

Followers of the Way

The hope of Israel

Philip Quenby, 26-11-23

Ezekiel 25:15-17, Jeremiah 49:34-39

This is the start of a sermon series on Preparing the Way of the LORD, and our theme today is: the Hope of Israel. You could hardly think of a better time to be talking about such things, as they fit the season of the year, they line up with what God is doing in the Holy Land, and they speak into God's intentions for His Church in our own nation (and indeed for the nation itself). As we test all this in the light of the Scriptures, we will ask, where are we on God's prophetic timeline, and what should we do?

Knowing the answer to the first of these questions is vital, because unless we get the timing right, we are liable to miss what God wants us to do, and what He wants to do in us. Think of it as being a little bit like an archaeological dig. You can search in the right place physically, but unless you go down to the right level (the correct point in time) you will miss what you are looking for. If we are to prepare the way of the LORD as we should, therefore, we need to understand seasons, times, and process.

The season of the year

Next Sunday is the start of Advent, that time in the Church calendar when we memorialise the events surrounding the birth of Christ, and marvel afresh that God took human form and dwelt among us. He came in a specific place and at a specific time, as Jesus of Nazareth (*Yeshua haNozri*), and He lived as a Torah-observant Jew. He is and for all eternity will remain the King of the Jews (*vemelech haYehudim*). And, though most of the Jewish people worldwide do not yet recognise it, He is the true Hope of Israel (*haTikvah Yisrael*).

When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon and began to rebuild the temple, they were brought to recognise, "we have been unfaithful to our God ... [yet they proclaimed] in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel." (Ezra 10:2). The Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*, Old Testament) tells them (and us) about this hope. We see it when Jeremiah addresses God as "O Hope of Israel, its Saviour in times of distress" (Jeremiah 14:8), "O LORD, the hope of Israel" (Jeremiah 17:13), and "the LORD, the hope of their [Israel's] fathers" (Jeremiah 50:7). Zechariah calls his own people "prisoners of hope" (Zechariah 9:12) and it is no accident the very next time the word hope appears in the Bible, it is in the context of a Messianic prophecy applied to Jesus in the wake of Christ showing Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath: "In his name the nations will put their hope." (Matthew 12:21, quoting Isaiah 42:4).

The Israeli national anthem is *Hatikvah* (meaning, Hope). *Tikvah* is not a vague hope, an I-hope-I-win-the-lottery hope, but a sure and certain expectation of what is to come. The

Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible point ultimately to Jesus. He is the hope of Israel, and He is our hope, too.

The birth of Jesus and the things He did whilst on earth were prophesied long beforehand. It has been estimated that Jesus fulfilled over 300 Messianic prophecies during His earthly ministry. It was foretold that he would come out of Egypt, be born in Bethlehem, and live in Nazareth; that he would be born of a virgin and be of the royal line of David; that he would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver; that He would be a man of sorrows and suffer for our sakes; that not one of his bones would be broken; that men would cast lots for his cloak; and much, much more besides. These facts should give us great confidence in the reliability of biblical prophecy, and a desire to search the prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled – not simply out of idle curiosity to know what will happen in days to come, but so we may position ourselves where God wishes us to be, and perform the good works that He has prepared for us to do in these End Times – so that we may indeed prepare the way of the LORD.

Events in Israel

Which brings us to what is happening in Israel, and our Bible readings from Ezekiel and Jeremiah. To put these in context, we need to say something at the start about how the prophetic vision works. A prophet sees things from heaven's perspective, and "to the LORD a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day." (2 Peter 3:8, KJV). This means there is a tendency for the biblical prophets to telescope time. This is not surprising, since the prophetic gift causes them to see like God, who stands outside time, and experiences all the events of human history in a continual present. For a physical comparison, it is as though we were looking at things through only one eye and our depth of field was reduced, making it difficult to tell what is in the foreground and what is in the background: to the prophet, what will take place in centuries to come can seem as immediate as what will happen tomorrow. The result is that the timing in which prophecies will be fulfilled can easily throw us, and we therefore need to be careful of being too dogmatic in our interpretations.

