

The Fig Tree Is in Bloom

Over the years I have accompanied thousands of people to the Holy Land. I am always thrilled to see people on these tours with their Bibles open, eagerly reading Old and New Testament passages that identify the very places they are seeing for themselves. I'll never forget an elderly gentleman in one group who kept peppering me with questions about biblical prophecy such as: "When Jesus returns, exactly where will He appear?" and "What else must happen before the Second Coming?"

His questions reflect an understanding about Israel that is so important for us as Christians to have. It is that everything God does on this planet, He does according to His dealings with Israel.

God's Word makes it clear that before Jesus' return, we will see the "restoration" of Israel. The apostle Peter, prophesying of a future event, told the Jews: "That [God] may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things" (Acts 3:20-21, NKJV).

Earlier, Jesus' disciples had asked Him to explain when these things would happen. They wanted to know:

" 'What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?' " (Matt. 24:3).

If you look closely at this verse you notice that the followers of the Lord wanted to know the sign-singular-of Christ's return and the end of the age. Jesus, however, began by detailing a lengthy list of what they should be looking for, including false prophets, wars, famines, earthquakes, the gospel being preached to the nations and much more (see Matt. 24:4-31).

Many of these events began to unfold immediately after Christ ascended back to the Father and have continued to this very

day. But what was the one "sign" that would be unmistakable? As Jesus often did, He answered their question in the form of a simple story:

" 'Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near-at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place' " (Matt. 24:32-34).

The fig tree is Israel. And God's Son was prophesying of the time to come when the nation was re-established-when its tender branch was putting on new leaves.

It is essential to understand that in 1948, Israel the fig tree was not newly planted-it simply was awakening and sprouting new growth once more. Israel was born when Joshua took possession of the land God promised to Abraham. Jesus didn't say the end would come in the generation after the tree was planted or grew branches but when the tree put on fresh leaves.

Connected to the Church

The most significant aspect of this parable is that from time the leaves would begin to blossom again " 'this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place' " (Matt. 24:34). One sign! One generation! What does this mean for you and me?

It is important to note that on God's timetable, a generation is 100 years. When God told Abraham of Israel's captivity in Egypt, He said: " 'Your descendants ... will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. ... But in the fourth generation they shall return here' " (Gen. 15:13, 16).

Since this is true, and the Lord was speaking about Israel's rebirth in 1948, the 100 years for these things to be

fulfilled means they will all come to pass before 2048.

You see, we simply cannot unravel or understand what is taking place in the Middle East or on the world scene without recognizing the central role of God's time clock-Israel.

I believe it is more than coincidence that when Israel was revived as a nation in 1948 God's hand began moving upon the Christian church worldwide in a new fashion. He started restoring the gifts of the Spirit.

Several years ago, my dear friend and mentor, the late Derek Prince, wrote a book titled *Israel and the Church: Parallel Restoration*. In it he pointed out several historic events in Israel's restoration and their correlating spiritual breakthroughs in the church. Here are a few examples:

Just before the turn of the 20th century, the first Zionist Congress embraced Theodor Herzl's concept that the Jewish people should be returned to their biblical homeland. Within 10 years, outpourings of God's Spirit began in Topeka, Kansas, and Azusa Street in Los Angeles.

In 1948, Israel declared its independence and became a sovereign nation. At the same time, the church began to experience the Latter Rain Movement and the launch of Billy Graham's evangelistic ministry.

In 1967, Israel experienced a mighty victory in the Six-Day War. The same year, the Holy Spirit was poured out on Roman Catholics at first Duquesne and then Notre Dame universities, beginning the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

Sadly, most Christians know very little about how Israel and the church are connected. They read the Scriptures, but they don't seem to be able to link the two together.

Today, because of misinterpretation, people are saying we-the church-are Israel. They're wrong!

Until recently, the Jewish people have not been open to hearing the message of Christ because Christianity was identified with the Crusades, Hitler and so much more. However, I can tell you personally that in the last few years we have begun to see a dramatic turnaround.

I vividly remember a day about 15 years ago when a Jewish cab driver forced me out of his taxi in Jerusalem for mentioning the name of Jesus. But recently I was in a stadium in Israel preaching the gospel to Jews and Arabs, publicly proclaiming, "Jesus! Jesus!" And together they were singing, "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Only a few years ago, it was the Palestinian Christians who were preaching the gospel to the Jews. Now you can find Jews who have accepted Christ preaching to the Arabs!

