

The Last Days

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2 Timothy 3.

The instruction of the third chapter of the Second Epistle to Timothy demands our careful study for therein we have on the one hand, warnings as to the solemn condition of Christendom in the last days, while, on the other hand, we are instructed as to our resources, so that the believer may live according to God in spite of the evil.

It is an immense mercy that we are not left to form our own judgment as to the condition of Christendom, nor to follow our own thoughts as to how we should walk in these last days. We have the mind of God, both as to the evil, and as to the path God would have us to tread in the presence of the evil. In the first nine verses of this chapter we have a solemn picture of the terrible condition of Christendom as seen by God at the close of the Church period. In verses 10 to 17, we have a clear unfolding of the mind of God for His people in these difficult times.

To understand the instruction of the chapter it is necessary to observe the connection with the chapters that precede and follow. In 2 Timothy 1 and 2 Timothy 2, we have the mind of the Lord for His people in the Apostle's day, when the corruption of the Christian profession had already commenced. In the second chapter the Apostle likens the House of God to a great house in which vessels to dishonour are found in association with vessels to honour. The Apostle instructs the individual believer how to act in the presence of this corruption. He presses three great truths; first, separation from iniquity and vessels to dishonour; secondly, following righteousness, faith, love, and peace, with those that call upon the Lord out of a pure heart; thirdly, to do so in a right spirit, marked by gentleness, patience and meekness. It is only as we individually answer to these instructions that we shall be able to understand and profit by the solemn truths of 2 Timothy 3. In this chapter the Apostle looks beyond the day in which he lived to the last days in which our lot is cast, to show the development of the evil which had already commenced in his day. Having set forth the development of the corruption of Christendom, and the resources of the godly in the midst of the corruption, in 2 Timothy 4, he encourages the servant of the Lord to continue his work for the Lord however evil the day.

1. THE EVIL OF THE LAST DAYS (Vv. 1 to 9).

The chapter naturally opens with a solemn picture of the evils of the last days, for, unless we see the true condition of Christendom, we shall hardly appreciate the instruction that God has given to enable the believer to rise above the evil.

In reading these verses we do well to remember that the terrible condition portrayed is not a description of Heathendom, nor of Judaism, but of Christendom. This condition is marked by four outstanding characteristics:-

First (Vv. 1-4); we are warned that in the last days the mass who compose the great Christian profession will be marked by *uncontrolled selfishness*, leading to every form of evil and self-indulgence. The solemn description commences with the statement that "men shall be lovers of their own selves." Hence they covet for self, boast in self are proud of themselves, and are impatient of every form of restraint upon self, human or divine. They indulge self according to their own evil lusts and are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Secondly (v. 5); men will seek to cover the evil condition of the Christian profession with the cloak of sanctity. They will affect the form of piety. They will retain outward religious forms while living a life of selfish indulgence that plainly shows they know nothing of the spiritual power of a new life. From this great lifeless profession we are definitely told to "turn away."

Thirdly (Vv. 6, 7); the last days will be marked by the diffusion of error working by the underhanded methods of men who "creep into houses" and appeal to the emotions and lusts of those ignorant of the truth.

Fourthly; the truth will be resisted by imitation. The magicians of Egypt, who withstood Moses, set forth the character and methods of these opposers. Jannes and Jambres sought to resist the testimony of God, not by a denial of the truth, but by imitation. They endeavoured to show that their power, though avowedly derived from another source, was as great as the power of God, and that they could produce results equal to those produced by the word of God through Moses. What Moses did by the word of the LORD they "did in like manner with their enchantments" (Ex. 7: 11, 22; Ex. 8: 7). But their folly was exposed.

They could produce remarkable results but they could not give life. When they attempted to produce life, we read, "They could not" (Ex. 8: 18).

This then is the terrible condition of the Christian profession in these last difficult days. We are warned that all the worst feelings of the human heart will be linked with the profession of Christianity, and every form of wickedness will cover itself with the outward form of godliness.

Moreover, we are faced with a number of religious cults professing to be Christian, such as Christian Science, Christadelphianism, and the Oxford Group Movement, which do not, like infidelity, deny the truth, but, none the less resist the truth by imitation. They seek to imitate the new Christian life, which is the result of the grace of God, by changing and reforming the old life as the result of human efforts. They may indeed, deceive the unwary by producing a changed life, but it is only the old life reformed and not the new life of Christ. The leaders of these evil cults are exposed by the word of God as "men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith."

