

A LASTING FAITH FOR THE LAST DAYS

PRACTICAL MEDITATIONS ON ESCHATOLOGY FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD ¹
Part 4 of 5

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LIVING IN THE LAST DAYS WITHOUT A CURIOSITY FOR THOSE DIFFICULT PASSAGES CONCERNING THE LAST DAYS

Before we consider the attitudes that we ought to have in the Last Days, let us consider some of the more difficult passages concerning eschatology or the Last Days revealed in Scripture. We must all admit that we have some built-in fancy for being attracted by the more difficult passages concerning the last days, as well as being curious about what is to happen with regard to the future of the world. I often shudder to think that more ink has been spilled in futile speculation of 'when', 'where', and 'how' Jesus will return, rather than focusing on the Jesus who knows when, where, and how he will return and who has not chosen to reveal it to us (Deut. 29:29).

It is sad (even frightening) to think that possibly we have spent more time as the people of God 'speculating' about eschatology and the last days, rather than carefully handling Scripture and living eschatologically — that is, living by faith with a true hope and love for his appearing. For some reason, we allow what God has *chosen not to reveal*, someone to prevent us from understanding *what he has been please to reveal*.

Though we desire to know more of Scripture, and our intentions are good, we get bogged down in the details and fail to consider the clear and encouraging teaching of such books as Daniel (particularly chapters 7-12), Mark chapter 13, Matthew chapter 24, and the Book of Revelation. We must resist the temptation to read into, or to be preoccupied with that which God 'does not' reveal to us, and to make every effort to understand that which he indeed 'does' reveal to us. Remember Deuteronomy 29:29—

THE SECRET THINGS BELONG TO THE LORD OUR GOD, BUT THE REVEALED THINGS TO US AND OUR CHILDREN.

There are some things about the future that we must admit will remain a mystery, but what is clear and what will edify and build up the church now is what we are to focus on in these books containing truth about the last days living. Sadly, we

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divide in our churches over the unclear portions of Scripture, even portions we do not truly understand, rather than uniting upon that which is clearly revealed for us all. Imagine if you will, the sadness and irony for Christ's church, with all of our "charts of eschatology" that supposedly enlighten us, yet divide us, and cause us to miss the main blessing of what should unite us by love in the Last Days! What is clear in the difficult eschatological passages are the warnings to watch together (implying unity and love) for the coming of the LORD Jesus and to live our lives NOW in light of this imminent truth! The truth of this is seen in Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins that Matthew places directly after his Olivet Discourse in chapter 24 of his gospel. In fact the Parable of the Ten Virgins is the second of three stories Jesus tells, so that his people will get the clear teaching of what he is saying to them! He says be watchful, prepared, and ready!

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour (Matthew 25:1-13).

With regard to some of the more difficult passages of Scripture concerning the Last Days, such as Matthew, 24, Mark 13, 2 Thessalonians 2-3, and the Book of Revelation, there are some clear teachings that we want to understand before we seek to further understand the more difficult teachings. In fact, when we study the clear passages first, they usually help us to understand the passages that are not so clear to us. We should remember that they were clear to the author of Scripture, as well as to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, as the Author will help us when we approach these texts humbly and in submission to Him the Great Teacher (1 Cor. 2:6ff; cf. 1 John 2:20-27).

As we have studied earlier, the clearest teachings in these difficult portions of Scripture is to be prepared; to watch; to be sober and alert. Additionally, there is a clear indication that evil and wickedness will increase in the Last Days in a way consistent with the progressive nature of the Kingdom coming into this world, and

the spread of the Gospel. There is an escalation or progressive view, not only of Christ's Kingdom coming into the world in this present age (1 Cor. 15:22-28; Mt. 12-13), but also there is an escalation or increase of wickedness and ungodliness, consummating, or ultimately coming to a conclusion in the overthrow of all evil, sin and death (Rev. 6-19:18; Mk. 13; cf. with the increase of wickedness from the first sin of Adam to Genesis 6: "All the thoughts and intents of man's heart were evil continually").

It is a constant New Testament expectation that to the extent to which the gospel of the cross is spread abroad, to that extent the hostility of the world will be manifested as well. Christ is destined to be a rising and falling for many, and to bring out into the open thoughts of many. HE has come into the world for judgment that those who do not see may see and those who see may become blind (Mt. 21:44; Luke 2:34; John 3:19-21, 8:39; Rom. 9:32,33; 1 Cor. 1:23; Heb. 4:12).

