

Latter Times and Last Days

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It is sorrowful to have to look at departures from God and His truth. It has been said of the Lord, that His soul tasted some of its bitterest grief, when He looked on the treachery of Judas; and ours should be thus affected when we think of the corruptions of Christendom, which are as the kiss and the treason of that apostle again.

The "mystery of iniquity" had began to work, we know, in the times of the apostles. And as the small seed cast into the ground carries with it the form and character of all that which the harvest is afterwards to manifest and Yield, so the leaven that was working secretly then, to the keen eye of the Spirit in the apostles had in it the varied evils, which, in the progress of corruptions, were to be manifested in Christendom: so that Paul guards Timothy even then against the pravities of both "the latter times" and "the last days," as though Timothy himself were in the midst of them.

But these pravities are different. In "the latter times," there was to be a departure from the word of God, or from the religion of "the truth," which alone is "godliness." Consequently there would be the giving heed to something beside the word or the truth, to "seducing spirits," and to "doctrines of devils" or demons. Then there would be speaking lies "in hypocrisy," making an exhibition of religion; and all this man's religion, or what man has got up, would "sear the conscience," deaden it to God's religion, or the religion of "the truth," fortified, as it would be, by man's "forbiddings" and "abstinences," which must be complied with and practised, though so contrary to the thoughts and gifts of God (see 1 Tim. 4).

"The last days," on the other hand, were not to be religious, but infidel. Superstitious vanities were to yield to man's will and independency. He was to be a lover of "himself," and in the train of that "heady," "high-minded," "disobedient to parents," "covetous," and such like — all qualities and characters making him as one who had broken the bands, and cast away the cords; not religious, but wilful. And in the midst of all this, there was to be the "form of godliness," — the appearing to return to that from which the "the latter times" had departed, "godliness," or the religion of "the truth;" but, when looked at a little within, no "power" would be found, though so much "form" (2 Tim 3).

Now, here we see a great moral reaction. All the cords and bands of the latter times castaway, and man indulging and admiring himself — religious vanities gone, but human independency asserted.

And these things have had their day. In the two great characteristic eras in the history of Christendom we get them — in the times before and since the Reformation. In the times before, there was man's religion, opposing itself to "the truth," and having its own vanities; in the times since, there has been man's pride, asserting his independency and breaking off all bonds. These have been the characters of the two eras. Of course something of the second was known during the time of the first, and much of the first still lives in the second; but these different pravities are the characteristics of the two eras.

And, what is a very solemn truth, I judge that the history of corrupted Christianity will close by a kind of coalition between the two pravities. And of such a state of things we get the pattern in the time, of our blessed Lord, when there were both man's religion and man's independency combined against

Him, — the unclean spirit who had gone out, having himself returned and brought other spirits more wicked than himself. There was Jewish religion, which would not let its votaries go into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; and there was Jewish infidelity, which would say: "We have no king but Caesar." This is a solemn, and fearful prospect. Surely there is real godliness in the midst of it all, but the sight is dreadful.

And there was the counterpart of what I have been here tracing in the wilderness. There was first the calf, then the captain — the two ensigns of Israel's departure from God during their journey from Egypt to Canaan, the two distinct standards of rebellion set up at different eras.

The calf was the ensign of man's religion. Man had his own gods then, and in eating and drinking and rising up to play man exhibited his religion — spake "lies in hypocrisy." The captain was the ensign of man's infidelity. Man was his own God then, setting up himself to be his own leader, as though answerable to none, breaking all bands, heady, high-minded."

Thus, by either the calf or the captain, man is ever working against God and His truth. It is either false religion or a spirit of independency that is moving him. And reaction is always to be dreaded, even by the true worshippers and saints of God, as is also the spirit of the times in which they live. Both of these must be watched against. If the present time exhibit much of the spirit of human pride and independency, of course the saint has to guard against being drawn into the stream, and carried along the current which has set in around him. But he has also to guard against reaction. He has to watch and pray, that he may not, through dread and hatred of the present form of evil, look for relief by a return to the previous form of evil. I believe there is much of both of these at present. I see people who should have stood only in godliness; dropping into the current of these times; and in the revival of high-church principles, and return to ecclesiastical ceremonies and observances of human imposition. There is evident unhealthy reaction among men of a sensitive righteous order of mind, who have marked the evil that is now predominant, and have sought relief from it, but have been turned back by Satan to the righteousness of man and away from "godliness" or the religion of "truth." In avoiding the evil of "the last days" they have returned to that of the "latter times," at least in measure.

In the midst of all this condition of things, I believe the poor saint of God, "who walks in the truth," as John speaks, may now see himself. His path is narrow. Errors on both sides threaten and attract him. The calf and the captain are erected as the standard of rival parties. The word alone is to work his passage through both, and the Spirit to lead him along it; he is to "purify himself by obeying the truth through the Spirit." He has been baptised to the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; and his soul is to know its living communion according to this. He has to continue in the things that he has learnt, knowing the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make a child, a fool in this world's wisdom, wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus. He is to know that, as a sinner, he is cast only upon God — God, and not man, has to do with him as a sinner. And taking his sin, yea, his sins too, into the presence of God, he is to see them there, by faith, washed away by the precious blood of a precious Sacrifice. He has to keep his conscience unclouded, so that his living communion with the Father and the Son, in the life of the Holy Ghost, be not broken, and to walk in the love of the Spirit with all who are Christ's, and in the charities of the gospel with all men. Let him do withal what service among the saints he may be fitted to do by gift of the Spirit, and what service to others he may have opportunity to fulfil, waiting daily for the Son from heaven, Who, he is to know, has delivered him from the wrath to come.