

# Signs of the Times

A SERMON – Preached on Sunday Morning, September 24th, 1866, by

MR. JAMES WELLS

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET

"An everlasting sign that shall not be cut off,"-Isaiah 55. 13.

The meaning simply of this scripture is that substituted state of things that is brought about by the Lord Jesus Christ, and that that state of things is to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Hence the Saviour himself in this verse is compared to the fir tree, in contrast to the thorn; and to the myrtle tree, in contrast to the brier. Here he stands in contrast to sinners. And by those representations there is intended what is called in another place the tree of life; that state of things is here typified which he hath brought about. Then, again, the people of God also are evidently here meant. They also are called fir trees, in contrast to their state by nature, wherein they are as the thorn, worthless, and fitted only for the fuel of God's wrath; and they are compared also to myrtle trees, in contrast to what they are by nature, as briers. Thus they are conformed to the Lord Jesus Christ. He has entered into paradise, and there is a paradise for them, and this state of things shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. There cannot, I think, be any doubt but that this is the meaning of our text. But I shall nevertheless this morning branch out, first, upon the doctrine which our text brings before us-the doctrine of divine signs. That is a doctrine of the highest importance, and a doctrine that the world cannot understand, as will be seen as we go along. Then I shall, secondly, show the two signs on earth by which we are to judge of things that are to come. Lastly, that there is but one sign which the Lord has given us of the ultimate end of the world.

First, then, notice what I may call the doctrine of divine signs. Hence the Saviour said to the Pharisees, "How is it ye do not discern the signs of the times?" Now the signs which the Lord from age to age hath granted are for a threefold purpose. First, to forewarn; secondly, to bring sinners to himself; and thirdly, to keep them with him; so that thus they become an everlasting sign, not to be cut off. Let us first have a word upon the Old Testament on this subject, and then turn to the New. But then these signs that I am about to mention, they were not understood and believed by any but those who were taught of God. Those who were taught of the Lord were forewarned by those signs, and they were saved by those signs, and they continued with God by those signs. Let us have, first, the typical. The Lord appeared to Noah, and Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, was taught to prepare the ark. He foresaw that the flood would come, and that ark, the plan which the Lord gave to him, showed him the wrath to come, and the way of escape. Thus he was forewarned; he abode by this revelation, and was saved, and so continued with God. Now the world did not understand this ark. This ark was the sign of two things: the sign of the coming flood, and the sign of escape from it; but the world did not understand it, and therefore were not saved by it. The Lord will do nothing that he will not forewarn his people of. He would not destroy the cities of the plain without making his purpose known to Abraham and to his servant Lot, that he might be delivered there from. Then you come to Egypt, and you find these three ends there also answered by the signs and wonders the Lord wrought in Egypt; only of course there the ends answered

were temporal, but they were a type of those ends we shall presently have to notice, that are eternal. But then there were but few among the Israelites that understood those signs. Hence said David in the 106th Psalm, "Our fathers understood not thy wonders in Egypt." But with those who were taught of God those wonders answered their three purposes. First, the right-minded Israelites were forewarned. When the Lord came and made a difference between the Egyptian and Israel, those who were taught of the Lord recognized in that the hand of the God of Abraham, and they saw that salvation was coming. Saith the right-minded Israelite, Shall I give up what God has done in bringing me out of Egypt? Shall I give up what God has done in following me with this rock that has supplied me daily in this thirsty land. Shall I give up what God hath done in bringing me manna every day? The right-minded Israelite so recognized God in those manifestations of himself that he did cleave unto the Lord God. He said to himself, A God that could thus bring me out of Egypt could do anything that is needful to be done. Give him up? No. A God that could divide the sea after this manner, a God that could overthrow my adversaries after this manner, a God that can bring water from the rock after this manner, a God that can supply me with manna from day to day in the infinity of his condescension-what will he not do?

