On occasion, I have had the privilege of preaching the Methodist Camp on Smith Island in the middle of Chesapeake Bay. I drove to Crisfield, Maryland, and then caught the ferry across the water to Smith Island. Coming back, the little boat left after the Sunday evening service so it was dark outside.

I wondered how the ferry boat captain would negotiate the arrival back at Crisfield since it was so dark and one could not see very far ahead. Ahead of us, on the Maryland shore, a few tiny dots of light began to appear and the skipper headed for them. I asked him how he knew what to do and he just smiled and said, “Watch those three lights ahead. When they all merge into one light, I will know my direction; I will line up my boat to that one light and that will take me right into the dock safely.”

There are so many events in world news today; however, they seem to be merging into one very bright indicator - all pointing to the Rapture of the Church. As one writer put it, “While this rapture of the saints is without any signs to warn us of its proximity, yet there are foreshadowings of events that will come after the Church is gone that are already appearing on the world scene. And because of these things, we believe the Rapture which has to PRECEDE these specific prophetic events could and must be very close.”

This is what Jesus meant when in Matthew 24:32,33 Jesus talked about the blossoming of the fig tree: "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. [33] Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.”

Well, the prophetic fig tree is blooming. The signs of Christ’s return are everywhere if one knows where to look.
Let's take a look today at some of the most prominent of those fig leaves now coming forth on God's tree:

**ISRAEL AND THE RE-GATHERING OF THE JEWS**

Ezekiel 37:11-14

Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. [12] Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. [13] And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, [14] And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord.

Throughout Jewish history, there have been efforts at genocide - that is, the elimination of the Jews from the earth. These have been satanically-inspired efforts that have resulted in the destruction of the nations and governments that fostered them. We can go back
“Arbeit Macht Frei” (Work Makes Free) - The Lying Sign That Greeted The Holocaust Victims Upon Their Arrival At Auschwitz

thousands of years to the effort by the Persians and that anti-Semite Haman in Queen Esther’s day to the lifetime of some of us older folks who clearly remember the Nazi efforts at the “final solution” of the Jews in the 1940's.

I have been in a number of those Nazi death camps, including Auschwitz/Birkenau near Krakow, Poland. At the top of this page, you will see a picture of the rail entry into that camp that brought millions of Jews to their deaths in the gas chambers and crematoria. Darlene and I have walked through that gate on two occasions. We also walked through the massive gas chamber at Birkenau where countless Jews were killed - simply because they were Jews.

One of the great tragedies of World War II was that many Jews were able to escape by ship but were denied entry into safe countries - including the United States. They were sent back to Europe where many were killed in the concentration camps.

At the end of the war, 1945, the Jews were looking for a safe harbor, a nation they could call home. Many had already returned to what was then known as Palestine, which had been under British occupation since World War I. Even before 1900, a movement had
Pastor Dan Betzer - then a teen-aged newscaster - interviewed President Harry S. Truman

started under the influence and leadership of Theodore Herzl - a movement called
Zionism. Zion is the Biblical name for Israel and Jerusalem; and Zionists believed that
"the land" ("Eretz Israel") belonged to the Jews and had since the days of Abraham.

Genesis 13:14-18  And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated
from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art
northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: [15] For all the land
which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. [16] And I will make
thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth,
then shall thy seed also be numbered. [17] Arise, walk through the land in the length
of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee. [18] Then Abram removed
his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built
there an altar unto the Lord.

Such a promise did not seem possible until 1948. Even though I was just eleven when
this historic event took place, I remember it very well. Earlier in 1917 the Balfour
Declaration by the British government declared that a "national home for the Jewish
people" would be founded in Palestine even while preserving the "civil and religious"
rights of non-Jewish people there. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General
Assembly voted (resolution 181) to partition Palestine between a Jewish and an Arab state, with Jerusalem under an international regime. The Jews agreed to pursue this but the Arabs did not. They called the declaration of the state of Israel “al-Nakba” - a catastrophe. A few months later, when the Brits pulled out of the Middle East, freely admitting they could not solve the many geo-political and religious issues of the land, Israel Prime Minister Ben Gurion proclaimed on May 14, 1948 that the culmination of nearly 2,000 years of hope by Jews would now take place with the formation of the State of Israel. Almost immediately, our President of the United States at that time, Harry S. Truman - against the advice of most of his cabinet - threw the weight of the United States behind the Jews in their efforts to form a nation.

