



Iraq and Armageddon

Whether or not you are in favor of the war in Iraq, you have probably noticed that it is next to impossible to escape hearing news about it. It has been the lead story on every evening news program, the front-page headline of every Dallas Morning News paper, since the war began. Television and radio updates are liberally interspersed between regular programming. If there has been any other news of significance the past two weeks, it is highly likely that we have missed it.

Some Christians find the war interesting for more than its political ramifications. War in the homeland of ancient Babylon, the enemy of Israel, raises hopes that it will set in motion events leading to Christ's return and the establishment of the visible kingdom of God on earth. Modern day developments in the political situation in the Middle East are filtered through passages from the Book of Daniel or the Book of Revelation in the Bible, leading to rather confident proclamations about the imminence of Christ's return and the establishment of a millennial kingdom. People perceive churches that indulge in this form of Biblical interpretation as "relevant" and "in touch."

This approach to understanding what the Bible says about the timing and purpose of Jesus' return is nothing new. Tensions between Arabs and Jews in the 1970's, together with the Cold War, made books like Hal Lindsey's "The Late Great Planet Earth" best sellers. The Persian Gulf War in 1991 gave birth to another round of books proclaiming the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

While we do not deny that Christ may return at any moment, or that the Christian must always be prepared, there is a danger in trying to use this morning's headlines to interpret the Bible. Pastor Kim Riddlebarger warns, "Unfortunately, it is all too fashionable to interpret the Bible in light of the morning newspaper and CNN. Yes, it is fun to read the Bible through the filter of every geopolitical crisis that arises in our modern world. This adds relevance to the Bible, we are told. There is, in addition, a quite serious side effect produced by this approach to Bible prophecy: The Bible no longer speaks for itself because it is twisted into a pretzel by each of its interpreters, who do their best to show that the upheaval of nations described in the book of Revelation has nothing whatsoever to do with the original reader in the first century struggling under Roman persecution, but is instead somehow related to the morning headlines. How many times can we tell our hearers that Jesus is coming back soon (No, we really mean it this time!) and then tie that message to a passing despot like Saddam Hussein or a tenuous political figure like Mikhail Gorbachev? How do we keep those who need to hear about



Christ's Second Advent the most from becoming increasingly cynical about the message of his coming?"

Saddam Hussein is a bad man, but he is not the Antichrist. The war in Iraq, like every other war before it, is a call to repentance, and a reminder of the shortness of our time here on earth, and a sign that the world situation is ripe for Jesus' return ("You will hear of wars and rumors of wars..." Matthew 24:6), but it is not the "battle of Armageddon" or even its precursor. When Jesus returns, he is not going to set up an earthly government in that worn out little piece of desert real estate known as Israel, but he is going to take us all to the real promised land in heaven (John 14:1-3, 2 Timothy 4:18, Hebrews 9:26-28, John 6:40, et. al.).

The events that reveal the most about our future are not those unfolding in Iraq right now, but those that took place on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem, and in a quiet garden at an empty tomb, a little less than 2000 years ago. On April 18th and April 20th you and I will hear the most important news we have ever heard...again. Jesus' death and resurrection are still the events that make the biggest difference in our lives. And they are still good news.

In Christ, Pastor Vieths