Moses includes all these three, namely, that the right-minded among them understood the signs, and were thereby forewarned and saved, and made to cleave unto the Lord their God, when he says, "Ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive unto this day" I must pass by a great many things, because I want to come as quickly as possible to the New Testament upon this matter. I notice in the next place the babylonish captivity. I must have just a word here of great importance, in order to understand the meaning of these signs the Lord hath granted. We see what the signs were to the Israelites, and we see how they were forewarned, the mode in which they were forewarned, and abode by the Lord. Now we come to something rather closer. When the Lord was about to send Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem he granted no outward signs. The only signs that he granted them were signs that none but the men that in modern language are called high Calvinists could understand. Jeremiah was a sign to the Jews that their captivity was coming, that Nebuchadnezzar should destroy the city and temple, that they should be carried away for seventy years into captivity. Jeremiah and some few of the prophets Ezekiel and some few more, these were signs. Take Jeremiah's 31st chapter, and see how he speaks there in the language of the new covenant. The right-minded Israelite saw that Jeremiah as a man of God. But the people in general could not see that; they received other men as the prophets of God. The right-minded Israelite saw that Ezekiel was a man of God. Jeremiah and Ezekiel stood in the eternities of the gospel; both of them were made acquainted with God's everlasting covenant; they were both of them men of God. The spiritually taught, seeing this, listened to them, obeyed them, were forewarned, went over to Nebuchadnezzar, submitted to the king of Babylon, and escaped the destruction. And these prophets were signs that none but those taught of God could understand. I cannot make the matter so strikingly clear to you as I could wish. Now try, if you can, to realize the fact of your being there yourself, and there are a great number of prophets saying that in two years the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar shall be broken, in two years he shall be driven back- that is what they did say,-and that he shall not take this city. We will suppose you are led by them. You are unable to see that that high-doctrine Jeremiah is a man of God; you are unable to see that Ezekiel is a man of God; you are unable to see that Baruch is a man of God; you are unable to see that the Ethiopian that drew Jeremiah up out the dungeon, in the kind way there recorded, is a man of God. You therefore are unable to see the distinction between the prophets of man and the prophets of God; you are guided by this large number of prophets; you linger about; presently the city is taken, your wife and children destroyed before your eyes, you dragged off to be burned, or sent into slavery, or put to some torture or another, what would you think of those prophets afterwards? And how was it you were thus misled? How was it you thus came to be deceived? Because Ezekiel and Jeremiah were the signs that God sent; but they were signs that none understood but those that were taught of God. "Beware," saith the Saviour, of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly

they are ravening wolves." They hate the truth, and hate the sheep, and hate the pasturage, and hate those eternal settlements of the most high God by which alone we can be saved. And thus the apostles given to Christ were for signs; and ministers are for signs, and the people of God are for signs, and all men sent of God are true signs; the others are false signs. See here, then, the importance of being able to judge between the prophet that was of God and the prophet that was not of God. Desolation came in, but those who understood God's signs,-the Lord saith to Ezekiel, "I will be a little sanctuary unto them in Babylon." You go the way I wish you to go; it is my way of saving you. Thou shalt go to Babylon, but thou shalt be delivered there; the Lord shall redeem thee from the hand of the enemy; and so he did. You have nothing to do but open the pages of the book of Daniel, and see the wonders the Lord there wrought on behalf of those that sided with Jeremiah, with Ezekiel, and with Daniel. And again I repeat it, because I think it is making it clear, that these men were, to a man, what in modern language would be called hyper-Calvinists. Read Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Daniel, and you will find that they are all one in the eternity and stability of the kingdom of Christ, the safety of the people, and their ultimate triumph. Thus you will see the three ends were answered. They were forewarned, they fell in with the testimony of the prophet, they were saved, and abode with the Lord, and the Lord abode with them.

