

2015 Comes to an End

*“He commandeth,
and raiseth the
stormy wind, which
lifteth up the waves
thereof. They
mount up to the
heaven, they go
down again to the
depths: their soul
is melted because
of trouble.”
—Psalm 107:25,26*

THE CLOSING WEEKS OF

2015 find the world in much the same chaotic condition as it was at the beginning of the year. None of the major problems facing the world at the beginning of 2015 has been solved, and most of them have worsened. In addition, new troubles have cropped up this year, which have added to mankind's dilemma. The situation is well portrayed by the language of the psalmist found in our opening text, in which is described a storm at sea, and how it affects a ship and its sailors.

This might well be considered a symbolic and prophetic description of the present world situation. We are living in a period wherein the old world is crumbling and passing away, to be replaced by the establishment of a new, righteous kingdom. The people do not recognize this as yet, and so it appears

to them to be a period of great storminess, gloom, and uncertainty. Indeed, many of earth's leaders still suppose they can solve the problems of this world. Eventually, however, they will learn that they cannot. When they do, then as the psalmist continues, they will "cry unto the LORD in their trouble," and he will bring them "out of their distresses." He will make "the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still," and he will bring "them unto their desired haven" of peace and security.—vss. 28-30

The Prophet Daniel foretold that "a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation" would mark the period in which we are now living. (Dan. 12:1) His prophecy indicates that this "time of trouble" is brought about by the standing up of Michael—one of the titles ascribed to Jesus since his resurrection as a divine being. One of the Bible's symbols of "the time of trouble" represents Jesus as treading a winepress, and he is said to do this alone.—Isa. 63:1-6; Rev. 19:11-16

What Daniel described as a "time of trouble" Jesus called a time of "great tribulation," or distress, upon the nations, which would lead to the destruction of all flesh except for the divine intervention by God's "elect"—Christ and his faithful body members. (Matt. 24:21,22; Luke 21:25,26) The Prophet Zephaniah foretold that the Lord would "gather the nations" that he might "pour upon them . . . indignation," and that the whole symbolic earth would be "devoured with the fire" of his "jealousy."—Zeph. 3:8

These are but some of the prophecies which point out the reason for the chaotic times in which we are living. There are trouble spots essentially

everywhere on earth, any one of which could erupt into much larger conflicts. While it is true that many of these are political in nature, they also are interwoven with a wide range of religious, social, and economic issues and problems.

Today's world is indeed on "fire," as the prophet indicated would be the case when God would "devour" the present order of things in the earth. This is true in the associations of nations one with the other, and it is true within nations. The angry passions of mankind are expressing themselves in awful and appalling ways. Let us recall some of the world's news highlights during the year 2015.

GLOBAL NEWS—SUMMED UP BY "ISIS"

Aside from economic issues and various disasters, which will be discussed in subsequent portions of this article, the one overriding topic of concern in the world during 2015 has been the growth of ISIS. This acronym, which stands for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, has struck great fear in the hearts of millions. By way of background, ISIS is an extremist militant group and self-proclaimed Islamic state which is led by and composed mainly of Sunni Arabs from Iraq and Syria. As of March 2015, it controlled territory occupied by 10 million people in those two countries, and has control over small areas of Libya, Nigeria, and Afghanistan.

ISIS claims that it has religious, political, and military authority over all Muslims worldwide, and that the legality of the governments in all the nations or states into which it expands is voided. The United Nations holds ISIS responsible for human rights abuses, war crimes, and countless murders

and executions of innocent men, women, and children. The group has been designated a terrorist organization by many countries, with over sixty nations directly or indirectly waging war against them.

As 2015 has progressed, ISIS has continued to expand its influence. By mid-year, in addition to the countries previously cited, Yemen, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Uzbekistan also had an ISIS presence. During 2015 they have engaged in almost nonstop terrorist attacks of all kinds, killing and injuring tens of thousands and destroying property, homes, businesses, and many ancient, historic sites. At the same time, many countries have begun strikes against ISIS strongholds, particularly in Syria and Iraq.

In recent weeks, a Russian passenger jet exploded and crashed into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula shortly after take-off from the resort city of Sharm el-Sheikh on October 31. All 224 people on board were killed. Although investigations are ongoing, it is highly suspected that a bomb was planted on the plane, and that this may have been carried out either directly by ISIS operatives or by those sympathetic to ISIS. On November 13, terrorist attacks in Paris, France left 129 dead and over 350 injured, with ISIS claiming responsibility for these deadly assaults. It is likely that these recent acts of violence are, at least in part, in retaliation for these countries' involvement in the fight against ISIS. Nevertheless, it seems no understatement to say that the war against this terrorist organization will most surely continue to escalate as we enter 2016.

