

Deliverance Draws Near

***“When these things
are beginning to
occur, raise
yourselves, and lift
up your heads; for
your deliverance is
drawing near.”***

***—Luke 21:28,
Wilson’s Emphatic
Diaglott***

AT VERY FEW TIMES IN our country’s history has there been the combination of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear, that has accompanied the start of 2017. Indeed, there are the ongoing concerns of a tenuous economy, fear of more terrorism, unpredictability of rogue nations, insecurity in the Middle East, and other world and national problems that continue to be faced. However, the minds of most Americans have been transfixed during the last two months of 2016 with the selection of a new president, and with the results of the election that took place on November 8th.

So-called “experts” such as political analysts, pollsters, the media, and even many politicians were seemingly dumbfounded by the election of Donald Trump as the nation’s 45th president. The citizenry of the country was certainly no less taken aback by the results of their participation in the

electoral process. More than 129 million votes were cast in the presidential election, with Hillary Clinton winning the popular vote, albeit by a very small margin.

Other election statistics, however, were clearly in favor of Donald Trump. He won the popular vote in 60% of the individual states—30 out of 50. As a result, he claimed over 300 electoral votes, well above the 270 necessary to be elected, and 57% of the total. This was well ahead of Hillary Clinton's 43% of the Electoral College vote.

Most have wondered how Donald Trump could have been elected, since he has previously held no political office, and is considered a Washington outsider with minimal knowledge of the inner workings of government. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of his victorious presidential run, and to many the most disturbing, was found in the temperament he displayed throughout most of the campaign process.

During the Republican and Democratic primaries, as well as in the presidential campaign, nearly all the candidates, but especially Donald Trump, bitterly attacked their opponents, both politically and personally. No holds were barred as sarcasm, contempt, maliciousness, and cruelty abounded openly, whether in debates, political ads, the news media, speeches, and even social media. "Tweeting" at all hours of the day and night became a common method for communicating disdain and criticism of opponents.

Despite all these circumstances, Mr. Trump won the election. Many are asking, "Why and how did this happen?" In hindsight, it seems that because

he was a Washington outsider, and not afraid to speak his mind concerning all subjects, his message resonated with many people who have for a long time been very dissatisfied with the “establishment” politics of Washington—on both the Democratic and Republican sides of the aisle. Donald Trump’s often-times explosive demeanor seemed to be an outlet for many people to express their anger at the status quo in this country. Revelation 11:18, which speaks prophetically of our day, states, “The nations [peoples] were angry.” The recent election seems to provide, at least in part, a stark fulfillment of these words.

The passage of time, along with world and national events as they unfold, will ultimately determine what results from a Trump presidency. As sincere students of the Bible, we should continue to do as Jesus admonished, “Watch ye therefore, and pray always,” noting the prophetic words of the Scriptures which point to the nearness of God’s kingdom.—Luke 21:31-36

OUR OUTLOOK

The start of a new year reminds us that time marches on, and time is an important element of our outlook as Christians and students of the Bible. The servants of God in every age have been out of harmony with the world around them. They have been pained by the sinful and unjust practices of the ungodly. Because of their own imperfections they have also groaned within themselves, longing for the time to come when the downward course of sin would be stopped, and deliverance from its corrupting influences would come to all mankind.—Rom. 8:22,23

The questions, “How long?” and “When?” and their equivalents, appear frequently in the writings of the prophets and apostles. God’s reply is consistent that the present reign of sin and death will not continue forever. The Bible expressions “last days,” “time of the end,” and “latter days,” give assurance that in God’s plan a new dispensation is coming, in which righteousness will be enthroned and sin and death destroyed.—Isa. 2:2; Dan. 12:4; Ezek. 38:16; II Tim. 3:1

BIBLE ASSURES

God’s assurances of this final triumph of right over wrong are recorded throughout the Bible, beginning with Genesis 3:15. There the statement is made that the “seed” of “the woman” would “bruise,” or crush, the serpent’s head. This hope is amplified by God’s promises to Abraham that through his “seed” all the families of the earth would be blessed.—Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18

Through Moses, God promised to send a great “Prophet,” and Isaiah prophesied, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder.” (Deut. 18:18; Isa. 9:6) Daniel also foretold, “In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom.”—Dan. 2:44

JESUS COMES

When Jesus came, he was accepted by his disciples as the one spoken of by the prophets. To them it seemed that the long-awaited time for the divinely promised deliverance had come. John the Baptist announced the presence of Jesus with the statement, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 3:2)

