

Chapter 1

Decade of Destiny

A hundred years ago, life for most Americans seemed happy and carefree. The Gay Nineties they called it. Excitement and optimism pervaded the land, from the bustling harbors of New York to the blossoming orchards of California,

And why not be upbeat? The West had been won. Our nation had recovered from its Civil War. The Industrial Revolution promised a peaceful and prosperous utopia. No wonder the future sparkled with star-spangled possibilities.

Unfortunately, how times have changed from those “Gay Nineties”! A century later, the word gay itself no longer means happy and carefree living. Now it connotes controversy, pain, and deadly disease. In many other ways we’ve also suffered serious loss in our society, despite all our technological advances. Many thoughtful observers see this time in earth’s history as the Decade of Destiny - our “make it or break it” moment of truth with human survival hanging in the balance.

Having so much at stake, it seems fitting for us in this book to investigate the explosive issues of our time. Only then can we be informed and prepared for whatever lies ahead. We will find in the Scriptures surprisingly relevant solutions for society’s perplexing problems.

Problem solving was far from the minds of many Americans in the 1890s. Back then, it seemed that the world was getting better and better. The New York Times typified the spirit of the day when it proclaimed in an editorial: “We step upon the threshold of ... the new century, facing a still brighter dawn of civilization.”

The nation was at peace overseas, while at home, Civil War wounds had healed. Although racism remained, at least the country had rid itself of the cancer of slavery. Economic prosperity fueled the industrial revolution, accelerated by new transcontinental railroads.

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Scientific breakthroughs unleashed a startling stream of new discoveries such as the X-ray, which revolutionized surgery. Tractors promised to give farmers a new lease on life. Electricity offered untold wonders - someone had even invented a toaster!

Best of all was the motorcar. In 1892 William Morrison paraded the first automobile through the streets of Chicago. At the end of the decade, nearly 8,000 cars sputtered their way around the country.

The new invention did pose some problems. One writer explained, "The operator [of a motorcar] must combine the intelligence of the driver with that of the horse." Prudently, New York City enforced a speed limit of nine miles per hour.

Life was simpler back in the 1890s. Even our government in Washington wasn't as complex as it is today. White House correspondent Albert Halstead observed, "It is not always necessary, although better, to make an engagement [an appointment] to see the president." Well, that certainly has changed now!

In New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty opened her arms to a better life for millions of immigrants passing through Ellis Island. Wages were low a century ago, but prices were low too. A Chicago couple furnishing a home could buy a mahogany parlor table for \$3.95, a sofa for \$9.98, and a brass-trimmed bed for \$3.00. Top quality suits cost \$10.65; shirts, 23 cents.

In the 1890s, steelmaster Andrew Carnegie saw his annual profits double. There seemed no limit for someone with talent and ambition. Horatio Alger fueled the fantasies of millions when he suggested: "If you are good and work hard, someday you will be rich." Even farmers enjoyed the prosperity of bumper crops.

There were challenges, of course - plenty of them. As I mentioned, racism persisted, not to be dealt with until decades later when the social patriot Martin Luther King, Jr., called us to moral accountability. While the nineteenth century American economy soared during the Industrial Revolution, too many

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factories were sweatshops, where women and even children endured long hours in danger and drudgery for a pittance - \$3.54 a week - while wealthy industrialists pocketed the profits.

All things considered, though, life was looking up. The Chicago World's Exposition showcased the spirit of the 1890s. Scientific progress and a love for entertainment combined in the graceful Ferris Wheel - but there was nothing scientific about the dancer "Little Egypt," a forerunner of the unabashed hedonism in the Roaring Twenties.

In the 1890s, secular humanism flourished - the belief that we humans have within ourselves the resources needed to survive and thrive. Darwin's evolutionary theory was gaining ground; even ministers got swept up in heralding an evolving Utopia. In the words of one pastor:

Laws are becoming more just, rulers humane; music is becoming sweeter and books wiser; homes are happier, and the individual heart becoming at once more just and more gentle.

Sounds a lot like the kinder, gentler nation we are still longing for today. Since the 1890s we have suffered two world wars and continual conflict of all kinds. Of course, our labor situation has dramatically improved, and much progress has been made in civil rights. But despite America's economic and social achievement, we find ourselves in a more precarious situation than ever before.