IN THE UNITED STATES

On the home front, the news in 2015 has been dominated by mass killings, a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court, the Pope's visit to this country, and internal politics. In June, a man opened fire at a 199-year-old historic church in Charleston, South Carolina, during a prayer service, killing nine people, including the church's senior pastor. The accused killer, after his arrest, confessed that he committed the killings with the hope of igniting a race war.

Less than four months later, in a quiet area of southwestern Oregon, a gunman opened fire at a community college, killing nine people and wounding seven more, before killing himself. The gunman was said to have had antireligious and white supremacist leanings, along with long-term mental health issues. Such mass killings as these in 2015 have once again raised to the forefront the issues of race relations in the United States, as well as the highly controversial topic of gun control.

In June, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of allowing same-sex marriage throughout the country. The ruling stated that same-sex couples have the fundamental right to marry and that individual states or municipalities cannot say that marriage is reserved for male/female couples. It is perhaps with amazement that we realize a country so largely founded on Scripturally-based moral principles 239 years ago has, by the actions of its leaders, abandoned the clear teachings of the Bible on this subject (see Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:26-28).

The leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, visited the United States in September. He was welcomed by President Obama and became

the first Pope to ever speak before Congress. While in Washington, in an intriguing twist to his visit, he met with an openly gay couple one day prior to meeting with a county clerk ardently opposed to homosexuality. He also went to New York, where he addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations, and to Philadelphia, where he visited some of the historical sites related to the country's founding.

Although the United States presidential election is not until November 2016, the political campaigns of hopefuls for that office began in full swing during the summer. The first debate among candidates was held in August, with many more to follow. At one time or another during the year, a total of twenty-three major candidates—six Democrats and seventeen Republicans—were declared as running for the highest office in the land. As of mid-November, that number had been reduced to eighteen—three Democrats and fifteen Republicans. It is certain that politics will continue to top the domestic news headlines throughout the coming year.

U.S. AND GLOBAL ECONOMY

While 2015 did not produce any economic “disasters” such as the world experienced during the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, many clouds of uncertainty hang over the global economy. Anxieties over a possible slowdown in China, weakening markets in emerging countries, and the effects of the Federal Reserve’s “on again, off again” approach toward raising interest rates, have all done nothing to dispel the generally gloomy outlook for the future.

The extremely fragile nature of the economy was illustrated this year, at least in part, by a 12% drop in the major United States equity markets in a matter of only a few days during August. Although nearly all of the decline was recovered during the fall, it continues to leave many “on edge” about investing in the market, especially as they remember the events of seven years ago.

With regard to China, there is good reason to be concerned if an economic slowdown materializes there. Using estimated 2015 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) numbers (excluding purchasing power adjustments), with the sole exception of the United States, China is now the largest economy in the world. Together, these two countries alone comprise 38% of total world GDP, or an estimated \$39 trillion in 2015, more than nine times higher than the next largest economy—Japan. Ten years ago, China’s economy was only 17% as large as that of the United States. As of 2015, it has climbed to be 62% of the U.S. total.

Conflicting statements by so-called experts, both in and out of China, have fueled uncertainty about that country’s future. Some world economists insist that China has begun a shift from investment-led growth to consumption-led growth, and that this will inevitably lead to declines in overall GDP growth. Others, including Chinese policymakers, are just as adamant that the country can continue to grow at a 6-7% annual rate for the foreseeable future.

The Federal Reserve’s decisions, or perhaps it should be said, lack thereof, on raising interest rates may be the most unusual, if not frustrating to many, in U.S. monetary policy history. It is far from

clear, also, that the markets will not overreact once the Fed actually does raise rates. Indeed, uncertainty and worry about the future, with an eye in the rearview mirror toward what has happened in the past, seems to epitomize the sentiments of most when it comes to world economic conditions as 2015 comes to an end.