But I will now come to the New Testament upon the doctrine of signs. I am aiming to show now that in different ages, when the Lord has manifested himself by certain signs, none have understood them but those of whom he has been the teacher, and that those that understood them were forewarned by them, were saved by them, and abode by the Lord by them. Now it is with pleasure that I look at the signs of the Christian times. The antediluvian, the postdiluvian, the Levitical times were now passed away, and signs came into existence of Christian times having commenced; and every one of those signs that I shall mention did just what I have stated. First, the birth of Jesus Christ was a sign that ancient times were ended, that Christian time, new time was now commenced. But to whom was that a sign? Only to those men whom God sovereignly enlightened. The angel was sent to special persons. There are some godly men watching over their flocks by night. The angel of the Lord shone upon them, and they were sore afraid. Then he opened up the meaning of this sign, and they were forewarned by the manifestation. They went to Bethlehem, they saw the babe, and they heard the testimony of Mary and of Joseph concerning this wondrous babe, and they returned to their fields rejoicing greatly in what they had seen. Thus they were forewarned, went to Bethlehem; secondly, were brought to God, and there is no doubt that they abode with him, and they are with him now. But did Herod understand this sign? Did the Pharisees understand this sign? No, they did not. Then as it was in Egypt, so it was in Christian time, so it is now. None but those that the Lord teaches can understand the signs of heaven. The star appears to have been a public star; any one might have seen it-I should think so; and yet that star, in its meaning, was understood only by those of whom the Lord was the teacher. "We have seen his star in the east." In my own mind, I am inclined to think that that which is called a star was an angel, only in his brilliant appearance compared to a star. An angel means a messenger, and ministers are, as you are aware, compared to stars, and the people of God, too, in their ultimate destiny. They understood that this star meant the birth of a Messiah, of a Saviour, of a luminous Ruler, that should put down the powers of darkness, and himself illumine the souls of myriads, and bring them into everlasting light. "We have seen his star." They were forewarned. But not so other people. They were drawn to Bethlehem, they came to Bethlehem, and they understood, for the Lord taught them what this wondrous Person was, and expressed their homage and love to him-offered to him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And in their simplicity one would say to another, Now, then, let us go and tell the king what a Saviour we have found. Let us go and tell the king of heavens goodness, of God's mercy and loving-kindness; that here is a Savior come into the world, that that star is the sign of his birth, and that we have seen him. No; the deep sovereignty of God comes in, and leaves Herod under the dominion of his own wicked heart, under the dominion of Satan, leaves Herod in the dark, commands the wise men to go to their own country another

way, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy it, and I do not choose to change Herod's heart, for I always have had, as though the Lord should say, mercy upon whom I will have mercy, and whom I will I harden. The sign, then, was understood only by those taught of God. Now can we fall in with the shepherds? I think we can I am sure you can, all of you that are taught of God. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour." You are a poor sinner, you feel you are; what are the best tidings? A Savior. Can we not fall in with the wise men? Yes. Has not the star of truth, the messenger, the prophet, led us to Jesus, and have we not worshipped him? And has not this Lord taken care of us, as he did of the wise men, from that day to this? Then, again, when he came into the house of the Lord, who understood it there? Very few. Simeon and a few more understood it. Ah, he said, "This child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel." He shall bring down many sinners, as he did Saul of Tarsus, and shall bring them up again. "And for a sign which shall be spoken against." The people of God shall understand it, but those that do not understand that sign shall speak against it, and they have to this day spoken against the real characters the Saviour sustains. Now Simeon, Anna, and a few more, understood this sign. Why, this is God's sign this can carry me through Jordan; this can give me a better life than I have now, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." We come now to the baptism of the Savior. Who understood that sign? Very few. God gave them a sign from heaven,—"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." Those who were taught of God understood it, and abode by the Lord by it, Again, His miracles were signs; yet they were not understood by the people at large. They attributed his miracles, as you know, to the power of Satan. But there appears to have been scarcely a miracle wrought but that some by means of that miracle were brought to believe on him; for although you read that though he had done so many miracles they believed not on him, howbeit so-and-so believed on him. So that while as a rule the general body did not believe on him, there were some whose hearts the Lord touched, and they did believe on him. What a sign he was to the leper when he cleansed him! What did that do? Why, bring the leper to God, and, as the leper was touched spiritually as well as literally, keep him with God. And so the rest of the miracles that he wrought. But the Lord can make that a sign which he pleases; Look at the woman of Samaria; why, the Lord made her a sign to the Samaritans, and opened their eyes, they were fore warned; they came to themselves, and said, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying; for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world." Then his life was a sign, See the life he lived. "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." Could any man charge him with seeking the wealth, or self, or honor, or ease, or pleasure of this world? Was not his life a life of complete self-denial, of continual sacrifice? Did he not go about doing good? And that life was more than blameless: that meritorious life stood to those taught of God as the sign of eternal justification before God, for we are justified by his righteousness. Then, again, his atoning death was a sign; but who understood it? And there was no miracle, no part, by which men were stance forewarned, and saved, and are no doubt with God now? There were. The centurion and those with him understood the sign. Why, it is the Son of God; "Truly this was a righteous man." Their eyes were opened, they were forewarned, acknowledged the truth, looked to God, and are no doubt now in heaven. See the sovereignty of God again. Here are two men, two thieves. Presently sovereign mercy enters the soul of one; all at once, to his astonishment, the dignity of the person of Christ, his perfect life, his substitutional atoning death, the kingdom into which he was to enter, the glory he was to be arrayed in, and the great purpose of all this, the eternal salvation of sinners—all this was unfolded to the thief, and he said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." "This day shalt thou be in paradise with me." He understood His resurrection was a sign also; that is, a sign of Christian time having commenced, and a sign of salvation, it was essential to salvation. So the word of God shows that our resurrection, spiritually and ultimately, both are by the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. His ascension to heaven was a sign, but only his own disciples understood it. The descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was a sign. And see what a mistake the people made. It is a remarkable thing, whenever the world give their opinion

