

In the Last Days

READ THE END OF THE STORY

Why is everybody so surprised? The headlines in the newspapers say:

CRIME ON A RAMPAGE! or
DRUG USE CLIMBS! or
FAMOUS PREACHER FOUND GUILTY!

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Why is everybody so surprised? That's what I don't understand. The headlines in the newspapers say CRIME ON A RAMPAGE! or DRUG USE CLIMBS! or FAMOUS PREACHER FOUND GUILTY!

The churches are torn asunder with reports of doctrinal division, moral compromise, and general apostasy. You don't need to guess what everybody's going to be talking about at the next social gathering. They'll be talking about how bad everything is. And it is bad. No argument there.

The environment is stifling itself with pollution. Crime is on a non-stop rocket to infinity. Politicians are being exposed for their greed; sports stars are being exposed for their compromises; business leaders await trial for taking advantage of "inside" information. Women are legally killing unborn children. Divorce rates spiral. Homosexuality becomes an "acceptable lifestyle". And on and on it goes.

Natural disasters abound. Tornados, earthquakes, hailstorms, and floods are becoming the order of the day. Record heat. Record cold. Record snow. It is as though both man and the elements are out of control. And where is the church amidst all this confusion? For the most part, it appears to be on the sidelines, wringing its hands, preaching sermons, and writing books about *the problem*. We're overwhelmed with the devastation about us. And we ought to be ashamed. Oh, it's all right to be disgusted by the sin. But we ought not to be so surprised at the circumstances.

We, of all people, ought to have expected it. We've read the last chapter of the book. We've seen the end of the movie.

Now I'm one of those people who loves to read the first chapter of a novel, skim a couple of chapters so it'll look official, and then sneak over to the last chapter to see how it all came out. It seems like such a waste of time to spend all that time while the author prolongs our misery, so he can get in enough pages to justify charging \$12.95 for the book. I want to know how it's all going to end. And I want to know *now*.

God seemed to understand people like me. He seemed to expect some of us at least to want to flip to the last chapter and see how it will all turn out. So many educators and so many theologians are saying: "It'll all turn out okay. Things are getting better". And they point to the thawing of the cold war as an example. The thawing of the cold war is a sign

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that the end is at hand, but not that things are getting better. God knows it's not going to get better. And for those who "have ears to hear" He has clearly pronounced the outcome. No surprises. He simply told it like it will be. Why we are so surprised, then, is not clear. Either we don't want to believe it, or we've never read it. But make no mistake about it, this old world is not getting better, and it never will. The battle is nearing its conclusion, and the enemy, already pronounced the loser, is screaming and clawing with every ounce of evil energy he possesses.

The devil can hear the thundering hoof beats of the King's army on the horizon. He can envision the sheer horror of hell. And he can imagine what it will be like to be chained to the tortures of despair while the Living God sets up His Kingdom at last. He knows, and we *ought* to know the end is at hand, and the answer isn't to be found in the goodness of man.

The answer is to be found in the Scriptures. There, in vivid language, the Living God has painted a portrait of what life will be like just before the trumpet blast, just before the curtain comes down on the weary actors who stand on stage in the drama of life. And He, in no uncertain terms, has told us a) not to be surprised, and b) not to be afraid.

The last chapter's already been written! And the Apostle Paul wanted to make sure that the Christians of his day, and those of us who stand on the threshold of the end times, understood as well. And he didn't focus strictly on how bad the world would become as the program of life ends and the credits pour across the screen. He had a lot to say about what the church would be like in those closing days of history.

In I Timothy, chapter four, where we left off in our last study, Paul addresses just that issue. Here the Apostle Paul is saying that in latter days, some will depart from the faith. They will listen to false doctrines. So that's our subject for this study, and here's our title and outline: "In the Last Days".

- I- Read The End of The Story
- II- The World Runs Its Course
- III- The Church Runs Aground
- IV- The Happiest Ending of All

THE WORLD RUNS ITS COURSE

Now the phrase used here (latter days) speaks not only of the final days of history, but also of all time in the future. But as we shall see as we work our way through Scripture, the seeds that infested the early church would only spread like cancer as the years progressed; and in the last days, things would "wax worse and worse."

It had already begun. The Gnostics, who were spreading heresy throughout the Ephesian church, believed that spirit was altogether good, and matter was altogether bad. This had surfaced already in two horrible doctrines. One was that since food was matter, food was bad, so as much as possible, one should abstain from eating. (I never would have made it in the Ephesian church.) The legalists came along behind them, and though they didn't think all food was bad, they defined certain foods as evil, and thus had a long list of what the spiritual giant of the day could and couldn't have at Wendy's. The second error was that if the body was evil, then any attempt to satisfy the body was evil, and so they were forbidding people to marry.

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They were men who weren't listening to Truth. Their consciences had been "seared" or "cauterized" with a hot iron. They were dead to the Word of God and to the Spirit of God, but they were teaching as though they had some "new theology" that everyone before them had missed. They were the legalists of their day, defining spirituality by what a man did, rather than by who a man is.

