Winds of Fire

"Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace [hold fast, Marginal Translation], whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire." —Hebrews 12:28,29

FIRE IS ONE OF THE MOST destructive of all natural phenomenon known by man. It has been defined as combustion manifested in light, flame, and heat. Since ancient times, men have wondered at its spectacular power to destroy; and it was one of the four elements under the study of alchemy by the medieval chemical scientists.

FIRE AS A SYMBOL

Because of its overwhelming power, fire has been used in a symbolic sense in the Scriptures to describe, or emphasize, total destruction. In our featured text, the Apostle Paul spoke of our Heavenly Father as being a 'consuming fire.' He is here speaking of fire in a positive sense. He directs our attention to the fact that God's plan and purpose is to destroy all traces of unrighteousness and false teaching during the time of judgment, when Christ's future kingdom will be established over all the earth.

In reference to our Heavenly Father's majestic holiness, the Prophet Habakkuk wrote, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?" (Hab. 1:13) All mankind will ultimately be lifted up in the ways of true holiness as described by Isaiah, who wrote, "An highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein."—Isa. 35:8

FIERY JUDGMENTS

Another of God's prophets has used the word 'fire' to describe the severe judgments that will be meted out to the nations. He said, "Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD'S wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land." (Zeph. 1:18) No people will be spared the judgments of the LORD. The prophet further stated, "Wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy."—Zeph. 3:8

WIND AND FIRE

When the power of wind is added to an existing fire it then becomes capable of taking on new and

added dimensions of devastation. With ignition and rapid fanning, fire spreads quickly and becomes very difficult to contain. Sparks may be carried long distances by the winds which create new and separate fires. Residents of the state of California have often been witnesses to this type of destruction during the autumn months of the year. Strong winds blow into the coastal areas of the state from an anticyclone weather system that is located over the high deserts of California and Nevada. These wildfires may be sparked when a combination of dangerous conditions prevail. This includes high wind velocity, high temperatures, low humidity, and an abundance of very dry fuel from underbrush. Specialists refer to this area of the United States as one of the most conflagration-prone environments in the world because the area also has a complex topography, and a very large human population.

SANTA ANA WINDS

These very hot, dry winds are commonly called 'Santa Anas.' This is a term that has been traced to early Spanish California when the winds were then referred to as Satanas, or devil winds, due to their extreme heat. One of the possible reasons that has been suggested by historians for now using the name Santa Ana instead of Satanas took place at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, an Associated Press correspondent was stationed in the Santa Ana area and began to use the term Santa Ana instead of Satanas in his press dispatches. The term seems to have become more popular dating from that time.

CALIFORNIA INFERNO

Whatever terminology that one may use to describe wildfires, the massive inferno that took place in Southern California during the month of October 2007 was devastating and unprecedented because of its dimensions. Hurricane strength winds, coupled with tinderbox undergrowth and conditions of low humidity, as well as high temperatures combined to create chaos. This extended over an area from Santa Barbara on the north to San Diego on the south, a distance of well over a hundred miles. Some fires also entered Mexico, stretching as far south as the city of Ensenada.

REPORTS FROM THE SCENE

As the fires began to spread, residents were forced to leave their homes and seek shelter elsewhere, including San Diego's Qualcomm Stadium, home to the NFL's Chargers. In the *Los Angeles Times* (Tuesday, October 23, 2007), reporters Tony Perry, Garrett Therolf, and Mitchell Landsberg submitted the following news item under the heading, "Massive Evacuations Ordered as Onslaught of Fires Spreads." They reported, "Wind-whipped firestorms destroyed more than 700 homes and businesses in Southern California on Monday, the second day of its onslaught, and more than half a million people in San Diego county were told to evacuate their homes.

"The gale-force winds turned hillside canyons into giant blowtorches from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border. Although the worst damage was around San Diego and Lake Arrowhead, dangerous fires also threatened Malibu, parts of Orange and Ventura counties, and the Agua Dulce area of Santa

Clarita. Monday evening, a new blaze was menacing homes near Valencia and Stevenson Ranch in northern Los Angeles County."

MASS EVACUATIONS

The fires became even more threatening as reported the next day in the *Los Angeles Daily News* (Wednesday, October 24, 2007) by Associated Press correspondents Allison Hoffman and Gillian Flaccus. Reporting from San Diego, California under the headline caption "560,000 Flee Homes: Mass Exodus from the Flames" these reporters wrote, "Deadly, wind-whipped wildfires have triggered the largest evacuation in state history, prompting more than 500,000 people to flee ahead of flames that destroyed more than 1,800 homes and continued to threaten tens of thousands more. The number of people joining the mandatory exodus—and the number of homes destroyed—was expected to grow though, as new fires started and others continued to burn a path toward the sea—through populated communities. 'This is the largest mass evacuation of a natural disaster in California history,' said Daniel Berlant, spokesman for the state's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection."