A better translation of the original Greek in his statement would be, "The royal majesty of the heavens has approached."—Matt. 3:2, *Diaglott*

It appeared certain to the disciples that there was to be no further delay. They believed that "the kingdom of God should immediately appear." (Luke 19:11) Jesus understood this situation, and to prevent them from being too greatly disappointed, he related the parable of the pounds, in which a "nobleman went into a far country" to receive a kingdom, and later to return.—vs. 12

Evidently the disciples recognized that Jesus, their Messiah, was the nobleman of this parable. He was telling them that he was going away, and that the kingdom which they believed "should immediately appear" would not be established until he returned. They did not understand, however, that his going away involved his death. Thus, they were quite unprepared for the sudden termination of his ministry.

Nevertheless, on the supposition that Jesus was leaving them and would return later to establish his kingdom, they went to him on the Mount of Olives, and asked, "Tell us, when these things will be? and what will be the sign of thy presence, and of the consummation of the age?" (Matt. 24:3, *Diaglott*) Here we have the questions, "When?" and "What will be the sign?" The disciples desired to know what evidences they should look for which would show that the time of waiting has ended, and that Christ has returned to set up the long-promised kingdom.

Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew contain Jesus' reply to these questions. Luke's account of the Lord's prophecy of his return and the end of the age is

found in the 21st chapter of his Gospel, of which our opening text is a part. Luke reports Jesus as saying that when you see certain signs beginning to come to pass, “lift up your heads; for your deliverance is drawing near.” Here we have one of the most definite assertions found in the Bible concerning the preparation for Christ’s kingdom. It is very important, therefore, that we ascertain what “these things” are which identify this time for which the people of God in every age have so hopefully waited and longingly prayed.

“THESE THINGS”

Let us examine briefly some of “these things”—the signs referred to by Jesus. Luke 21:24 reads, “They 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, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” The first part of this text is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Israelites among the various Gentile nations.

While the literal city of Jerusalem was then destroyed, its destruction signified the overthrow of the whole Jewish polity, and the complete subjection of the people to Gentile domination. The nation had lost its independence six centuries before this, when their last king, Zedekiah, was overthrown, and the people were taken captive to Babylon.

When Jesus said, “Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled,” he was merely saying that the nation which had lost its independence in the days of Babylon would be further dispersed, and continue

to be persecuted until the “times of the Gentiles” were ended. This is one of the things which we should see begin to come to pass if we are to be assured that our deliverance is near.

We believe this prophecy of Jesus has been fulfilled. However, let us not read more into his words than he says. We know from other promises of God that wonderful blessings of health, peace, life and joy are in store for Israel. We believe that the time will come when he will “make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” (Jer. 31:31-34) We understand, too, that the Gentiles will share in these blessings in God’s due time.

Jesus, though, said nothing about these kingdom blessings in this prophecy recorded by Luke. He only said that Jerusalem, emblematic of the nation, would no longer be “trodden down” by the Gentiles. Since the treading down of the nation began with the loss of its sovereign independence, its restoration to this status would fulfill Jesus’ prophecy. Israel, since 1948, is now a free nation, having been given this status in the world by the United Nations.

The state of Israel today is not a large nation. Jesus did not say it would be. She does not possess all the land promised to her, nor is she free from many serious problems, but these conditions were not implied by Jesus. Like every other nation on earth today, Israel is perplexed and fearful. She has economic, social and political challenges which are similar to those of other nations, and as is abundantly evident, she has many enemies.

Jesus did not say that Israel would escape these problems when she first became free. He indicated only that Israel would no longer be trodden down—

that her status of bondage as a nation, which began six centuries earlier when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem, would be changed. She would again be free to conduct her own affairs and make her own laws. Indeed, we have seen this come to pass.

POWERS OF HEAVEN SHAKEN

Luke 21, verses 25 and 26, describe two signs which are closely related. Here, Jesus spoke of “signs in the sun and moon and stars.” On the earth, he said, there would be “anguish of nations in perplexity; roarings of the sea and waves.” Because of these things, Jesus said that men’s hearts would be exceedingly fearful, adding, “for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”—*Diaglott*

It seems evident from these two verses that the signs in the sun and moon and stars are what Jesus refers to as the “powers of the heavens” being shaken. This is one of the contributing causes of men’s hearts becoming very fearful. It is not the literal heavens that are shaken, any more than it is the roaring of the literal sea and waves to which Jesus refers in this prophecy.