Two issues are involved:

- the gradual deterioration of the church, and
- the final state of society and the church just prior to Christ's return.

The thing we Christians would rather talk about is how rotten society is. It's the perfect attention-getter for sermon material, and it allows us to enter into our "doom and gloom" mode which focuses on the advances Satan is making in our world, rather than on the responsibilities we have in the light of the world that is to come. Paul wrote in Colossians 3, some amazing words. Paraphrased in the Living Bible, it reads like this:

Let heaven fill your thoughts; don't spend your time worrying about things down here.
(Colossians 3:2 TLB)

We aren't called to be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good, but we are called to have our affections so glued to eternity, that to waste our time murmuring about the state of the Union would seem superfluous, especially since God already told us it would go downhill.

In II Timothy 3, Paul wrote specifically about the last days, and he described our society so perfectly, we don't even need to read the newspapers; we only need to read the Bible to know what is happening and what is about to happen. It reads like this:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come:

(II Timothy 3:1 TLB)

He goes on to describe those "perilous times". Let's read it paraphrased again from The Living Bible. It seems true to the original text, and much easier to understand:

For people will love only themselves and their money; they will be proud and boastful, sneering at God, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful to them, and thoroughly bad.

They will be hardhearted and never give in to others; they will be constant liars and troublemakers and will think nothing of immorality. They will be rough and cruel, and sneer at those who try to be good.

They will betray their friends; they will be hotheaded, puffed up with pride, and prefer good times to worshipping God.

They will go to church, yes, but they won't really believe anything they hear. Don't be taken in by people like that.
(II Timothy 3:2-5 TLB)

This is what fallen man will look like just before Jesus comes again. The pseudo morality that had come to mankind as a side effect of the Christian church's presence on planet earth will have given way to reality. People will do their own thing. Authority will be sneered at. Moral standards will degenerate until "if it feels good, do it" prevails. It'll be

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every man for himself, and people will prefer living it up to living right. Churches will be full, but not of believers. And so it goes. And so it is...in our generation.

That's how man will look at the end of the age. He will live like the fallen, degenerate creature he is. And how will society itself look? And what will God be doing to the elements? Matthew 24 gives us a preview:

Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you.

For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places." (Matthew 24:3-7)

"Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.

And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold."

(Matthew 24:11,12 NKJV)

Not a pretty sight. Just prior to Christ's return, here's what the world will look like. There will be prophets or religious leaders arising from everywhere saying they are Christ, or they have a word from God no one else has, or they have come with some special dispensation from God. And these cults will attract many.

Little wars will be breaking out everywhere. Nations will be talking peace but thinking war. The Mideast, we learn in other places will be a veritable hot bed of military activity. Satan will pretend to want peace, but there can be no peace until Jesus comes.

Natural disasters will abound. Food shortages, outbreaks of seemingly incurable diseases, and earthquakes will begin to shake the foundations of the world in places and in intensities never felt before. Sin will dominate the world. There will be such an amoral society, that even Christians will become apathetic and non-evangelistic.

And so it shall be just prior to the Lord's return. I guess the key is not that things are so bad in our generation. The key is why are we Christians so perplexed? Why do we scurry about with such long faces as though the universe was out of control, and God must have misread the future? Is there one single thing present in our society today that is not an exact fulfillment of Scriptural prophecy? Did God misread what man would be like when he would be given the years and the freedom and the prosperity we have? I defy you to find one thing that is happening today that God did not expect and even warn us of. Israel's return as a nation? The bitter conflict in the Mideast? The sudden desire for peace of the godless nations in the Far East? The outbreak of aids? The legalization of abortion? The rise and fall of preachers who claim to have the answers but who preach a gospel that is less than the real gospel? The seemingly inexplicable changes in the weather? The rise of natural disasters? The greed? The immorality? A nation filled with churches filled with people who have no hope?

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Take your pick. Read Newsweek or read the Bible. One reports the news, the other predicts the news. And the one that predicts it is more accurate than the one that reports it; because it tells us where it's all leading. The weekly magazines don't have the slightest idea where we're headed. They think there are man-made solutions to all these problems, when God has told us that man is the problem.

So the state of the world is as it was predicted. Man left to his own devices has never created anything different. If you thought that man was going to get better and better, and society was going to get better and better until Utopia came to earth, you've been reading someone else's Bible. In the last days, perilous times will come.

The Church Runs Aground

And where is the true church amidst all this decline? Where are the born-again ones who have the trumpet to blow and the truth to proclaim? According to our passage in I Timothy, they are wrapped up in demonic doctrines that focus on this life rather than the life to come. They are bound up in creating new forms of legalism, all in the name of freedom. They are teaching moral purity; but their own consciences, filled with the garbage of their day, have been seared with a hot iron until the standards of Scripture have been redefined to be less offensive to the "freewheeling" society they live in.

According to Jude, verses 17-19, these last days would be filled with dissension and division within the true church. Separatists who claim they have the only answer will scoff and deride the rest of Christ's body, and unity will not exist at all.

