

#266 "The Last Days"

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It has always been difficult for believers in a world in which Satan is prince and in which unbelievers are held captive to him to do his bidding (Ephesians 2:2, 2 Timothy 2:26). Jesus promised trouble for believers (John 16:33), and Paul warned Timothy that all who desire to live godly in Jesus Christ will be persecuted (1 Timothy 3:12). There are no exceptions to that statement, for when a believer takes God seriously, speaks the gospel boldly yet with grace, and lives honorably while upholding what is good, he will encounter hate. The only way to avoid persecution according to this verse is to stop living out the truth of Scripture. Thus, those who want to walk by faith and honor Christ will find themselves struggling against the spiritual forces of sin and darkness (Ephesians 6:12) in the world. Our hope and prayer in the battles is that God will open the eyes of some who are doing the persecuting. By God's grace, some may, on account of how they see our hope and graciousness despite the persecution and struggle, ask about the reason for our faith (1 Peter 3:15). As we near the last days and, in fact, may even be living in them now, we have a chance to shine brighter than ever before because the darkness is darker than ever before. As 2 Timothy 3:13 says, "But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." We need to be prepared for the cost of following Christ (Luke 14:27-33). Denying ourselves by choosing to obey Scripture, taking up our crosses and willingly participating in the sufferings of Christ, and following Him even though it is going to hurt are all part of being a disciple (Matthew 16:24). There is a great cost, but the rewards in heaven are more than commensurate.

Matthew 24 gives some examples of big picture signs that will precede the tribulation and the second coming of Christ. Jesus predicted that diseases, earthquakes, and famines will be on the increase as well as wars and rumors of wars (v. 4-8). There will be many false prophets including false messiahs, cults, false religions, and false teachers (Matthew 24:5, 11, 2 Timothy 3:13), and most people's love will grow cold corresponding to the increase in lawlessness, sin, and corruption (Matthew 24:12). Daniel also predicted that there will be a significant increase in information and knowledge, and man will gain the ability to travel to and fro with ease (Daniel 12:4). Israel is back to the promised land, which is significant because much of Biblical prophecy concerning the end times centers around geographical Israel (e.g. Zechariah 14:4, Revelation 16:16). The temple still needs to be rebuilt so that the antichrist can defile it (Daniel 12:11), and the gospel is still going throughout the ends of the earth (Matthew 24:14), though the complete fulfillment of that may happen during the tribulation period (Revelation 14:6). The point is that, while we do not know the exact hour and while we shouldn't seek it out (Matthew 24:36), the season is clear. Times are changing, signs are certainly coming to pass, and the end is drawing ever nearer.

If the big picture signs are not convincing enough, we only need to look at the characteristics of the people in the last days. 1 Timothy 3:1-5 says,

“But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these.”

This laundry list of sin is eerily familiar. Even ten or fifteen years ago, people rejected good and what was moral, but they didn't hate good and those who stood up for morality nearly as much as they do today. The decay is more than evident as society is more than ever force fed lies about family, marriage, economics, politics, morality, the origins of the world and of man, and so on. Some profess a form of religion, but they will use it to justify sin, selfishness, and their own perversities. Parents more often than not set terrible examples for their children, and children curse and disrespect their parents because of the selfishness and rebellion in their own hearts. Violence, brutality, and treacherousness are the new normal of interpersonal interaction as it is every person for himself. The weakest and the innocent get not just pushed aside or neglected, but they are literally at risk of death, with the unborn being the most egregious example. People are arrogant and reckless, willing to say anything or do anything just to get ahead according to what is convenient in the moment. They disdain God, truth, morality, wisdom, and divine prerogative because they hate God and His Word. They know not God and thus know not love (1 John 4:7-8), and they harm each other as a way of being. Being a peacemaker or a reconciler is viewed as weak and pathetic, and self-control has long gone out of style. People seek after the idol of pleasure because they love themselves and their sin and pride so much that they will not even consider the God of the Bible. They are so concerned for themselves that they will live only in the moment with no concern for others, for future generations, for truth, or for God and the coming judgment. Boastfulness in self, ungratefulness to God, and exchanging truth for lies has led God to give them over to all kinds of lusts, perversities, and depravities. Romans 1:26-27 says, “For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.” Homosexuality has been around for thousands of years, but it is being used now as a beating stick for people who love God and who love all people, including those who practice homosexuality, despite hating the sin itself. The world is so vitriolic and hateful against the truth and unloving that they cannot conceive of how anybody would deny somebody the sinful impulses of his or her heart, no matter how biologically unnatural they might be. They literally think that doing whatever they want is the best and most honorable path, and their hearts which are desperately wicked lead them into all kinds of hurt and make them responsible for the harm of the innocent. Even though they know in their conscience the laws of God and that there are consequences for not keeping them (Romans 1:32), they let their selfishness corrupt their hearts and defile their consciences (Titus 1:15). It seems that nothing is out of bounds any longer except for Jesus.

This is indeed the world in which we live. Lies, spin, propaganda, stupidity, and selfish agendas bombard us from every angle, and so many are storing up so much of God's wrath. Paul wanted Timothy to

realize that this will be the reality, that difficult times will come. We are supposed to see the decay, and we are supposed to be reviled by it. We should not be surprised by what we see, but we should have known this was coming because the Bible tells us so. It is how we respond in this environment that is critical. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were forced to bow to an idol or be incinerated, and they didn't waffle, balk, second-guess, or compromise. They were willing to go into the fire because, while they believed God would save them, they also boldly and humbly declared that even if He didn't that they wanted it known that they wouldn't compromise (Daniel 3:16-18). They knew that in standing up to persecution with love and grace that that itself was a testimony to a great and powerful God Who had captured their hearts and set them free from enslavement to the devil. Matthew 5:10 says, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We must not run from persecution like the plague, but we must, as Stephen did, declare the glories of God even as the stones, whether literal or metaphorical, fly (Acts 7:54-60). Following Jesus has always come at a cost, and the world needs to see, now just as it has for several millennia, those who are willing to show them love even though their lifestyles are repulsive and their persecution painful. The world hated Christ, and He warned us that it would hate us as well (John 15:18). Yet He still came to seek and save the lost and to show them love that they didn't know (Luke 19:10). The truth for some is an aroma leading to life, but for most it will lead them to seek the harm or even death of the one speaking the truth concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (2 Corinthians 2:16). Yet we cannot be silent, for the gospel has the power to save and change hearts, even the most corrupted of all like Paul when he was still Saul persecuting the church like no other (1 Timothy 1:15). The temptation to want to be liked, to blend in, to be accepted, and to be a Christian and not have it cost us anything is strong. But Jesus is a stumbling block or just plain lunacy to people in their natural state (1 Corinthians 1:23), and when we align ourselves with Him, walls go up and a great divide ensues. But God is still working, and sometimes the miracle of salvation will come to the lost (Romans 1:16). Thus, even though there is a cost, the chance to be used by God to help change a heart and save a soul is more than worth it (Proverbs 11:30).

It is an honorable thing before God and a blessing to be ridiculed for knowing and loving Jesus. Standing against sin is one thing, but we must stand against it because Jesus says so. The world doesn't need empty moralism, ideology not backed up by Scripture, or those who spout off hate in return for hate. What the world needs are those who stand for the truth, accept the costs, recognize persecution as a blessing, love the persecutors, love the sinners, hate the sin, and point people always and only to Jesus. While we live, we must always point to Him, and when we die, we can rejoice in our gain (Philippians 1:21).