The second element of the prophetic we need to bear in mind is that biblical prophets often literally saw the future unfolding before their eyes. They did not have the context in which to understand or even to describe properly the new technologies they witnessed, so they did the best they could by using comparisons that were familiar to them. In his 1917 campaign to free Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks, General Allenby realised Isaiah had seen aeroplanes when that prophet wrote, "like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem" (Isaiah 31:5). And so, he sent the RAF to drop leaflets on the Turkish positions, telling them he would give them safe passage north if they evacuated Jerusalem without a fight. They accepted the offer, and Allenby entered the Holy City without a shot being fired. God preserved His city from destruction, exactly as Isaiah foretold, albeit through a technology people in the 8th century BC could not have begun to grasp.

So, we hold things lightly and feel our way cautiously when it comes to locating ourselves precisely on God's prophetic timeline. But this does not mean the task is impossible. The sons of Issachar were men who "understood the times and knew what Israel should do"

(1 Chronicles 12:32), and Jesus criticised the Pharisees precisely because “you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” (Matthew 16:3). Note the connection, by the way, between prophetic understanding and godly action: we seek to understand the times, not as an intellectual exercise, but so we will know what to do.

In terms of the great sweep of Bible prophecy (the macro picture, if you like), the prophecies that remain unfulfilled fall into four main categories: (1) a regathering of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, (2) the coming of all nations against Jerusalem, (3) the supernatural revelation of Messiah to His people, and (4) the coming of the Messiah in power and glory to establish His kingdom on earth. There is little doubt the first of these has already begun, but it is still in progress. There has so far been only a partial regathering of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland – the land which God promised on oath to give them as an “everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:8) – and He is currently bringing about the conditions that will accelerate and complete this regathering. God says, “For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers ... I will send for many fishermen ... and they will catch them. And after that I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks.” (Jeremiah 16:15-16). Knowing this regathering is still going on is a big help in locating ourselves on the prophetic timeline.

God’s intentions for His Church and our nation

In many ways, we can think of Israel as our visual aid. As it is with Israel, so it will (must) be with the Church. One of the things that is presently happening (I suggest) is that God is goading Israel to put right mistakes of the past and to do what she should have done long ago. As Israel (for understandable reasons, that seemed good to many at the time) has given away territory she should never have let go, so the Church in our nation has conceded spiritual ground to the enemy. Like Israel, we are being given a chance to put this right, and we must not pass up the opportunity. We will come back to what this means for us and what we should do as a result towards the end of this talk.

Battles on earth, battles in the heavens

But first, with all this as context, let us start to be more specific based on today’s Bible readings. Israel’s hope is for salvation and the kingdom reign of the Messiah, yet it is also for judgment on her enemies and the LORD’s help in battle. Time and again, Israel has looked to God to fight for her when all seemed lost. It is widely recognised that Israel is fighting her toughest battle since the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Some say what we are witnessing may be the start of the war described in Ezekiel 38 and 39. Personally, I doubt this, as one of the fundamental conditions of the conflict Ezekiel describes – that Gog and his allies “will invade a land that has recovered from war ... a land of unwalled villages ... [with] peaceful and unsuspecting people – all of them living without walls and without gates and bars” (Ezekiel 38:8 and 11) – does not seem to fit present circumstances. But we are quite possibly seeing a yet further fulfilment of Psalm 83, with its confederation of surrounding nations who “with cunning conspire against [God’s] people” (Psalm 83:3).

If this supposition is right, God could well be initiating a train of events that will prompt a massive increase in *Aliyah* (Jewish immigration into Israel), while at the same time

progressively bringing about the conditions Ezekiel 38 describes prior to the outbreak of the Gog/Magog war – of seeming peace and security for Israel at last. If Israel does what God is currently giving her the chance to do in Gaza, in Judea and Samaria, and across her northern borders, Jews worldwide will contrast the relative freedom and security they can expect to find in their ancestral homeland with their increasingly precarious position in those countries they presently inhabit. The worldwide increase of antisemitism – an increase not just in the geographic extent and frequency of this ancient hatred, but of its virulence and the sheer satanic blood lust associated with it – means both push and pull factors (the fishermen and the hunters of Jeremiah 16:16) will increase greatly.

