

What Hand Will Shape the 21st Century?—Part One

It is no secret that people and nations want to control future events. The mystery is how to know and understand the nature of future events and how they might be mitigated or even avoided. But can we know the course of human events, and can we change the outcome of world-shaping problems to arrive at a better future?

The disciples of Jesus wanted to know about the future. Certainly, they wanted things to work out for everyone's benefit and well-being. They were as concerned about their lives, and the lives of their families and friends, just as we are today.

Nonetheless, the disciples knew that many things were out of their control, and Jesus confirmed this when he spoke of the "beginning of sorrows" that would catalyze greater problems for the world in the future, particularly before his second coming to set up the kingdom of God. The disciples, of course, knew what these events were, as most people would, because they had no doubt witnessed and experienced some of them, or at least heard about some of them, throughout the history of Israel.

Now, these "beginning of sorrows" have been around since the foundation of civilization beginning with the fateful decision made by Adam. They are not something exclusive to the end of this world and they are not exclusive to any one nation or group of nations. They are, however, the very things that have changed and shaped the character and psychological outlook of individuals and nations throughout time. They are also what shapes people's value systems.

The "beginning of sorrows" are generally said to be wars, religious and political deceptions that cause conflicts, famine, disease and other natural disasters that continue to plague humankind with many problems (Mt. 24:5-8).

Notably, any one of these events, or a combination of these events—deception, conflict, deficiency, natural disasters and disease—to a greater or lesser degree—can change the face of world civilization. They can bring down governments, change international boundary lines, eliminate populations, bring about homelessness and more, and their impact can be especially catastrophic on a globalizing world.

Interestingly, the effects of these sorrows can, in part, define eras in human experience,

particularly on a national level. They are something like a hand that can mold and shape the conditions of the world, and thereby influence the politics, economics and resources of nations.

The long-term psychological effects resulting from these sorrows have motivated people to seek ways to stop or minimize the economic and consequent impact of these events and problems. This means seeking ways to maintain transparency, mitigate wars, prevent acts of terrorism, cure diseases and deal with natural disasters. Billions upon billions of dollars are spent each year to deal with such problems.

The United Nations is an example of an institution that has been entrusted with the responsibility to mitigate or prevent these “sorrows,” and we currently see other organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization attempting to play a role in dealing with these same issues in the world.

So, to understand how these “beginning of sorrows” will continue to shape our 21st Century, leading to the events spoken of by Jesus, it is worth examining how these sorrows, this “hand,” shaped the 20th Century.

When this hand moved in the 20th Century, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, it at one

time brought the world into the grip of an unparalleled economic catastrophe—the Great Depression

Now, a peculiarity of the Great Depression was not that there wasn't work that needed to be done, or that there was not actually a total nationwide shortage of food, or that people were not willing to work, but the underlying peculiarity of the Great Depression was there was generally a famine of money. (The Dust Bowl that occurred in the southern plains of the United States in the 1930s and the migrations and disease that came with it did intensify the Great Depression.)

In the period from the end of the 1800s to the early part of the 1900s there was relative calm and peace in the world. This situation, along with a stable economic system based on the gold standard, allowed for growth in the industrializing countries.

Then came World War I.

The economies of the world were disrupted, some were shattered. Britain had been one of the first to break from the gold standard, and it was no longer the supervisor of world trade when the war began. This economic situation set a precedent for what was to come later for other nations.

After World War I, people wanted to go back to the days when life seemed better and

simpler—and so they tried, but failed in many respects—because there were too many troubles with the world economy. Some national economies began to fluctuate from a general post-war boom to serious downturns. There was also the problem of national debts.

Also, the world was a very different place after World War I. The boundaries of several European countries were changed. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up into smaller countries, the map of Germany was redrawn and Poland became an independent nation. Then there was the eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire and a reshaping and creation of States in the Middle East.