Other news items reported that new fires had flared up in the communities of Newhall and Acton, and that howling Santa Ana winds had gusted up to 100 mph to fan the flames. In the Lake Arrowhead area, firefighters were battling two fast-moving blazes in the San Bernadino Mountains and were being taxed by steep terrain, winding roads, and a forest filled with dead trees and dried up underbrush that was helping to fuel the fires.

GOVERNOR VIEWS DESTRUCTION

After viewing firsthand some of the major wildfires in Southern California, Governor Arnold Schwarznegger included a stop in Santa Clarita during an evening news conference. He declared the affected areas as disaster zones, and promised to obtain aid for the many citizens who had lost their homes.

He thanked the firefighters for their heroic efforts in helping to fight the wildfires, and praised the coordination between the many various agencies that were involved in bringing the disaster under control. He said, "The key thing in all of this is that we help people rebuild their homes as quickly as possible. We have to work together. It's all one family."

PRESIDENT BUSH SURVEYS DAMAGE

Before he traveled to San Diego, President Bush first conferred with advisors in a strategy move to determine the federal government's response to the wildfire disaster in Southern California. After the criticism surrounding his administration's response, or the lack of it, during the disaster surrounding Hurricane Katrina at New Orleans over two years ago, greater care was taken to show that it was playing a more active role in California.

Governor Schwarznegger praised the President for immediately agreeing to sign a disaster declaration, a federal authorization for the Individual and Households Program that would provide financial assistance to residents whose losses were not covered by insurance. The State Supplemental Grant Program was to be implemented as well.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) also responded quickly to the needs of the evacuees, coordinating with local police and fire departments. The agency sent an extra 950 firefighters who were brought in from across the nation to support the exhausted California crews. At the Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego, Lynne Carrier, an official representing the agency said, "You can see that FEMA is here. We have people in Pasadena, San Bernadino, Riverside, and all the way up to Santa Barbara. But, San Diego has been the hardest hit of any area."

President Bush and Governor Schwarznegger together toured the area around San Diego by helicopter, and landed at Rancho Bernardo, one of the areas that suffered the most damage. Bush assured the fire victims that the federal government was there to help them with whatever was needed.

SMOKE INHALATION

As smoke from the multiple wildfires engulfed Southern California, health officials said that they had seen a dramatic increase in the number of people who were going to hospitals with asthma and other respiratory problems. One official said that they were seeing a real spike, a severalfold increase in people seeking aid, particularly with wheezing, coughing, tightness in the chest, and with difficult breathing.

Smoke and ash, along with dust raised by gusting winds, have affected the quality of air in at least four counties. Spokespersons from the South Coast Air Quality Management District reported that this will affect everyone in some way because

it's a substantial exposure. Overwhelming amounts of particulate matter can cause irritation and chest pain, which can lead to coughing and shortness of breath. Poor air quality can also linger, and during periods of smog this often becomes a particular problem.

Satellite images indicated that the smoke was being carried out to sea, but some of it could be blown back over populated areas with a shift in wind direction. The air there is sometimes bad to begin with and, when the particulate matter is combined with high levels of smoke, problems may arise.

ANIMAL RESCUES

Residents forced to evacuate their homes were being urged to take all of their household pets and other animals with them. Most Red Cross evacuation centers were accepting pets, but were asking, if possible, to place them in a crate or carrier. Because of limited supplies at some centers, pet owners were also requested to bring all necessary supplies including leashes, food, water, and medications.

Many wild animals joined in the exodus from the firestorm any way they could. Some were rescued by Animal Control Officers, and others by volunteer workers. The famous Del Mar race track became an animal safe haven for all kinds of animals including goats, ponies, horses, llamas, and others. Over 2,000 horses from all over San Diego County were being sheltered at the track. State Fairgrounds were also made available to house horses, and in some cases the owners were bunking in at the jockey's quarters. Ducks, geese and swan from

the Project Wildlife satellite facility located in Temecula were relocated to the International Bird Rescue Research Center in San Pedro where the birds were medically evaluated and admitted. They will remain there until the fire threat is over and can be returned to the Project Wildlife facility.