It is the symbolic heavens and earth that are involved here, the same as mentioned by the Apostle Peter when he wrote, “The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”—II Pet. 3:10

The figurative heavens and earth which pass away with “a great noise” in the “day of the Lord”

are the spiritual and material aspects of the present world order, which must give place to the kingdom of Christ. This kingdom, as Peter identifies it three verses later, is the “new heavens and . . . new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (II Pet. 3:13) Just as the literal heavens exercise a powerful influence over all life on the earth, so the symbolic heavens through the centuries of this present evil world have exercised a large measure of control over the people.

This has been done through religion, which has been recognized as a spiritual influence. It is spiritual in the sense of claiming a higher authority than the dictates of human laws. The past church/state governments of Europe are a good example of this arrangement. However, even where these have not functioned, peoples of the earth, Christian and non-Christian alike, have been subject to the forces of religious viewpoints and influences.

However, one of the things which Jesus foretold would take place at the end of the age was, “The powers of the heavens will be shaken.” That is, established religious institutions and concepts would lose their control over the people. In many countries throughout the world, religion still exercises much influence in the affairs of mankind. Nevertheless, we have begun to see this “shaking” come to pass, as people and nations have resisted, even to the point of armed conflict, the “powers of the heavens” to which they have been in bondage for, in some cases, many centuries. Indeed, this development is contributing to the fear that fills the hearts of man today.

“WIDOWHOOD”

We are reminded of the judgments at the end of the age that come upon all false religions, illustrated by ecclesiastical Babylon as outlined in Revelation 18 and Isaiah 47. We note the attitude expressed in Revelation 18:7, “I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow,” and in Isaiah 47:8, “I am, and none else beside me; I shall not sit as a widow, neither shall I know the loss of children.” This is the attitude just prior to the severe judgments pronounced upon Babylon by God. Isaiah continues, “These two things shall come to thee in a moment in one day, the loss of children, and widowhood.”—vs. 9

This “widowhood” came at the time of the First World War, when the kings of Europe lost their crowns and the Divine Right of Kings church/state arrangement came to an end. The resulting fragmentation of the power of the former state church also caused a “loss of children,” as the peoples of European countries and others exercised their freedom from bondage to the “mother” church that had once existed.

Apart from these specific developments, in every part of the world, there has been an increasing breakdown of religious and moral standards. Evidences of this are increases in crime, hatred, violence, immorality, injustice, and discontent, as well as growing corruption and dishonesty in business and government.

SIGNS BEGINNING TO COME TO PASS

We have seen these and other signs which have begun to come to pass in our day. Only those who

are watching the “more sure word of prophecy” can see this beginning with an understanding of what it means. (II Pet. 1:19) How heartening is that understanding! It means that our “deliverance is drawing near.” That deliverance from the bondage of sin and death for which God’s people throughout the Gospel Age have waited and prayed is at hand. This means, also, that the deliverance of the whole world from the rulership of Satan is near. For this, too, we thank God.

However, unlike the watchers who “lift up” their heads, men’s hearts are filled with fear as they contemplate what they feel will be the inevitable result of the complete breaking down of present society. As we see these signs being fulfilled, we rejoice in the evidences they give that the world will soon recognize the significance of what is taking place. Jesus said, “Then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”—Luke 21:27

With the symbolic sun, moon, and stars in the ecclesiastical heavens obscured so far as their power to control is concerned, the world will at first see only a “cloud” of trouble. It will be in that symbolic cloud—by means which divine providence will reveal to mankind—that the presence of earth’s new king will be recognized. Then, in God’s plan, the “new heavens” will take control, and through the assisting agencies of the new symbolic earth, his promised blessings of peace, joy and life will begin to flow to mankind as a vast “river of water of life.”—Rev. 22:1-3

Thus, as we enter the year 2017, it should be with hope, confidence and joy. Such should be our attitude, regardless of the uncertainties of having

a new president, the insecurity surrounding present economic conditions, or the pain of witnessing the spread of immorality, hatred, and strife in the world. We are promised that deliverance is near—just how near, God has not revealed. Let us continue to strive to be faithful to the precious Truths which have been revealed to us, and by them, be refreshed and sustained in these troubling times—until our deliverance, and the world's, comes to pass. ■