The cost of rebuilding was unaffordable for many countries, and currency was devalued because of the accelerated printing of money. This inflation created an environment of economic instability. When this happens, confidence in government is abandoned.

People begin to look for alternative solutions, even if those solutions are out of line with good judgment. (Examples are the rise to power of Benito Mussolini in Italy and, later, Adolf Hitler in Germany.)

Consequently, after the First World War, the nations of Germany and France and England were not able to fully recover. Britain alone owed enormous sums of money to the United States. And the demands for war reparations were too great for some nations to bear. The

United States emerged as the largest creditor nation, and a reluctant world leader with a new outlook on foreign policy.

Now, America in the early 1920s seemed like the place to be. However, America had turned a blind eye to its own problems. There were problems with over-production, a rising personal debt and an increasing gulf between the rich and the poor.

America also had one additional problem as a result of its apparent growing prosperity. It had a great deal of misguided pride. There is an old saying that “pride goes before a fall,” and like other nations and ancient empires who have had this same problem, and had the same result, it came true for the United States (Pro. 18:12).

Consequently, many people were genuinely surprised when in the latter part of October 1929 the American Stock Market began its fateful decline. October 29th, “Black Tuesday,” is the date that some experts believe marks the beginning of the Great Depression. But it was really not the cause of the Great Depression. America was only the last of the significant economic markets to fall in a world economy that was already becoming closely linked together.

Thus, the First World War, the resulting famine it created for Germany, and the 1918 influenza epidemic, created the economic

instability throughout Europe that set the stage for the Great Depression. The forces that make up what are referred to as the “beginning of sorrows”—wars, political and religious deceptions, famine, disease, and other natural disasters—created a world that could not financially bear up under these problems.

We have probably heard the stories of how some brokers committed suicide, and how certain of the rich suddenly became broke overnight and how many ordinary middle-class families were forced to sell their homes. We have also heard about the over-production of grain crops followed by drought, and the problems of disease, malnutrition and homelessness in this period of history. As many as 17,000 families were being evicted from their homes in the United States each month at the height of the Great Depression.

Another problem of the depression period was the rapid rise in unemployment in the United States, even for those who did not participate in the Stock Market. About a million and a half people were unemployed in 1929, and by 1930 there were more than four million unemployed. One year later, the number of unemployed had grown to more than eight million, and the year after that it was twelve million unemployed. This was the result of insufficiency in money circulation in the United States.


Unless a person has experienced the Great Depression, as some of those still living have done so, it is difficult to fathom the magnitude of its effects in different parts of the world.

These events—these sorrows—of the 20th Century have profoundly affected the national character of today’s leading nations, and these include nations such as the United States, the supposed leader of the free world since the end of World War II, Russia, China, Great Britain, France, Germany and to some degree Japan and Korea. These countries set the pace economically in the 20th Century in such a way as to bring the global economy to where it is today in the 21st Century. They have taken the lead in technological advancement and turning information into currency, and their economic policies, which drive the world economy today, were fashioned and formed at a time of great want—the time of the Great Depression.

Obviously, the 20th Century was marked by stark contrasts. On the one hand, we can observe the greatest progress and ingenuity in all of human history. The world moved into the Space Age, created the computer, and there were amazing advancements in medical research, agriculture and transportation. On the other hand, we can observe some of the greatest atrocities the world has ever known. In fact, the 20th Century saw the worst wars in all human history, flood and drought

caused famines that killed millions of people, earthquakes, diseases that stalked the world and the emergence of new epidemics such as HIV and Ebola.

Also consider how the world after World War II has lived under the threat of nuclear war ever since, and now we find ourselves beginning a venture into the 21st Century. A time some are calling the Post-Modern Era, or the Post-Industrial Period, but it is certainly a time epitomizing the Information Age, and what we might also call the Age of Deception.

What then should we expect to see in the 21st Century? How will the hand that shapes and reshapes our globalizing world affect the lives of peoples and nations in the near future? 
(Continued in part two of this series.)