This launched a major battle between Jews and Arabs. Give Arab armies invaded the tiny land of Israel (about the size of New Jersey) with the intention of driving the Jews into the sea. There were terrible massacres during this battle. By the time an armistice was negotiated in 1949, the Israelis had extended their territory, leaving Jordan with the West Bank (of the Jordan River), Egypt with Gaza, and Jerusalem divided. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled Israel at that time - which began the “Palestinian” debate.

So the nation of Israel was born. There are biblical commentators who do not equate this event with Ezekiel 37 saying that only the return of Messiah could bring it about. But it is my opinion that May of 1948 very clearly fulfilled the promise of God to Ezekiel that the Jews would return to their homeland of Israel.

Politicians all over the world as well as members of the United Nations have dealt with the Middle East situation for over a century and still have earned no lasting peace. Nor will they. But One is coming Who will settle it once and for all. And that is the Messiah whom we believe is the Lord Jesus Christ.

So one of the brightest lights guiding us into the harbor of eternity is the tiny land of Israel and the return of the Jews to their homeland.

THE GATHERING STORM IN RUSSIA

When we read Ezekiel 38 and 39, we learn of the nations that will attack Israel (during what I personally believe are the first four “Seal Judgments” of Revelation 6). There we read of the riders on the white horse, the red horse, the black horse and the pale horse.

Rev. 6:1-8

And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. [2] And I saw, and
behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto
him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. [3] And when he had opened
the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. [4] And there went out
another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take
peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given
unto him a great sword. [5] And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the
third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on
him had a pair of balances in his hand. [6] And I heard a voice in the midst of the
four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a
penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine. [7] And when he had opened the
fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. [8] And I looked,
and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed
with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill
with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

On the white horse came Antichrist with his promise of peace to the earth. Note from
verse 2 that he carried a bow - but no arrows are mentioned. Why? Because Antichrist
will sweep the favor of the western world by his impassioned commitment to peace
(which is really a lie as we see by what follows.). Even Israel will get caught up in this
figure’s tranquil charisma. But the red horse which follows is war.

What war? Now we return to Ezekiel to find out the names of the combatants:

Ezekiel 38:1-9

And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, [2] Son of man, set thy face
against Gog, the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and
prophecy against him, [3] And say, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold I am against
thee, O Gog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal: [4] And I will turn thee back,
and put hooks into thy jaws, and I will bring thee forth, and all thine army, horses
and horsemen, all of them clothed with all sorts of armour, even a great company
with bucklers and shields, all of them handling swords: [5] Persia, Ethiopia, and
Libya with them; all of them with shield and helmet: [6] Gomer, and all his bands;
the house of Togarmah of the north quarters, and all his bands: and many people
with thee. [7] Be thou prepared, and prepare for thyself, thou, and all thy company
that are assembled unto thee, and be thou a guard unto them.

[8] After many days thou shalt be visited: in the latter years thou shalt come into
the land that is brought back from the sword, and is gathered out of many people,
against the mountains of Israel, which have been always waste: but it is brought
forth out of the nations, and they shall dwell safely all of them. [9] Thou shalt ascend
and come like a storm, thou shalt be like a cloud to cover the land, thou, and all thy
bands, and many people with thee.

These are the attackers against Israel. Who do we know them to be today? Gog was king of the land of Magog and chief ruler over Rosh, Meshech and Tubal. In Genesis 10:2, Magog, Meshech and Tubal are the names of the sons of Japheth; thus the future battle described here will be led by a descendant of Japheth. These countries are located to the north of Israel. They will be joined by armies from the east and south. Persia, Ethiopia and Libya are also mentioned. Persia, of course, is Iran. The other nations represent the Muslim north of current Africa. Gomer represents people north of the Black Sea area and Togarmah is Armenia.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT STUDY BIBLE / FOOTNOTES / PAGES 1232-1233.