And according to II Peter, chapter 3, perhaps the greatest sin of all will characterize even the true believers. They will lose sight of Christ's coming and begin to preach and to teach as though Christ did die for our sins, but the focus of our lives is on the here and now because we're not sure if the then is ever coming. Peter wrote:

Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder)

that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior,

knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts,

and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."

(II Peter 3:1-4 NKJV)

Peter is opening the curtains of the future and walking into the Christian community in the last days. He visits seminaries, walks in on great preachers, reads books written by Christian authors, and listens to Christian radio and TV. He is astonished. Where is the promise of His coming? These men, who are the voice of their day, rarely, if ever, speak of Christ's return. Heaven is barely described. Eternity is only a vague uncertainty mentioned at funerals and sung about in hymns. But the average person who calls himself a Christian doesn't even understand if or how the Lord will return.

We live in a world where the people who know God intimately, personally, experientially, and scripturally still don't talk about heaven as though it's real, and still

don't anticipate the Lord's coming with any more intensity than the Super Bowl, (if they anticipate it at all).

THE HAPPIEST ENDING OF ALL

Peter says it's a choice. We can be caught up in the gloom and doom of the age in which we live and can spend our time weeping over the state of the Union, or we can look up! The choice is ours. The passage goes on,

For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water,

by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water.

But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (II Peter 3:5-9 NKJV)

"For this they willfully forget" (KJV says willingly ignorant of). They choose to believe that creation didn't happen the way God said it would. They choose to willingly make light of the flood that destroyed the world. They choose to be ignorant of the fact that God's timetable is not the same as ours; that with Him it's only been a day or two in the light of eternity since Jesus returned to the Father and promised to come again.

Ah, but what they are missing is the reason He has not returned. He has not returned because His love is so deep, His mercy so rich, His grace so abundant, He does not want any to perish...so He waits, and He waits, and He waits.

They're missing it! Some of *us* are missing it! We've overlooked the end of the story! We're all caught up in the grief and the apostasy and the weariness of the battle, and we've forgotten this story has the happiest ending of all. And it isn't fiction. It's written by the hand of the same God who gave us such notable stories as "The Prophecy of Isaiah", "The Promises of Daniel", and the "Witness of Jeremiah". This same author, the Holy Spirit of God, has written the ending in bold, black letters across the entirety of His Word, and we who live in the most exciting age in history, act as though either He never wrote it or it might not be true. Let's let Peter finish his discourse:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. (II Peter 3:10 NKJV)

Listen to the Word of the Lord. The "Day of the Lord" will come. It will come like a "thief in the night". Just when we are least expecting it, it will happen. God hasn't forgotten. Jesus isn't lost somewhere in the galaxies trying to find planet earth. God didn't change His mind and decide it wasn't worth it. So what ought we to be doing? Worrying about the state of the economy? Fretting about the political situation in Washington? Complaining about the price of groceries? Railing at the inequities of the age? Peter goes on:

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Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,

looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (II Peter 3:11-13 NKJV)

Because of what we know, two things ought to be happening, two glorious things.

1- We ought to be motivated to holiness.

One thing that happens when believers downplay the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age is that we begin to compromise with the matter of holiness. We begin to alter God's standards, first ever so slightly, then more boldly. Like children who think they can get by with anything they want, because they know their parents will be gone for a week, we do things and think things and want things that break the heart of God.

If those kids only realized, "mom and dad may return at any time", their whole outlook would be different. Peter is saying, "What manner of persons ought we to be? Filled with holiness, the essence of godliness." That's what we ought to be like. Peter concludes,

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; (II Peter 3:14 NKJV)

Jesus is coming soon! It ought to be a motivation for holiness.

2- It ought to be a motivation for expectancy.

"Looking for and longing for and expectantly praying for" that day to come at any time. First, the rapture, then His coming, His reigning and a new heaven and a new earth! That's our hope! That's our story! That's His Glory! Jesus is coming again! This world we fret so much about is passing away. In a split second it will be gone. The stock market will burn up. The football stadium will burn up. The TV station will burn up. The church house will burn up. That new house will burn up. Everything temporal we are living for or trusting in will burn up. Jesus is coming again.

Sure, the world is a mess. No argument there. The church is a mess. No argument there. But why are we so surprised? Why do we walk around with long faces as though we have no hope? We've read the last chapter! We've read the end of the book! We know how it all turns out!

Yes, in the last days, perilous times will come. Don't be astonished. It's supposed to be this way. Ah, but just after those perilous times, Jesus will come. That makes this the most exciting time in history. By God's grace, let's act like it.

Let's pray.

Our Father and our God, oh, how we worship You.

Father, teach us to look up. We're men and women of the Book, yet we focus so much of our time thinking about and talking about and worrying about the end roads that Satan is making into our world (and he is). But that ought not to excite us

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because the closer he gets, the closer You get to coming again.

We act, Father, as though we're men and women who have no hope. We forget that one day very soon, the eastern sky will be a glow, the trumpet will blast, the voice of the archangel will ring across the heavens and those who have ears to hear will be captured up together to meet the Lord in the air. And it could be today. Father, may we live like it.

In Jesus name,

Amen

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