

52. Heralds of the Day of God

As the Lamb opened the sixth seal, what cataclysm occurred?

"And I beheld when He had opened the sixth seal, and lo, there was a great earthquake!" Revelation 6:12.

At the close of the vision of the fifth seal, John heard the martyrs inquiring how long it would be before the cause of truth would finally triumph. In answer, a voice from heaven bade them be patient just a little longer, but no specific indication was given to them or to John as to just how long the waiting period would be.

With the opening of the sixth seal, however, it becomes evident that the church is not to be left without intimation of the approach of the final crisis. For as the Lamb breaks this seal, a series of spectacular signs come successively into view as heralds of the day of God.

First, John beheld "a great earthquake." Jesus had declared that among the catastrophes of the last days there would be "famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places" (Matthew 24: 7). But He had not mentioned this particular earthquake which by reason of its vast extent and colossal force would be recognized by those who had eyes to see as a sign from God. Joel, however, was more specific, for, listing the signs of the "day of the Lord," he said: "The earth shall quake before them." Joel 2: 10.

So we ask, Was the world startled by any notable seismic disturbance somewhere about the end of the papal persecutions of the Middle Ages? The answer is yes, for on November 1, 1755, a terrific terrestrial convulsion, centering upon Lisbon in Portugal-from which it came to be known as the Lisbon earthquake-shook a great area of the earth's surface.

That the Lisbon earthquake was without parallel in history down to that day has been admitted by many authoritative scientists.

"The effects of the earthquake of the first of November, 1755," asserts Nourse in his History and Philosophy of Earthquakes, "were distributed over nearly four millions of English square miles of the earth's surface; a most astonishing space! And greatly surpassing anything of this kind ever recorded in history." - Page 334.

Quite rightly, therefore, Nelson's Encyclopedia asserts that "the Lisbon earthquake" was "the most notable earthquake of history."

In the city of Lisbon, which was right at the center of the disturbance 90,000 out of a total population of 150,000 lost their lives in the earthquake shocks and as a result of the tidal waves which swept over the city.

In North Africa the effects were almost as severe. "A great part of the city of Algiers was destroyed," states Robert Sears in Wonders of the World. "Many houses were thrown down in Fez and Mequines and multitudes were buried beneath their ruins. Similar effects were realized in Morocco. Its effects were likewise felt at Tangier, at Tetuan, at Funchal in the island of Madiera; . . . it is probable . . . that all Africa was shaken by this tremendous convulsion." - Pages 50,58.

Records also exist of the effects of the quake in Germany, Holland, France, and Britain, in Norway and Sweden, and even as far north as Greenland.

Earthquake tremors were recorded also across the Atlantic in Antigua and Barbados, and a number of ships at sea recorded severe shocks.

The effect of this earthquake upon the people of Europe of that day is described by James Parton in his Life of Voltaire:

"For many weeks as we see in the letters and memoirs of that time, people in distant parts of Europe went to bed in alarm, relieved in the morning to find that they had escaped the fate of Lisbon one night more."-Vol. 2, pages 208, 209.

By what was the earthquake followed in the vision of the sixth seal?

"And the sun became black as sackcloth of hair." Revelation 6:12.

While the sign of the "great earthquake" was referred to specifically by only one prophet prior to the vision of the seven seals, the second sign of the darkening of the sun was mentioned by no fewer than five earlier prophets including Jesus Himself. (Joel. 2:31; Amos 8:9; Isaiah 13:10; Ezekiel 32:7,8; Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:24.) From these many prophecies, four features of the remarkable phenomenon can be adduced to aid in its identification. It was to take place immediately after the close of the great papal persecutions (Christ). The day would begin clear and bright (Amos) and then a cloud would as it were

come up over the sun (Ezekiel). As a result, while still morning, the sun would be dark as night (Isaiah).

Did any such celestial manifestation occur in the latter years of the eighteenth century?

Yes, on May 19, 1780, there occurred what has gone down in history as the "Dark Day."

Noah Webster, in his Explanatory and Pronouncing Vocabulary, records the event as it was experienced in New England: "The Dark

Day, May 19, 1780-so called on account of a remarkable darkness on that day extending over all New England. In some places, persons could not see to read common print in the open air for several hours together. Birds sang their evening songs, disappeared, and became silent; fowls went to roost; cattle sought the barnyard; and candles were lighted in the houses. . . . The true cause of this remarkable phenomenon is not known.' - Edition 1869.

In Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Professor Samuel Williams wrote up the observations he collected about this remarkable phenomenon in considerable detail. He says:

"It came on between the hours of ten and eleven a.m., and continued until the middle of the next night....

"The degree to which the darkness arose was different in different places. In most parts of the country it was so great that people were unable to read common print, determine the time of the day by their clocks or watches, dine or manage their domestic business, without the light of candles.

"The extent of this darkness was very remarkable. Our intelligence in this respect is not so particular as I could wish; but from the documents that have been received, it seems to have extended all over the New England States.... It is probable it extended much beyond these limits in some directions, but the exact boundaries cannot be ascertained by any observations that I have been able to collect.

"With regard to its duration, it continued in this place at least fourteen hours, but it is probable that this was not exactly the same in different parts of the country."-Vol. 1, page 234, 235.