Consider the economy. Business may still be thriving on the coasts, but our heartland has been suffering. Farms, mines, oil fields, and steel mills have languished, leaving thousands unemployed. Homeless families haunt the streets of our cities - and rural areas too. Worse yet, tidings of economic trouble brewing overseas may be more threatening than any domestic devastation. Nearly 2,000 years ago, the apostle James penned a startling warning of hard times in the time of the end:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your

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garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded (James 5:1-3).

Here we have a dismal portrayal of world finances in the last days. Just when the wealthy are enjoying economic prosperity, business as usual, something unsettling happens. Our financial system disintegrates to the point that wealth is “corroded” - symbolizing severe economic crisis.

Who could forget Black Monday, October 19, 1987? Amid the frenzied shouting of Wall Street traders, the market plummeted more than 500 points in one terrifying day, plunging even deeper, percentage-wise, than any single day of the Great Depression. Although our economy rallied, we saw chilling evidence that what some experts said could never happen did happen, like a bolt out of the blue sky.

And, according to the Scripture we just read, an economic collapse is indeed on its way. When our monetary structure crumbles, a time of trouble results, described in the passage we just read as a “day of slaughter.” And God’s Word predicted all this would happen just before the “coming of the Lord” - the time in which you and I live today.

As we contemplate the financial crisis approaching, let me assure you of this. You can be safe and secure even during any economic collapse. Safe in God’s care - provided you are willing to accept His conditions.

Back in the 1890s, America stood proudly at the height of military strength. The easily-won Spanish-American War planted the Stars and Stripes on the shores of Asia. The United States had arrived as an unchallenged world power. But beyond the horizon, trouble loomed. As the nineteenth century faded, Kaiser Wilhelm in Berlin fired thirty-three guns to salute a new era for Germany, to “win the place she had not attained,” as he put it. The horrors of World War I followed, after which came an even more devastating World War II. Without question, our world could not survive another all-out war.

Come with me back to October 1962, those spine-tingling days of the Cuban missile crisis. Khrushchev, the cagey old

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dictator, dared to test the resolve of our forceful young president, John Kennedy. We edged perilously close to nuclear war - much closer than previously known, recently declassified records reveal. Thank God, the Soviets backed down and granted the world a stay of execution.

In recent years, with both superpowers negotiating instead of trying to intimidate each other, tensions have eased considerably.

But a chilling warning of Bible prophecy challenges our present peace and security:

When they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Thank God, we don't have to be caught off guard:

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief... . Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober (1 Thessalonians 5:4-6).

These are sobering times. We must be alert.

In the 1890s, there was no thought of mass extermination from nuclear or chemical war. Now, besides those awful threats, we have another bomb bursting upon us: overpopulation, with three-and-a-half times as many people alive now as lived on this planet a century ago. Back then, we didn't have widespread famines with millions starving overseas. Now, even in this land of plenty, hungry people roam our streets, many of them addicted to alcohol and cocaine.

A century ago Americans cherished respect for authority. That was before Watergate. Today even parents are not respected as they once were. Television sitcoms poke fun at parental authority, especially dad. Without the moral absolutes of God's Law, society is decaying - all of this in tragic fulfillment of prophecy. The apostle Paul predicted:

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But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good (2 Timothy 3:1-3).

A century ago it was safe to walk the streets of our cities. People even left their doors unlocked. Now our cities have become war zones of gangs and drugs. Mass murderers terrorize entire metropolitan areas. It was back in the 1960s when our society began flirting with unrestrained freedom. “Doing your own thing,” they called it, all in the name of peace and love. But the erosion of morality swept us into the gutter of pain and shame. We suffer the heartache of teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, and drug addiction, not to mention vandalism, violence, and sexually transmitted disease.

All this has resulted from rejecting God’s standard of moral absolutes, His Ten Commandments. Look at the type of people the Bible predicted would populate our world in the end time:

Traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Timothy 3:4, 5).