All this is part of a wider move of God across the nations that is characterised by gathering, separating, and acceleration. What God wishes to be separate (holy) can no longer cohabit with what it has lived alongside for a long time. What God wishes to gather is being drawn together, sometimes against its own wishes. And all the while, the pace of events is speeding up.

So, after a long introduction, we come to our Bible texts. God is a promise-keeping God. If He says He will do something, He will. As Peter reminds us, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with [us], not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9). There comes a time, however, when God’s patience is exhausted, and then He will act. With opinion polls suggesting upwards of 80% of Palestinians support the actions of Hamas, and with the Iranian regime still fomenting war across the Middle East and intent on destroying Israel, this may be precisely such a moment.

Ezekiel tells us what will happen when God’s patience with Philistia is exhausted, and Jeremiah tells us how God will move against Elam. These are ancient names for places that are still very much alive and very much at the forefront of the great contest between good and evil that is raging in the heavens above and on the earth below. The Philistine heartlands were in what we now call the Gaza strip, and the name Palestine derives from Philistine or Philistia. When the Philistines “seized Samson [and] gouged out his eyes [they] took him down to Gaza.” (Judges 16:21). The land of Elam is in the western part of what is now Iran (or Persia, as it used to be known) – a place where a demonic principality is so entrenched that this “prince of the Persian kingdom resisted [the angel sent to Daniel for] twenty-one days” (Daniel 10:13).

As many have observed, the word *Hamas*, meaning zeal in Arabic, is the Hebrew for violence. We have seen this organisation – with the backing of many across the world – act in exactly the way the Bible describes, with “vengeance ... malice in their hearts, and with ancient hostility [seeking] to destroy Judah” (Ezekiel 25:15). All indications are that the LORD is indeed “about to stretch out [His] hand against the Philistines ... [and to] punish them in [His] wrath.” (Ezekiel 25:6-17). This will be dreadful to behold, but there is redemptive purpose in it, for “Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I take vengeance on them.” (Ezekiel 25:17). God will show those with open minds who is the one true God, giving people trapped in Islam the chance to acknowledge Him and to gain salvation. God is never unfair or unjust. He wants everyone to come to a saving knowledge of Him, and we should pray for the people of Gaza that the number who turn to the God

of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be as large as it can be. But meanwhile, our desire to see souls saved and human suffering alleviated must not blind us to the fact that the evil that manipulates these people and holds them in its grip must be dealt with.

The consensus in Western capitals is that Hamas and Hezbollah are Iranian proxies. The jury is out as to whether the war will widen to Iran at this point, or not. But given the strides Iran has made with its nuclear programme, the day of reckoning cannot be far off. God's Word promises He "will break the bow of Elam, the mainstay of their might" (Jeremiah 49:35) – in other words, that He will strip them of their long-range offensive weapon. We should not expect the God of Israel to allow nuclear weapons to be used against His chosen people. As a covenant-keeping God, He is obliged to come to their defence, for covenant means their enemies are His enemies, and His enemies are theirs. (This explains, in part, why demonic hatred vents itself so strongly against Israel and the Jewish people. The devil also wants to wipe them off the face of the earth in the hope this means there will be nowhere for Jesus to return to, allowing Satan to continue to rule as the god of this world. In addition, the enemy acts out a spirit of vengeance and rage because of all that Israel and the Jews have been in the past purposes of God.)

Well, as with Philistia, an awful fate awaits Elam, whose people will be "[scattered] ... to the four winds" (Jeremiah 49:36), will be "[shattered] ... before their foes ... [and suffer] disaster" (Jeremiah 49:37). Again, though, there is redemptive purpose, for the LORD says "I will set my throne in Elam" (Jeremiah 49:38) and "I will restore the fortunes of Elam in days to come" (Jeremiah 49:39). The prayers, witness, and faithful endurance of the Iranian underground Church will no doubt weigh heavily with God in determining how He will deal with Elam in mercy after His "fierce anger" (Jeremiah 49:37) against this nation is spent.