In the last days, the days that precede the return of Christ, the wickedness of human beings will rise to a fearful level. The days of Noah will return. Lust, sensual pleasures, lawlessness, greed, unbelief, pride, mockery, and slander will erupt in fearful ways (Mt. 24:37ff; Luke 17:26ff; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18).

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:1-7).

This escalation of evil should be kept in mind and understood when reading the descriptions that the Apostles wrote concerning the Last Days. This means that although we live in the power of the Spirit in this present age, and our hope is set on the Age to come to be revealed when Christ returns, we will suffer persecution from evil spirits and people. In fact, the great expectation of every Christian ought to be a life of persecution in the Last Days as difficult as this is for us.

Paul says to Timothy: "Those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" — 2 Tim. 3:12. God is gracious and allows us to have times of peace and creaturely comforts here in this present age that makes Last Days living somewhat easier. However, we should never place our trust in these "things", because they are never guaranteed to us. As American Christians who

do not see as much persecution as the rest of our brothers and sisters in the world, we ought to daily remind ourselves of this truth!

In our desire to understand eschatological portions of the Bible, we must keep in mind not to get too bogged down with the details, but to “hear” the emphasis of Christ in difficult passages such as Mt. 24 and Mk. 13 and in the Book of Revelation. *These Scriptures are given for our **encouragement** — may this important truth be not overlooked!*

May we consider the clarity of what is written in these passages and pray for patience and understanding by the Spirit, approaching any difficult portion of Scripture with humility, as a child comes to their father. May we thank Christ for the Spirit’s gifts to the Church in teachers who can help us to better understand these passages. Although there can be some difficulties with understanding these passages, we should understand what is clear about them.

THE DIFFICULT PASSAGES ARE NOT MEANT FOR OUR CALCULATION ON CHRIST’S RETURN, BUT FOR OUR CONSIDERATION OF THE ATTITUDE THAT WE SHOULD HAVE UNTIL HE RETURNS.

In Mark’s account of the apocalyptic Olivet discourse, he tells his disciples and us to “watch” five times! Jesus ends with a clear message of what he wants his disciples to understand however much we or they misunderstand Jesus’ eschatology in Mk. 13:

Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming — in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning — lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!

The focus of our eschatological faith as the people of the Living God ought to be fixed upon Jesus Christ our Savior and King! We must learn from these somewhat difficult passages concerning eschatology that Jesus teaches us to be alert, sober, and watchful.

How can we learn from this as a Last-Days-People? Be alert as to who we are, who we serve, and keep our focus on His imminent return for us. Our alertness, soberness, watchfulness is increased in the faithful preaching of the Word. In the preaching and teaching of the Word, we are reminded of the shortness of this life and the greatness of the next life! We are reminded of our weaknesses and His great strength on our behalf (2 Cor. 4:16-18; 12:9); we are reminded that each day is a gift and we should use our time for his glory. Paul says that we must make the most of our time, knowing the days are evil. Paul reminds us that Today is the Day of Salvation, the day of grace offered to repentant sinners (2 Cor. 6). The Apostle Paul sums up the great news, the nearness of the Last

Day, as well as the attitude of how we should live our lives as God's people *now* in Romans 13.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Romans 13:10-14).

Let us pray that God, by His Spirit will make us an expectant people. A people who hold on loosely to the "things" of this present age, and a people who realize that they are citizens of another Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Age to Come. May we be diligent by His grace, to be serving him wholeheartedly when he returns, working to build up his church, to seek unity in his church and with his people, and may he not find us searching the Scriptures in a futile manner for yet another eschatological "chart of Jesus' return", but may he find us living with an eschatological faith awaiting the Living Hope Who will renew all things and bring glory to Himself! Amen.

ARMED FOR ESCHATOLOGICAL WARFARE

As we learned in the last study, although the gospel increases and expands throughout the world, the increase of wickedness also grows in the last days (2 Tim. 3:1-7). As in the parable of the sower and the seeds, the Evil One is there to snatch up the seeds that drop on the path as the Word of the Kingdom is proclaimed (Matt. 13:18ff). There is an eschatological war in the heavenlies and here on earth between the Seed of the Woman and the seed of the Serpent; between the Sower of the Seeds of Righteousness and the Sower of Seeds of Wickedness; there is war between the Sower of Wheat and the sower of weeds. Yet, despite his real and evil work, the Sower of Righteousness prevails, and His Kingdom is abundantly increased (13:23, 43).

Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or

persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty (Matthew 13:18-23).

And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Matthew 13:36-43).

As seeds of the Woman, being united to Jesus Christ the Seed of the Woman, we are called to bear his name, be witnesses to his Kingdom, and to boldly march in his Power and Spirit, but we must be aware of an enemy who is scheming against us, who is the Great Serpent, the Devil, who has his own seeds. We must remember as children of light that we are in a great war and how the Apostle Peter describes our Eschatological enemy the Devil in his First Epistle:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 5:8-11).

For this eschatological warfare in the last days, we need the armor of *God* Christians so that we may stand. That is, we must realize we are clothed in the armor that is given to us by God when we are united to Christ. Paul says in Ephesians 6:10-18 to "be strong in the LORD." That is, our battle, our warfare is

not against flesh and blood (cf. 2 Cor. 10:3-5), but it is against the rulers, powers, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Because we have been united to Jesus Christ by faith, seated with him in the heavenly places, although our battle is experienced by us in an earthly manner, it is also a battle "in the heavnlies". Dr. Sinclair Ferguson writes: "The work of the Spirit in uniting us to Christ brings the Christian life into an eschatological atmosphere. It is lived out in the heavenly realms (Eph. 1:3; 2:6). But these are also realms of eschatological conflict where the evil day is faced (Eph. 6:12-13)" (from *The Holy Spirit*, published by IVP). Paul says in Ephesians 6:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints... (Ephesians 6:10-18).

This eschatological warfare is a battle where we stand grounded in the truth revealed to us in Scripture as our belt of truth. It is a battle in which we stand with the breastplate of Christ's righteousness that is given to us; we stand with in the peace of the gospel, and with the helmet of salvation, using the Word of God as our sword to stand firm by faith. In this battle, we are called to pray continuously, ever depending on the grace, mercy and strength of God to stand firm against the Evil One and his schemes.

The reality is that Paul says *we can stand* (Eph. 6:13-14) in this great battle. That is, we are able to stand in this battle, we do not have to give up or to bow our heads in despair and doubt. When we are tempted by the Evil One, the one who hates us, we must remember that we have been united to Jesus Christ, we have died to sin and to our former master, and therefore Paul says "stand firm" by faith in this reality (Rom. 6:3-8; Col. 1:11-14)!

People of God in the Last Days: Hold on and fight this battle, knowing that you have the Divine Warrior who has conquered death, hell, and the devil, and stand

upon Christ's victory won in his resurrection and ascension in these last days! Our Divine and Gracious Warrior, the Living God, has worn this armor himself (Is. 59:15-20)! It is "His" armor of strength that he gives to us so that we may stand firm in His Name, by His grace!

We should also remember we fight together (Eph. 6:18).

...praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...

We do not stand alone, but are part of Christ's body, and therefore we should take courage that the gates of hell shall never prevail against his Church, his people for whom he died (Matt. 16:18)! We should remember to pray for one another, for some in the body are much weaker than others and although they are dressed in God's armor, are strong in Lord, and have his powerful might in Christ, they have a weak faith, a faith that has not fully realized nor fully grasped these truths. Therefore, they need others who are standing firm, to help them to stand by His grace.

Paul says we must always stand in the confidence of our union with Christ, that no temptation comes into our lives, except which is common to all humanity (1 Cor. 10:12-13).

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:12-13).

And with each temptation by the Evil One, we know that we can stand, and we know that God will not allow us to be tempted without providing a way out. If you think you are standing, take heed, lest you fall. That means, ever rely upon the grace and strength of the Lord Jesus and His powerful Spirit to help you, never on anything you can do in yourself, or by yourself. Always be ever mindful that you are in warfare, yet you are completely clothed with God's armor, and you can indeed, by faith, "be strong in the Lord and in the might of His power"!

Whatever your battle today, whatever your discouragement, whatever the temptation that continually seems to beset you, know who you are because of Jesus Christ, and in the knowledge of who you are, clothed in His righteousness and armor, stand firm in these Last Days! Pray for others as well, that they may stand firm, and never forget that you are never alone in the battle. Oh, and by the way, the battle has been completely won by Jesus Christ the righteous!

Stand firm and strong in this reality! "Fear not, for I am with you," says your God and Father.