The most disturbing thing about our current spiritual decay is that religious leaders have led the way into immoral pleasure seeking. A century ago Americans had spiritual leaders they felt they could trust. Evangelist Dwight L. Moody, by the time he retired in 1892, had won the respect of millions. In 1895 Billy Sunday took up the torch and began preaching to huge, attentive crowds. But now, for too many Americans, organized religion has become a joke - especially with the unthinkable scandals among religious broadcasters. Thank God for faithful ones like Billy Graham, who live above reproach. Other voices of faithfulness and integrity ring true as well. I’m thinking of James Dobson with his “Focus on the Family,” and my good

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friend Lloyd Ogilvie. Many others too. One of the most important voices of our time is Chuck Colson, formerly of Watergate fame, who with his Prison Fellowship organization is accomplishing great good.

Although there has been a revival of religious interest in recent years, much of what passes for faith these days is nothing more than “give me what I want” selfishness. “Claim your miracle,” they say. “Get what you want from God.” But tell me, don’t you think we should rather think of what God wants for our lives - after all, He created us!

You see my concern here. Another matter of deep distress is the environment. Americans in the 1890s never had to worry about acid rain or the greenhouse effect of the shrinking ozone layer. But now pollution has ravaged mother earth, Ecologists fear that irreversible damage may have been done to our world.

In March of 1989, a ruptured oil tanker spilled 11 million gallons of thick crude into Alaska’s Prince William Sound and beyond. Cleanup workers onshore, being paid \$16.73 an hour, scrubbed off the grime from potato-sized rocks, one by one. It was a futile and pitiful attempt to undo the irreversible damage suffered.

As we consider the way things have been going in our world, with all the pollution, the weaponry, the crime and immorality, positive thinking seems almost irrational. Can our world even last until the end of the decade? What happens when terrorist madmen get their restless fingers on the nuclear trigger?

But let’s take courage, friend. Help is on the way. God has wonderful things in store for His committed people after Jesus comes:

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13).

Thank God, our Lord Jesus Christ will cleanse this old planet of all its crime, all its pollution, all its selfishness,

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weaponry, and war. Peace on earth at last - what a day that will be!

A foretaste of this peace on earth happened, incredibly, on a battlefield during World War I. As reported in Guideposts magazine, it took place on Christmas Eve, 1914. In the rugged countryside of France, British and German troops had dug miles-long trenches, from which they blasted each other with machine guns and mortars.

Between the German and British trenches lay a barren no man's land, a narrow strip of craters and shattered trees where anything that moved was shot. Whenever there was a lull in the firing, the shivering men on both sides could hear the noise of cooking going on in the enemy trenches.

Late on Christmas Eve, with freezing rain still falling and the temperature dropping, a British guard heard a new sound wafting across no man's land. In the enemy trenches a man was singing: "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht." It was a tune the British sentry recognized as "Silent Night, Holy Night." He began to hum along with the melody. Then a second British soldier crawled over and joined in. Soon others on both sides began blending their rough voices across the war-torn battlefield.

The Germans offered a second carol, "O Tannenbaum," and the British responded with "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." On and on through the night the singing continued. As dawn broke, signs appeared on both sides, in two languages, "Merry Christmas!"

Then, incredibly, one by one the soldiers laid down their guns and crawled beneath the barbed wire into no man's land, scores of British and German troops meeting together. The soldiers opened their wallets and showed off pictures of their families and exchanged gifts of candy.

This experience, surely one of history's most remarkable occurrences on any battlefield, has come to be known as the Soldier's Truce. Tragically, it was over all too soon. By mid-morning Christmas day, furious officers ordered their men back to the trenches. Soon the deadly bullets were whizzing back and forth again. Later that day a command came from British

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headquarters forbidding such contact: “We are here to fight, not to fraternize!”

Nevertheless, for a few hours the master of those soldiers was neither the kaiser or an earthly king, but heaven’s Prince of Peace.

And thank God, the day is coming when that same Lord of glory will break through the clouds and put an end to war! An end to pollution, greed, and crime. The peace of God will reign unchallenged throughout this purified planet.

Where will you be on that day, my friend? Will you be shivering in the trenches of sin, or will you be rejoicing with God’s committed people, saying, “Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him, and He has come to save us!”