These then are the evils that constitute the last days; perilous, or "difficult," times for the believer. Nevertheless, as the remainder of the chapter will show, God has made full provision that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works in an evil day.

2. INSTRUCTION FOR THE MAN OF GOD IN THE LAST DAYS (Vv. 10-17).

With verse 10 we pass on to learn the rich provision that God has made in order that the believer may escape the evils of Christendom in the last days. To this end there is set before us:-

First, Paul's doctrine, or "teaching;"

Secondly, Paul's manner of life

Thirdly, the Lord, Himself

Fourthly, continuance in the things we have learned; and

Fifthly, the Holy Scriptures.

(a) PAUL'S DOCTRINE (v. 10). If we are to escape the evils of Christendom, we must be established in Paul's doctrine. The Apostle can say of Timothy, "Thou hast fully known my doctrine." It is no mere vague or partial acquaintance that will suffice: we need to be "thoroughly acquainted" with Paul's doctrine (N. Tn.).

Paul's doctrine unfolds to us in the fullest way the glad tidings concerning God's Son Jesus Christ to a world of sinners. But we do well to remember that the gospel revealed to Paul, and preached to the world, included a great deal more than is generally proclaimed in Evangelical circles. He not only proclaimed the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, but also the entire setting aside of the man that committed the sins. Paul's doctrine was not a reformation of the "old man" and a mere change of life; he preached the judgment, and setting aside, of the old man in death, and the introduction of an entirely new life-Christ. Moreover, Paul's doctrine delivers us from the world: he preached that Christ "gave Himself for our sins that He might deliver us from this present evil world" (Gal. 1: 4).

It is manifest, then, that Paul's doctrine exposes the corruption of the last days. Christendom retains and indulges the old man under the cover of a Christian profession. It may seek to produce a change of life, but it is apart from Christ and the grace of God, and, moreover leaves people in the world. It is an effort to make the old man respectable, and the evil world a better and a brighter place. Christianity, as unfolded in Paul's doctrine, brings us to Christ-a New Man in a New world.

Further, Paul's doctrine embraces the whole truth of the Church. Not only does his teaching proclaim God's grace to the sinner, through Christ, but it also reveals to us God's purpose for believers as united to Christ to form His body -the Church. One great snare of these last days is the effort to lead believers to rest content with the knowledge of salvation while ignoring their privileges and responsibilities as forming part of the Church of God-to make everything of that which meets man's need while remaining utterly indifferent to that which is dearest to the heart of Christ.

(b) PAUL'S MANNER OF LIFE (Vv. 10, 11). If the devil cannot prevent us from having the light of Paul's doctrine he will seek to mar the manner of life so that the doctrine is brought into contempt by the inconsistency of the life. If we are to escape this evil of the last days we shall not only need Paul's doctrine but, we must heed his manner of life. Very blessedly, the Apostle sets before us the character of this life. Inwardly it is a life marked by "purpose, faith, longsuffering, love and patience." Outwardly it is marked by persecutions and afflictions.

Too often our lives are not characterised by any definite purpose, or that purpose is far short of Christ. The Apostle was a man of purpose. He could say "For me to live is Christ;" and he says, "One thing I do . . . I pursue looking towards the goal for the prize of the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus." Moreover, his life was marked by "faith." How many there are that take the outside path without faith for the path, so that when trouble or difficulty arises, they become a source of weakness or give up the path altogether. In answer to the call of God, Abraham went out by faith. Lot, too, went out of the Land of Ur, but he went out with Abraham. Though he was a just man he had no faith for the path, and when the test came he turned aside. Again, "longsuffering" marked the Apostle's life. Like

His Master he met reproaches, slights and insults, in silent longsuffering. Nevertheless, love was behind the longsuffering. His was not the silence of haughty contempt, but rather the silence of love that grieved over the evildoer. Moreover, his life was marked by endurance. In spite of persecution and afflictions he endured, like Moses of old, "as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11: 27).

(c) THE LORD (v. 11). In the presence of the evil of the last days, we have not only the doctrine of Christianity as revealed through Paul, and the manner of life, consistent with the doctrine, set forth in the Apostle, but we have the Lord, Himself, to support us. Again the Apostle refers to his own experience. of the Lord's delivering grace to encourage us in turning to the Lord. Whatever persecutions he had to meet, whatever afflictions he was called to endure, he could say "out of them all the Lord delivered me." In the next chapter, he can say, "The Lord stood *with me* and *strengthened me*" (17); again, looking on to what remained of his path down here, he said, "The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work and will preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom" (18).

