

## Publishing Editor's column

**W**ITHIN the last year the world has suffered from three major catastrophes: the tsunami which devastated coastal regions of southeast Asia, the hurricane which destroyed New Orleans, and the earthquake which brought widespread devastation to mountainous regions in northern Pakistan. We would expect perhaps one such disaster every two or three years; three within the space of a year seems to be unprecedented. Are we being warned that the overthrow of this present evil world is near?

There have been warnings of even greater catastrophes to come. Two of the world's most important centres of industry and commerce, Tokyo and Los Angeles, lie in earthquake zones, and it has been pointed out that a high-magnitude earthquake centred on either of these places would destroy them and have a devastating effect on the world's financial systems. Scientists have drawn attention to the fact that volcanic activity in the Canary Islands could cause a mountain to collapse into the sea, triggering a tsunami which would devastate the eastern seaboard of the USA, including another great financial centre, New York. We anticipate that the worldwide earthquake and volcanic activity which several scriptures say will occur at the time of our Lord's return will have these effects, but it is possible that greater catastrophes than we have seen so far will occur before that time as further warning of what is to come.

There is now another form of catastrophe that threatens the world, one with the potential to be much worse than any earthquake or hurricane. It is the threat of an influenza epidemic, and of a particularly lethal form of the disease. Experts vary in their assessments of how likely it is that such an epidemic will occur in the near future and how many people it would kill, but it seems to be generally agreed that there will sooner or later be one.

Major flu epidemics (pandemics) have occurred before, notably in 1918, when it is estimated that forty million or more people died. Some strains of flu are more lethal than others, and the one that threatens us is considered to be of the more lethal kind. Better treatments today offer greater chances of surviving an attack of even the more serious forms of flu, but the ease and frequency of modern communications enable it to spread more quickly.

However, these are not the issues which I particularly want to dwell on. The most striking thing I have read on the subject of a flu epidemic concerns the economic threat that it would pose if it were widespread. One major reason for this is the importance which the leisure and tourist industries have for many nations today, with many "run[ning] to and fro" as Daniel prophesied (12:4) and people being "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:4). In a flu epidemic these industries would virtually dry up, with people being afraid to meet with others or to travel, and perhaps even being forbidden to do so. Who would want to attend a major sporting event or go on a long-haul flight if there is the prospect of sitting next to someone with a deadly virus? Furthermore, there is already a slump in retail spending, and a flu epidemic would cause people to postpone all but essential purchases.

All this could cause widespread job losses and business failures. One estimate is that the economy of Britain, for example, would decline by eight per cent. The economies of the Far East would be particularly badly affected, with their dependence on meeting the current enormous demand for consumer products in the West. Intense competition has led to businesses being on a knife-edge for viability, and a severe reduction in demand would be disastrous for many of them.

In Luke's account of our Lord's Olivet Prophecy, we have in verses 10 and 11 what I believe to be a prophecy of conditions in the days just before his return, after which he goes on to speak of what would happen in the apostles' own time. As well as speaking of wars, earthquakes and famines, he also speaks of pestilences being part of the end-time troubles, and a major flu epidemic would certainly be a fulfilment of that.

As brethren and sisters awaiting the coming of the Lord, and yet in many cases now enjoying material prosperity and health provision far beyond what previous generations have had, we are being reminded of the uncertainty of human life and the need to place our hopes in the coming Kingdom, not man's achievements. Whether or not a flu epidemic emerges in the near future, we can expect further reminders of man's powerlessness in the face of the forces God has under His control, before He intervenes in human affairs in the person of His Son.

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