To complete the regional picture at this stage of unfolding prophecy, a day is coming when "Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins." (Isaiah 17:1). The Bible does not specify if this is the result of war or natural disaster, but we should be on the alert for an overspill of the present conflict into Syria. Once more, we will see terrible events, but again God has a redemptive purpose in mind. The Bible describes how there will come a day when "Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.'" (Isaiah 19:24-25). (We need to be careful about drawing parallels because Syria and Assyria are not the same, of course, though modern Assyria was under Assyrian control at various points.)

In summary, cataclysmic events are in process that will cause the nations to quake and tremble, and those who do not know God to melt in fear. Believers are called in such days to look beyond headlines and the agendas of the rich and powerful, and to see instead the kingdom purposes of God. Knowing His character – how His righteousness, justice, holiness, and jealousy for His name are tempered always by a heart of love, mercy, and grace – we will be better able to stand, and to proclaim "the reason for the hope [we] have" (1 Peter 3:15), realising God moves with redemptive purpose in all things.

Seasons, times, and process

If this is the season, and these are the times, the question for us is, “What should we do then?” (Luke 3:10, 3:12, 3:14, Acts 2:37) – the question put to John the Baptist, and to Peter when he preached at Pentecost.

To answer this, we need to consider what it means to prepare the way of the LORD. John the Baptist prepared the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus through preaching a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mark 1:4). Whereas now the Great Commission requires us to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I [Jesus] have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20). There are three words in this sentence that need emphasising: disciples, obey, and everything. The Lord seeks disciples, not converts. He demands obedience. And this is obedience in *everything* He commanded us, not only those parts that we find easy or congenial. Part of preparing the way for the Lord to come in power to this nation and to a suffering world requires rediscovering our Great Commission mandate.

It also involves manifesting the kingdom. Believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, meaning Jesus spoke literally when He said, “The kingdom of heaven is within you.” (Luke 17:21). This kingdom within us is to manifest into the world – to show itself, to demonstrate its power, and to take territory from the enemy. Jesus gave His disciples “power to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.” (Luke 9:1-2). When we begin to move in this kind of kingdom power, then we shall see the demonic in our nation start to retreat, we will see people set free to choose Jesus and receive salvation, and we will make Jews jealous for the Gospel (Romans 11:14, KJV). Like Israel, we are being given a chance to retake territory we long ago gave up to another kingdom – the kingdom of darkness. This is a golden opportunity, and we must not miss it.

If we are to do this, we need to relearn how five-fold ministry should operate. The LORD does not work according to formulas, but He is a God of order and of process. There is a certain process to follow if the kingdom is to manifest, which is why the disciples were given the sequence of driving out demons, curing diseases, and preaching the kingdom. (Lest we imagine this is a formula to follow every time, on another occasion, the sequence was different, because God responds according to circumstances and individual characters: see Matthew 10:8, where the sequence is healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing those with leprosy, and driving out demons.) But whatever the sequence might be, the same point applies. The five ministries are to interact in a way that is mutually supportive and empowering. Evangelists will not meet with the success they should unless the demonic forces that prevent people being free to hear and receive the Gospel have first been dealt with. No matter how good the pastor, no believer will come into full maturity without addressing the demonic in his or her own life – whether that has come in through trauma, generational sin, curses, wrong relationships, or false worship. No teacher can walk in the fullness of that ministry by teaching error, or less than the full, unadulterated Word of God. Prophets need space to speak, while apostles need to be properly commissioned and supported.

So, these are our tasks. To rediscover our Great Commission mandate, manifest the kingdom, and use fivefold ministry according to God’s designated process. We are being

called to remind a backslidden nation there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun. There will undoubtedly be hard times to come, hard graft needed, and hard days to endure. But, like Paul, let us “rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” (Romans 5:3-5). The Hope of Israel is our hope. He is the only hope for this lost and fallen world. And He is looking for His people to arise in these days,