DISASTERS—NATURAL AND MANMADE

The year 2015 saw its share of natural disasters and other tragedies which took the lives of many, and wreaked havoc in many parts of the world. In March, a German jetliner crashed, with no warning given, into the French Alps, killing all 150 passengers and crew. It was later determined that the copilot had locked the pilot out of the cockpit and then deliberately crashed the plane in order to carry out his own suicide. In April, over 800 emigrants died when a ship carrying them capsized in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Libya. It is estimated that more than 2,000 emigrants have died in 2015 trying to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe.

Two powerful earthquakes occurred during the year in Asia, one in Nepal and the other in South Asia, which claimed the lives of over 4,000 people, injured tens of thousands, and destroyed thousands of structures. During the summer of 2015, a severe heat wave killed more than 2,000 in India. In the United States, an all-time record was set this year for wildfire destruction, with over 11 million acres burned, mostly in six western states.

Warehouse chemical explosions in China's port city of Tianjin in August and again in October took the lives of more than 170 people and destroyed

warehouses, businesses, apartments, and homes. The disaster raised questions about corruption and government efficiency, when it was discovered that the warehouses were located closer to residential areas than permitted by law, and stored much more hazardous material than authorized.

Even religious observances were not without calamitous results during 2015. In September, during one of Islam's holiest events, over 700 people were killed and 800 injured in a stampede while making a pilgrimage near Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

The foregoing represents only what might be considered as major news headlines during the year. For the vast majority of the world, however, the daily struggle to provide clothing, shelter, and food, and the countless battles against disease, both physical and mental, were more than enough to make 2015 another difficult year in the annals of human history. It is enough to make the sincere heart wonder whether the world will ever find real solutions to its problems and experience peace, security, good will, health and happiness. What a prospect this would be if we had reason to believe such a condition is possible!

“HIS SHOULDER”

This month much of the world will again be reminded of the birth of Jesus, The Prince of Peace, although the true anniversary of his birth is about October 1. Only a very few of earth's billions realize that in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus we have the true solution to all the world's problems. One of the prophecies of his birth indicates this: “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and

the government shall be upon his shoulder.” (Isa. 9:6) Today, weak and powerless men and women are endeavoring as best they can to shoulder the responsibilities of keeping the peace, and of bestowing blessings upon the sin-cursed and dying world, and they are miserably failing.

However, there is hope that this will soon change. Now we are living in a time of transition. Satan’s world is gradually, but most assuredly, going down to destruction. Soon, the kingdom of Christ will be established in its place, and the world will learn that Christ is the only one who can and will establish peace on earth and “good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14) “The government shall be upon his shoulder”—what a meaningful expression this is! When Jesus was raised from the dead, he announced to his disciples, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” (Matt. 28:18) With “all power,” how well-equipped he is to shoulder the responsibilities of world peace, and to bring about the resolution of mankind’s many problems.

Isaiah further wrote concerning Jesus, The Prince of Peace, that “of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.” (Isa. 9:7) This means that eventually, under the rulership of Christ, peace and goodwill shall be just as universal as fear and chaos are today. Christ’s kingdom of peace will spread its beneficent influence over all the continents, and over the isles of the sea. He will easily solve the troubles which plague mankind today, and bring about the fulfillment of the promise that “every man” shall dwell in happiness and peace “under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid.”—Mic. 4:1-4

No problem that confronts the world today will be too great for The Prince of Peace to solve. The largest of mankind's problems, which no human ruler has ever attempted to solve, is the great enemy—death. Today, even if peace could be established in every part of the earth, and economic security could be assured to all the billions of humanity, people would still be dying at the rate of over 150,000 per day, with all the sickness and suffering this implies.

However, in Christ's new world the problems of sickness and death will be solved. The people are dying because they are members of a sin-cursed and dying race, resulting from Adam's transgression. However, Paul assures us that "as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" by obedience to the righteous laws of the kingdom. Christ shall reign, Paul says, until the great enemy death is destroyed.—I Cor. 15:21,22,26

The restless roaring of the sea and waves is used in the Bible to symbolize the world of mankind in its present state of chaos and distress. One of the prophecies of the kingdom assures us of the time when there shall be "no more sea." It is then, this prophecy continues, that through Christ, God "will dwell" with the people, and "shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."—Rev. 21:1-4

When God's Word assures us that "there shall be no more death," it means that even those who have died will be restored to life. These all have been ransomed from death by the precious blood of Christ. The Prophet Isaiah wrote, "The ransomed

of the LORD shall return [from death], and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isa. 35:10) These blessings of peace and life will not reach the world in 2016, but they are near, and in this we can rejoice. ■