of the people of God they are always sure to give an opinion that will directly or does by implication charge them with being very bad characters. It is a very difficult thing to get a good word from the world, especially the professing world, and some of the hypocrisies are in this as bad as others. Hence upon that day when the Holy Spirit descended, and the apostles could speak sixteen different languages, for there were sixteen different nations present, or representatives of nations, and the apostles could speak to them in their own languages;- Why, said one, what do you think of this? Think! Why, they are all drunk together, that is the fact, they are all filled with new wine. Do not you know what our minister, what our respectables said of Jesus of Nazareth, that he was a gluttonous man and a winebibber? and these are his followers. They are all drunk together. But Peter was not put out by it. He said, "These are not drunken." If we are not all tee-totallers we are not drunkards. Besides, it is a very unusual thing to be drunk in the third hour of the day. Such a thing was not known then, and therefore that did for a good powerful argument at that time. I am afraid such an argument would not have so much force now as it had then, but it did for a good argument then. Well, if they are not drunk, what is it then? If you will be quiet I will tell you. And so they were quiet, and he showed them that it was that which was predicted by the prophet Joel; and while he was going on with his discourse, the arrows of conviction seized the souls of three thousand. Now they understood the sign. Ah, they said, it is the presence of God, the power of God. See now the fulfilment of prediction, how faithful the Lord is to his word.

Now, then, what are the signs of the present time in which we live? There are but two other signs, which I shall name presently. What is the sign of the time in which we live? The birth of Christ that is a sign to me of my heavenly birth, and it is my salvation. What is the sign now of the present time? Why, the miracles of Christ; they are all come down to us, and they stand as signs of the Lord's mercy and goodness to us. His life, that is a sign to us of justification; his death is a sign to us of eternal salvation. His resurrection is a sign to us of eternal life; his ascension is a sign to us of the certainty of our ascension at the appointed time; his enthronement at the right hand of God is a sign that we shall be there also, for "because I live, ye shall live also. Where I am, there ye shall be also." These are the signs to keep to; these signs will do you good. They are the signs of the Christian dispensation, and those signs will continue down to the end of time. As to men pretending from the political convulsions of nations, men pretending from wars, the temporal downfall of the Pope, or other circumstances, to predict what is *coming* upon the earth, why, it is all delusion. You can predict nothing from those things whatever. All those things are in the world, and after the world, and belong to the world, and are no sign one way or another of the end of the world or of the coming of Christ. We cannot, therefore, infer anything from any of political state of nations whatever.

