

Publishing Editor's column

SOME YEARS AGO I read a book entitled *Turning Points in History*, in which the writer not only dealt with the events themselves but put forward ideas as to what would have happened had things turned out differently. It is always interesting to speculate on such matters. What, for example, would our lives be like today in Britain if Nelson had been defeated at the battle of Trafalgar? Answers can vary from the trivial (no cricket or fish-and-chips) to the important (a completely different legal system).

From our position as Bible readers who believe that God is working out a purpose on the earth, we look at things from a different point of view from most people. Looking back at history, we see the growth of religious freedom, and the creation of an environment in which the Bible could be translated into different languages and made available to all. We also see in more recent times the development of a situation in which the Jews could return to their ancient land and become an independent nation once more, and other developments amongst the nations which fulfil Bible prophecy, such as the rise of Russia as a great power and the coming together of European nations.

We can thus apply the 'What if . . .?' question to various events in history from our own perspective. What if the Spanish Armada had been successful and Roman Catholic Spain had conquered Britain? Would we have the religious freedom and the Bible in English that we prize today? What if the French had emerged as the dominant power in the world after the Napoleonic Wars instead of Britain? Would the return of the Jews have still happened? We answer such questions with a 'No', and we see in the rise and fall of leaders of men, and the key role of the weather at certain times, evidence of the hand of God at work in bringing about the fulfilment of His purpose.

Yet we must not take this argument too far. If it is God's purpose that something will happen then it will happen, regardless of the outcome of a particular situation. Whilst we can look at history and see how God's purpose has worked out in the way events have gone, we sometimes look at current or recent events and have difficulty in seeing how they fit with what we perceive to be Bible prophecy. In such circumstances we wait

in faith for God's purpose to be fulfilled in a different way from what we might have expected. For example, Britain, having showed herself favourable to the return of the Jews, and been given the mandate to rule Palestine, responded to Arab pressure and attempted to limit Jewish immigration. However, exhausted by World War 2 and a hard winter, she relinquished the mandate, opening the way for the independence of Israel and a massive return of the Jews.

One area where the 'What if . . .?' question should surely be avoided is in relation to the work of Jesus Christ. So many prophecies of the Old Testament depended on his perfect obedience. What if he had committed a sin? What if he had turned back at the last minute from the path of suffering? It is not for us to speculate about such things. He *did* live a sinless life and he *did not* turn back from the cross, and that is all that matters to us. We cannot understand how God could know the end from the beginning and reveal it in His Word, and yet His Son have had complete free will whether or not to carry out what was written of him, for God's ways are beyond man's comprehension.

And what of ourselves? Do we ever have 'What if . . .?' thoughts about our lives? What if we had accepted that job? What if we had married that person? We can look back and see that the course of our life might have turned out more difficult for us and the outcome a bad one, and we are thankful that the hand of God seems to have worked for our benefit. If such be the case then the 'What if . . .?' question is a beneficial one to ask, for it encourages us to see that God has directed our steps.

We can also look back with regrets, mindful of our mistakes, of decisions not taken with the right motives, and wish we had done something different. In these circumstances, 'What if . . .?' is an unprofitable question to ask. Instead we need to accept that the past cannot be undone, and to make the best of our lives, learning the lessons of the past, seeking forgiveness for our mistakes and accepting that God is able to use them to shape our characters in the right way, for does He not say to us, "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28)?

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