I recently spoke with a Messianic Jew who conducts regular services in Jerusalem. He told me, "I have never seen such a hunger in the hearts of Jewish people. Every week men and women are accepting Jesus as their Messiah."

So, while we have seen this nation restored physically, I believe what we are about to witness will be the greatest miracle in thousands of years. According to what I see in Scripture, a mighty spiritual outpouring is on the horizon for Israel.

The prophet Zechariah wrote, " ' "For behold," ... says the Lord of hosts ... "I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day" ' " (Zech. 3:9).

In "one day" God will restore His chosen people spiritually to Himself. Jesus prophesied that the times of the gentiles would be fulfilled, or come to an end, and God would again turn His attention to His ancient people, Israel (see Luke 21:24). The apostle Paul echoed this fact when he wrote, "Blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25).

Though there are different interpretations of how this will unfold, Scripture tells us, "And so all Israel will be saved: as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins'" (Rom. 11:26-27).

Three Significant Prophecies

I have been told that for centuries, Jewish rabbis have been waiting for the fulfillment of three Old Testament passages they believe point to the Messiah's coming. The first two have already occurred, and the third is taking place right before our eyes.

1. Traffic in the streets of Jerusalem. Nahum wrote of a time after Israel would be scattered and persecuted, when "the emptiers have emptied them out and ruined their vine branches" (Nah. 2:2). He saw the day when "the chariots come with flaming torches in the day of His preparation ... they jostle one another in the broad roads; they seem like torches, they run like the lightning" (vv. 3-4).

The prophet saw cars in Jerusalem and did not know how to properly describe them-vehicles speeding in the streets of the city that he called "broad roads." These wide roads didn't exist in the prophet's day, but they certainly do now!

2. The Israeli Air Force of 1967. Isaiah spoke of a day to come: "Like birds flying about, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem. Defending, He will also deliver it; passing over, He will preserve it" (Is. 31:5).

In 1948 the Israeli Air Force was still a fledgling force. At the time they had only a hodgepodge collection of donated civilian aircraft, totally inadequate for battle against modern fighter jets.

So they used their creativity. Pilots used to throw soda

bottles out of their planes to create a whistling sound. The enemy thought a bomb was approaching and would run for their lives! But in the 1967 war, the “birds” mentioned in Isaiah were dominating the skies and defending Jerusalem.

3. The desert must bloom. Isaiah prophesied: “The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, even with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it” (Is. 35:1-2).

Before 1948, Israel was practically nothing but desert and desolation. During the Ottoman Empire, nearly every tree in the land was cut down. Yet every time I return to Israel I am amazed at the abundance of palms, banana trees and flowers growing profusely throughout the region.

As a boy, I remember going to southern Israel into the Negev. Most of what I saw was unproductive land that was practically uninhabitable.

But on a recent journey I returned to the same area and was astonished by what I saw-acres of crops as far as the eye could see and communities springing up everywhere. God was speaking of Israel when He declared:

” ‘So they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the wasted, desolate, and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited” ‘” (Ezek. 36:35).

Many Christians are planting trees in Israel. Our own ministry has been involved in planting olive trees all over the country; we even have our own orchard. We as Christians are a part of fulfilling this prophecy.

What were once arid sand dunes are now rich and fertile farmlands, not only feeding Israel’s own people but also exporting fruits and vegetables to the world. Israel’s economy now surpasses that of many European countries.

It is only by a miracle of God that this nation is still alive. As Christians, we know that the Messiah came to the earth the first time 2,000 years ago, yet the Jewish people are still looking for Him. According to Scripture He will return again, and Israel will believe.

On a journey back to my homeland recently, I was near the Western Wall in Jerusalem where many people were praying. I asked a rabbi standing there, "Do you believe the Messiah is coming?"

"He has to! It is time," he answered.

One famous song played all the time in Israel is "Where Is the Messiah?" The Jewish people are looking for the Messiah and praying now more than ever for their total deliverance.

And when Christ returns the second time, the greatest revival the world has ever seen will break out in this land that is so precious to Him.

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