I notice now, secondly, the two signs on earth, by which we are to judge things to come. The one is the sign of God's mercy, and the other is the sign of God's wrath. Every Christian is a sign of God's mercy. You are a vessel of mercy, a sign of mercy. God will continue his mercy to you and to you dwelling, and will continue his mercy to others on your account. For if there be only one good man in the ship, though the ship be broken to pieces, the head part remained unmovable, and not a life was lost. "I have given thee all them that sail with thee." Every Christian is a sign of God's mercy; not only a sign of mercy shown but of mercy that he will yet show. "He that hath begun the good work will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ." And the more we have of these signs in our nation, so much the better for old England. You know that if there had been ten in the cities of the plain, those cities would not have been destroyed; and as long as we have a goodly number of real Christians in England, all the nations of the earth may gather together against it, but England would prove to be impregnable and invulnerable, nothing could move her; because if God be there, if he has a goodly sprinkle of people there, then we may apply the words to her in a minor sense that are applied to the city of God, "She shall not be moved; God is in the midst of her; he will help her, and that right early." I hope we have in England, then, some thousands of these

signs. "The children thou hast given me are for signs and for wonders." So I advise you that know not the Lord to make much of the people of God. You will not have them long. You would not be so well off now if it were not for them, for it is on their account that the Lord blesses you. "I will make them and the place round about them a blessing." So I judge of England by the number of Christians, and by the state of those Christians. Every ungodly man is a sign of wrath, every enemy is a sign of wrath. You that know not the Lord, you are every day seeking, somewhat ignorantly I grant, to bring down God's wrath upon your devoted head, and upon those around you. If Jehoshaphat go into affinity with Ahab, though Jehoshaphat is a good man, yet, because he makes a bad use of good things, he will have to flee, out of the host, cry out to God to be sheltered. Ahab had sought Elijah's life, so had Jezebel, and were therefore subjected to God's wrath. Every enemy, therefore, every Puseyite parson, every Catholic priest, and every ceremony that thy bring forward into their so-called places of worship, all these are seeking to draw down the wrath of Almighty God, for they are all offensive in his eyes. Thus, then, the signs we have to judge by as to what may come upon England, or any nation, are the number of Christians and what those Christians are, whether they are alive to God's truth, decided for him, and stand like iron pillars, defenced cities, brazen walls, and would much rather lay down their life than sacrifice one particle of that vital godliness by which alone they are saved. So, then, let the people of God lessen in number, let conversions cease, let the thousands of Christians we have in England die off one after the other and let there be nothing left but Pharisaic professors; then I can prophesy with unerring certainty that the destruction of this nation is not far off. When was Babylon itself destroyed? In the very height of its luxury and prosperity. Yea, all the ancient cities-go back to Nineveh, go on to Babylon, to Thebes in Upper Egypt, and to Rome,-all of them; their destruction set in after they had got rid of the people of God, whom the world in all ages has hated. Therefore, pride ourselves as we may in our scientific discoveries, in our mechanical achievements and improvements take away the people of God, Victoria's throne would not be worth a straw. No my hearers, it is on their account, they are the salt of the earth, they are the pillars of the world, and the Lord will bless ten thousand sinners rather than destroy one saint. May the Lord, then, increase the number of real Christians, and that will be a sign that, so far from its being past twelve o'clock with old England, we should think the sun is only just rising upon her, and that she has a career of prosperity before her that shall surpass anything that has ever yet been realized. But that will depend upon the blessing of the Lord.