Magog is commonly considered by Bible students to be the area of the former Soviet Union. Following “detente,” it appeared that perhaps Russia was not the culprit in the Ezekiel prophecy after all; however, with the rule of Vladimir Putin the linkage is again engaged firmly.

In an earlier study, I read reports of the emerging appreciation of former dictator Joseph Stalin in various parts of Russia. This despite the reality that Stalin oversaw the killings of millions of his own people. Now Putin reigns supreme. Born in 1952, Putin became a high-ranking member of the KGB and today has gained the general popularity of the Russian citizenry. There are reasons for it: Wages have jumped 300% under his leadership; unemployment and poverty have been cut in half; the Russian GNP has risen 72%; income taxes across the board are a low 13%; he has reformed both the military and police forces; and there have been major hi-tech advances in Russia. However - and this is a major “however,” the sweet flow of democracy is in severe regression under his iron hand.

Putin has made it clear that he sides with Iran and other nations who look with disfavor upon Israel. Iran (Persia) has made it clear that the leadership there regards Israel as a general sore on the face of humanity. There is no question where the nations of North Africa (Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Morocco, etc.) stand with regard to the Jews and Israel. The rise of Russian influence among Arab nations today is as clear as the proverbial nose on your face. It cannot be misunderstood in these crucial days that the prophecy of Ezekiel vis-a-vis Israel is certainly being manifest in our day and should be considered one of the “blossoming fig leaves” that Jesus mentioned. Many of us believe that the Rapture will precede this attack on the Israel. That being the case, how close to Christ’s coming for His saints can we be?

The Crack-down on Christianity
A person has to be suspicious of any entity or movement that has to be enforced at the point of a gun. Such seems to be the case with rabid Islam. We have been praying for the release of U.S. citizen Saeed Abedini who is currently serving an eight-year sentence in a brutal Iranian prison for assisting with an orphanage in Iran. Now we learn that five Iranian Christian converts go on trial in Iran’s Revolutionary Court this week. These men along with two others were detained when security forces raided an underground house church in the city of Shiraz during a prayer session. The charges against them: disturbing public order, evangelizing, threatening national security and engaging in internet activity that threatens the government. These men face lengthy prison sentences.

An observer of Iranian policies notes that there has been an increase in the harassment, arrests, trials and imprisonments of converts to Christianity since the beginning of last year. “Any movement that differs from or offers an alternative to orthodox Shia Islam, and any persons who choose to follow an alternative belief system, are interpreted as a challenge to the very state itself.” How insecure can people believe in their religion when it has to be enforced at gunpoint?

Under Shariah - Islamic law, a Muslim who converts to Christianity is on a par with someone waging war against Islam. Death sentences for such individuals are prescribed by fatwas - or legal decrees - and reinforced by Iran’s Constitution which allows judges to rely on fatwas for determining charges and sentencing on crimes not addressed in the Iranian penal code.

All religious minorities in Iran, including Bahais, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians, have faced various forms of persecution and political and social marginalization throughout the regime’s 30 year reign. But the Iranian government saves its highest retribution for those who have abandoned Islam.

The Bible speaks of the world religious system (called Babylon) that will be strong in the last days that God will bring down in a single day:

Rev. 17:1-6

And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: [2] With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. [3] So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. [4] And the woman was arrayed in
purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: [5] And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. [6] And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.

All the threats, guns, torture, jail sentences and rabid dogma that the world religious system can offer or sustain can stop the judgment of God. In one day, He brings the whole religious apparatus crashing down.

He will also bring down Antichrist’s political system as well. There will be a religious Babylon which I have just addressed as well as a world political system also known as Babylon to God.

I will address this in detail in two weeks.

March 27: THE COLLAPSE OF BABYLON