what is the cause of the evils

which afflict humanity, shows how we may order our lives in the service of God, and reveals to us the great future we may have in the world kingdom to be established by Christ. The matters involved are so important that they cannot properly be explained in this short work. They deserve separate treatment. Meanwhile, let us gain comfort from this reflection: God has *always* been concerned with the individual man or woman who gives earnest thought to His words. Just consider this short saying addressed 700 years before Christ to faithful Israelites who were deeply disturbed by the corruption in their nation. God says that He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and yet ó

“to this man will I look, even to him that is poor (humble), and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word.” (Isaiah 66:1,2)

Those words still apply. His gracious favour is always shown to those who are conscious of their weakness and imperfections, and who approach His word in a spirit of humble reverence. The marvel is that the very words of God are still available to us in this confused 21st century. Let us give our attention to them while there is still time. For as Jesus said to his disciples: “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

By FRED PEARCE

Contact us: www.truebibleteaching.co.nz