Now I may just mention here what I believe to be two or three delusions. There is a great deal said now about the Jews being gathered into their own land. I believe that to be a sheer delusion. There is not a partial of authority for such a doctrine as the restoration of the Jews to their land. We must go to the New Testament, and take it as expounding to us the Old Testament, and not go to the Old Testament Scriptures and put our fanciful interpretations upon them. By thus taking the New Testament as our guide, we shall see that there is no land held out to Jew or Gentile but that eternal land that is by Jesus Christ. There is no other name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved. Then again, that Jesus Christ will come and reign on the earth I believe to be sheer delusion. There is not a scripture in all the Bible to prove anything of the sort. Nor doth the thousand years mean a thousand years literally, but it means a long period of time, God alone understanding the duration thereof. It represents, as I solemnly believe, the gospel dispensation. And in our day they are quoting the words, "Behold, I come quickly." Well, let us explain that. What is meant by the Saviour when he saith, "Behold, I come quickly"? Just the same that is meant in the 46th Psalm, and in the 18th of Luke. Now put the three together, and there you get the meaning. "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, and that right early." Are you in great distress of soul as a Christian? He will help you, will not let you be there very long; he will turn your captivity away; he will see you again; he will help you in the right time. Are you in almost unbearable difficulties in circumstance? He will turn your captivity in that sense; he will help you right early. Oh, Lazarus is dead, and in the grave four days. I will be there soon enough. "Lord, if thou had been here, my brother had not died." I was here. Not in thy bodily presence, Lord. No, but I was here

in spirit; I saw it all, I knew all about it. It means his interposition for his people spiritually and temporally; does not mean his personal coming at the last. Then the 18th of Luke:-"Shall not God avenge his own elect? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily;" that is, in due time, proper time. Their adversaries shall have partial dominion for a time; they shall worry you for a time; but by-and-bye God will stop their mouths by stopping their breath, and you shall say, There is that lion dead now, cannot hurt me. He shall help speedily. Therefore, "I come quickly" means in the manifestation of himself spiritually or providentially as the matter shall require. "The Judge standeth before the door." I see how they are judging and condemning you; I will step in presently and condemn them. I see them shooting at you; I will shoot at them presently. I will take care they shall miss their mark, but I won't miss my mark. No; Goliath shall not be able to strike David, but David shall not miss his mark with Goliath. "I come quickly." It has nothing whatsoever to do with Chris's coming to the earth. Now the Lord did give signs of the destruction of Jerusalem, and those signs should be understood by his people. When you see the Roman armies before the city then know that it is nigh, even at the door. And that Jesus Christ will come again the Bible is as clear upon as we could wish it to be; but then it will be at the last great day. He will then come in flaming fire; but to whom will he come in flaming fire? Not to his people. The fire will in fold itself among the ranks of his enemies, and will be between him and his enemies. He will not come in flaming fire to his people. Besides, the dead in Christ shall rise first, and you will be above the fire, you will be up in the air, and the fire will be down here, where we now are-upon this earth. The subterranean fires of the earth will be called into action, and the earth will be burned up; and then there is the fire of God's wrath over the wicked, and you are up with Christ above the world. You see the fire beneath you, you see the burning globe, and you see the wicked miles and miles under your feet, and his wrath sinks them down to the bottomless pit. But to his own people "he shall come in like manner as ye have seen him go." Calmly he left the disciples at Olivet, and ascended to heaven, and as calmly shall he come at the end. As calmly as the priest did when he came with his face shining out of the temple, the Savior shall come the second time without sin unto salvation, While the others are on the burning globe, all their inheritance all their hope gone forever, and God's wrath pouring down upon them: you will be in the sunshine; not in the sunshine of the material sun, but in the sunshine of God; for "God is a sun and a shield." That will be your place; and you will sanction what the Saviour shall do, and will shout "Alleluia!" and the smoke of the torment of the lost shall ascend forever and ever. So he shall come, and there shall be a resurrection of the just and of the unjust. That day is fixed, and the just and the unjust will both rise the same day; only the saints will rise first. But then that will take only a moment. So eager will this almighty Savior be to gain full possession of his saints, that the magnificence of his power shall appear in the last great transaction; he shall raise them in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. And while, as I hold their ranks will reach thousands of miles, yet in consequence of the greatness of the powers which they shall then possess, they shall look on with calm dignity while flaming fire carries the others away to everlasting perdition, and you are safe, far above all heavens. Talk about his coming to reign on earth, why, you shall go far-above all heavens