Of the effect of the Dark Day upon the minds of the people who experienced it, contemporary newspapers and other documents provide a striking commentary.

"A very general opinion prevailed," asserted Timothy Dwight, "that the day of judgment was at hand." - Quoted by John W. Barber in "Connecticut Historical Collections," page 403.

What appearance would the moon acquire after the obscuration of the sun?

"And the moon became as blood." Revelation 6:12.

Each of the prophets who foretold the sign of the Dark Day also spoke of a sign in the moon immediately following. (Joel 2:31; Isaiah 13:10; Ezekiel 32:7; Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:24; Luke 21:25.) And true to the prophecies, the night after the Dark Day of May 19, 1780, saw the fulfillment of this further sign.

"The darkness of the following evening," writes Dr. Samuel Tenney of Exeter, New Hampshire, "was probably as gross as ever has been since the Almighty gave birth to light.... I could not help conceiving at the time, that if every luminous body in the universe had been shrouded in impenetrable shades, or struck out of existence, the darkness could not have been more complete. A sheet of white paper held within a few inches of the eyes, was equally invisible with the blackest velvet."-"Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society for the year 1792," Vol. 1, pages 97, 98.

The Boston Gazette and Country Journal had this to say on May 29, 1780: "In the evening ... perhaps it never was darker since the children of Israel left the house of bondage. This gross darkness held till about one o'clock, although the moon had been full but the day before!"

Unquestionably the signs in the sun and moon were fulfilled in the remarkable Dark Day of 1780 and the night which followed.

What further sign appeared in the heavens in the vision of the sixth seal?

"And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casts her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind." Revelation 6: 13.

Jesus in His list of the signs in heaven and earth which would herald His coming said: "The stars shall fall from heaven." Matthew 24: 29. John's prophecy adds the further feature that the stars would appear to be falling from one point in the heavens like a shower of unripe figs from a tree shaken by a strong wind.

More than half a century passed after the Dark Day before this third sign appeared, but on November 13, 1833, a considerable proportion of the world's population saw the greatest meteoric shower

in the history of the world, which exactly fulfilled the prophetic specifications.

"The most sublime phenomenon of shooting stars, of which the world has furnished any record, was witnessed throughout the United States on the morning of the 13th of November, 1833," writes Elijah H. Burritt in *The Geography of the Heavens*. "The entire extent of this astonishing exhibition has not been precisely ascertained, but it covered no inconsiderable portion of the earth's surface." - Page 163.

Not a few who wrote on this remarkable celestial sight mentioned its striking resemblance to the prophetic picture penned by the prophet John. Perhaps the most remarkable eye-witness description of all was printed in the *New York Journal of Commerce* of November 14, 1833, in the course of which the writer says: "Here is the exactness of the prophet. The stars did not come as if from several trees shaken, but from one: those which appeared in the east fell toward the east. Those which appeared in west, fell toward the west; and those which appeared toward the south (for I went out of my residence into the park), fell toward the south; and they fell, not as ripe fruit falls. Far from it. But they flew, they were cast like the unripe fruit, which at first refuses to leave the branch. And, when it does break its hold, flies swiftly, straight off, descending; and in the multitude falling, some cross the track of others, as they are thrown with more or less force!" -Vol. 8, No. 534, page 2.

In recent years the wonder of this sign of the falling of the stars has been still further enhanced by the greater knowledge of the phenomenon of meteorite showers which modern astronomical research has given to us. It has now been established that they are the result of the earth every now and then passing through a comet orbit in which travels a stream of particles of comet matter so far away from the nose of the comet as to be non-luminous. But which at once become luminous as a result of the friction of the earth's atmosphere.

Every year the earth passes through a number of such comet orbits, resulting in regularly occurring annual showers, such as the Lyrids in April, the Perseids in August. The Orionids in October, the Leonids and Andromedes in November, and Geminids in December, the designations being given according to the radiant or point in the heavens from which they appear to radiate.

Normally, these showers are not at all spectacular, but if a comet on its vast orbit happens to pass by just before the earth arrives on its annual journey, the concentration of meteoric matter is far greater and the shower more intense. The closer the earth is to the comet on these rare occasions, other factors being equal, the more numerous are the specks of matter which enter the atmosphere. But the intensity of the displays is not predictable because other factors, such as the gravitational influence of the earth and other planets, may sweep the particles away and dissipate the expected shower.

All this sheds wonderful light on the spectacular meteoric shower which first made its appearance in 1800, reached maximum intensity in 1833, decreased considerably in 1866, and disappeared entirely in 1899. In His omnipotence God ordained that "when the tribulation of those days" came to an end, a certain comet would be "lit up" perhaps by atomic fission. And would pass through the earth's orbit at such a time and place as to produce the most outstanding display of celestial fireworks of all time. He further ordained that while this comet tail would contact the earth on successive occasions in the "time of the end" as the comet returned on its thirty-three year journey through space, the 'Stream would, by gravitational displacement and other factors, decrease in concentration and at last completely disappear.

Nearly nineteen centuries before it was to appear God foretold this last-day celestial display and exactly on time the "sign" appeared and was recognized as one of the promised tokens of the return of the Son of man.

Surely we can put our trust in the Word of such a One who knows "the end from the beginning," and have confidence that all the rest of His promises, as yet unfulfilled, will be "yea and amen" in Christ Jesus.