If we are to fully know Paul's doctrine, and live the manner of life consistent with the doctrine in the face of every kind of opposition and even persecution, we shall need the sustaining grace of the Lord. Let us not think we can hold the doctrine, and live the life, apart from Christ. To the disciples the Lord has to say, "Without Me ye can do nothing." The enemy is strong and we are weak, but the Apostle found that the Lord's grace was sufficient to enable him to meet all the power of the enemy arrayed against him, and that the Lord's "strength is made perfect in weakness." Thus he can add, "When I am weak? then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12: 9, 10).

We need to be conscious of our weakness in order to be continually cast upon the Lord.

(d) CONTINUE THOU IN THE THINGS WHICH THOU HAST LEARNED" (v. 14). In a day of abounding evil and confusion, there is always the danger of growing disheartened and giving up the truth and abandoning the life that answers to the truth. The Lord's word to Philadelphia is' "Hold fast." Here we are exhorted to "Continue"-to continue in Paul's doctrine, to continue in the life consistent with the doctrine, to continue cleaving to the Lord, and thus continue in the things we have learned.

Let us remember that throughout the history of the Church the great truths, that can be summed up by the Apostle as "My doctrine," have been obscured if not entirely ignored and forgotten. But, in these last days there has been a gracious recovery of the truth. Moreover, this recovery of the truth immediately entails conflict, for the great effort of the enemy will ever be to mar any testimony to Christ by robbing us of the truth. This he will seek to do by using many specious pleas in order to draw us back into associations that are contrary to Paul's doctrine. If we allow ourselves to be enticed into forming links with any religious associations short of the truth we shall most certainly lose the truth, abandon the separate path of faith, and settle down in the corrupt worldly religious profession. Hence the need of the word, "Continue thou in those things which thou hast learned, and of which thou hast been fully persuaded, knowing of whom thou hast learned them."

Why, we may ask, do we find believers suddenly give up some great truth that they have long professed? Is it not because they have not learned truth from an inspired source. They accepted the truth simply on the word of some teacher It was not held in simple faith in God's word Thus they are not "fully persuaded" of the truth.

(e) THE SCRIPTURES (Vv. 15-17). The final safeguard against all the evils of Christendom, in these last days, will be found in clinging to the inspiration and sufficiency of Holy Scripture. There we have the truth presented in a permanent form, guarded from error by inspiration, and presented with divine authority.

The Apostle sets before us the great gain of the Scriptures. First, they are able to make us "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." Secondly, having directed us to Christ so that we find in Him salvation, we shall further learn that "every Scripture" is "*profitable* for the believer, inasmuch as in the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, we shall discover things concerning Christ (Luke 24: 27, 44). Furthermore we shall find how profitable the Scriptures are for "*conviction*." Alas! we may be blind to our own faults, and so filled with our own self-importance, that we are deaf to remonstrances from others; but, if subject to the word, we shall find that Scripture brings conviction, for it is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword . . . a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Moreover the Scriptures not only convict, they also *correct*, and, having corrected, they will *instruct us* in the way that is right. Having then the inspired Scriptures it is possible for the man of God to be fully established in the truth in the presence of abounding error, and to be "fully fitted to every good work" in an evil day.

If then these are the great truths which will enable us to escape the evils of the last days, and to live the life that becomes the man of God, we may be sure that these are the truths that the devil will oppose.

His first snare will be to endeavour to make us content with a partial knowledge of the doctrine, instead of earnestly seeking to become "fully acquainted" with the truth.

If, however, he cannot prevent us laying hold of the doctrine his next snare will be to seek to mar the "manner of life," and thus bring the doctrine into disrepute.

Further he will seek to persuade us that we can hold the doctrine and live the life in our own strength, and thus practically do without the Lord.

Moreover, he will seek by the difficulties of the way to lead us to give up the truth and the path of separation consistent with the truth, instead of continuing in the things which we have learned.

Lastly he will seek to undermine the authority of the Scriptures by leading us to hold truths on the authority of some teacher, even if he cannot get us to question the inspiration of Scripture. H. S.