FEAR OF MUDSLIDES

In certain areas of northern San Diego County, investigators note that scorched, steep hillsides and hilltops may increase the chances that rain will create heavy muddy runoff. These conditions, if left unattended, could further endanger homes and clog streams and culverts. They point out that in some places the fires have killed the root systems, and if heavy rains do occur there will be no way to hold the soil in place. State and federal agencies are planning to address the threat by removing debris, placing barriers at key spots and reseeding the scorched earth.

As the rainy season approaches, protecting the areas most likely at risk from mudflows are residents of the La Jolla Indian Reservation which is located approximately 60 miles northeast of San Diego. During the firestorms that hit the area more than 90% of the tribe's 9,400 acre reservation was burned, and 59 of its 180 dwellings were destroyed.

THE STAGGERING COST

The extensive firestorms in Southern California during the autumn of 2007 affected millions of people, and seven counties were declared disaster areas. Over 6,000 firefighters battled the numerous blazes, estimated to be in excess of twenty. They were assisted by units of the United States armed

forces, and members of the United States National Guard. Additionally, over 3,000 prisoners who had been convicted of nonviolent crimes were brought in to help. Mexico also helped by sending several firefighters from the cities of Tijuana and Tecate.

Aside from the low humidity conditions, high temperatures, and hurricane force Santa Ana winds, there were numerous other causes for the terrible destruction. Several fires were triggered by power lines that had been damaged by the high winds, and one was started when a semitrailer truck overturned. At least one other fire had been deliberately set, and the suspect was shot and killed at the scene by state law authorities. Others remain under investigation. The last fire was finally brought under control on November 9th, nineteen days after the original blaze started.

There were more than twenty fires all told in which nine people died as a direct result of the fires, and eighty-five were injured including sixty-one firefighters. Crews were brought in from the neighboring states of Nevada and Arizona, and fire fighting aircraft were used when winds died down enough to use them. It is estimated that 500,000 acres were scorched which represents an area 3/4 the size of the state of Rhode Island. Over 1,800 homes and other buildings were destroyed at a loss in excess of $1 billion, while hundreds more were damaged.

A lengthy and difficult struggle faces many homeowners as they try to rebuild their homes and property and put their lives back together. Some families may not have adequate insurance to cover the costs of rebuilding, and in other cases insurance

companies may haggle over what may or may not be covered in their policies. Problems may also arise in obtaining building contractors because of the heavy overload, and the prices of certain materials may rise dramatically.

A PERFECTED EARTH

With this latest natural catastrophe to hit the United States well in memory, and with all of the other many problems facing the world of mankind today, we naturally turn to the Holy Scriptures for answers and understanding. In God's Word, we find the answers that teach that a time is near at hand when a totally new social order will be established over all the earth. This new social structure includes a tremendous reconstruction work that will be necessary to carry out this Divine program, and God has set aside a thousand years to accomplish it.

Under the future administration of Christ Jesus and his faithful church members, this glorious kingdom of truth and righteousness will carry out the lifting-up process of all the obedient of the human family who respond to the righteous laws of God. Mankind will then be brought back to perfection, and everlasting life will be made available for them all. God's wonderful plan also includes the awakening of all who are resting in their graves, and this countless resurrected class will also share in the blessing of life in a perfected new earth.

NEW HEAVENS AND EARTH

John the Revelator wrote under inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God concerning the Divine plan and promises of God concerning the perfected

earth. He said, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God."—Rev. 21:1-3

In this symbolic terminology, it is noted that the new heavenly administration under Christ and his church is represented in the 'holy city, new Jerusalem.' This is the spiritual, governing body that will administer all of earth's affairs, and is seen by the revelator as coming down from God out of heaven as the bride of Christ Jesus. The 'great voice' announces the new kingdom arrangement wherein our loving Heavenly Father's ultimate purpose is restoring mankind. He will then be with the people in carrying out his plan for the recovery of the human family from the ravages of sin and death.

As we continue to read John's words, we realize the widening perspective concerning God's blessings for his human creation. "God 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." (vs. 4) To grasp the significance and true meaning of the new order to be established here on earth is a blessing of great proportion.

Earth's new order, together with its environment and weather patterns, will also be brought under control during the time of Christ's kingdom.

No longer will the natural elements be in conflict with the stability of the new structure established under Christ's kingdom. Disasters such as fire-storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and other devastating incidents will become a thing of the past. Our loving Heavenly Father's ultimate design is to bring blessings of truth, happiness, and life to all of earth's inhabitants, and both man and the lower animal creation will live in peace and harmony with one another. "He that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful."—vs. 5 ■