2 Timothy - Commentaries by Paul Wilson

Correspondence, Latter Times and the Last Days, The

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What is the difference between the "latter times" of 1 Tim. 4 and the "last days" of 2 Tim. 3?

Answer: There are at least three differences between the "latter times" and the "last days."

Different periods of time are contemplated.

The number of people involved is not the same in both. 3) The features that mark the periods are vastly different. We shall consider the differences in this order.

The "latter times" means merely some point of time later than the time of writing the epistle. The full development of these times came about the fourth century, although an evil was showing itself in the Apostle's day, which led to the "latter times" error. We shall notice this more fully in considering the features that mark the "latter times."

The "last days" are what the words imply—the last days of the Christian profession. It does not necessarily mean only a few days, but whatever period of time at the end of this era which shall be marked by its distinctive characters.

In the "latter times" some would depart from the faith. It would not be a general departure, but be limited in scope. There would be false teachers who would propagate lies, which indeed would have their origin in "doctrines of demons," and some would be led astray.

The "last days" are not marked by partial declension but by a general spiritual and moral breakdown—the whole period would bear the impress of giving up the vital elements of Christianity. Indeed, the word "men" at the beginning of the description of the "last days" is indicative of carnality. The Corinthians had been charged with being carnal and walking as men (1 Cor. 3:3). The general state of the whole profession shall have sunk to that of mere nature—"men"—where the conduct of the natural man might be expected.

We shall now consider the distinctive features of the two periods of time.

3) In the "latter times" false teachers with seared consciences would come teaching doctrines of demons. These teachers despised the Creator and rejected His provisions under the pretext of thereby obtaining a greater degree of sanctity. This form of evil was even then in the Apostle's day beginning to show itself. It had its roots in the Gnostic system of error which was imported from oriental mysticism. Gnosticism was known in the East before Christianity began; it was an airy philosophy derived from various Eastern cults. It was named from the Greek word for knowledge and made great pretensions to wisdom and knowledge.

Shortly after the establishment of Christianity the adherents of this metaphysical error began to infiltrate the ranks of Christians. As might be expected, they denied the deity and humanity of the Lord Jesus. The Apostle John warned the saints of those who confess not "Jesus Christ come in flesh" (1 John 4:3; J.N.D. Trans.).

The proponents of this mystic adulteration of the gospel taught that the Christians needed to add something to their faith in Christ—that they needed to follow certain human rules for purification of the flesh. It was against this false doctrine that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians when he said, "Ye are complete in Him." What did they need to add to their fitness in Christ? they were already complete in Him.

When the Apostle asked the Colossians, "Why... are ye subject to ordinances"? (chap. 2:20), he was referring to the Gnostic rules for human improvement; such as, "Touch not; taste not; handle not." These things indeed made "a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body;... to the satisfying of the flesh." Man naturally likes a system that makes something of him and his flesh, even though it causes him to neglect his body and treat it harshly. It was "science falsely so called" (1 Tim. 6:20).

With this background it became easy to introduce a teaching that the body was evil, marriage defiling, and animals eaten as food to be abhorred. So in the "latter times" wicked teachers forbade the saints to marry on the false premise that they would thereby attain greater sanctity. This evil system (known as Manicheism after a Persian magician) treated the body as evil and vile, but the Word of God does not speak of the body as such. The only time that the word "vile" is used of the body is a mistranslation (Phil. 3:21); our bodies are bodies of humiliation at present, for they are not yet glorified. "The body is... for the Lord."

To forbid or despise marriage was to despise God who made the body and instituted the relationship. Fornication or any immoral use of the body is wrong, but marriage is to be held in every way in honor (see Heb. 13:4; J.N.D. Trans.). God will judge those who indulge in unlawful lusts, for He is the 'avenger of all these things.... For God has not called us to uncleanness but in sanctification" (see 1 Thess. 4:3-8; J.N.D. Trans.), but legitimate marriage is of God who said, "It is not good that the man should be alone," and who "from the beginning... made them male and female."

The command to "abstain from meats" was also a thrust at God Himself, for He it was who gave man flesh to eat (Gen. 9:3). God is wiser than men and what He gave and sanctified by His Word does not defile. We might mention, however, that to the children of Israel, who were in a special relationship with Him, there were special instructions given describing "clean and unclean," and which may be eaten and which may not. These regulations have a special spiritual significance for us (for this we refer the reader to Notes on Leviticus by C.H.M.), but the Gentiles never were placed under such restrictions, and in Acts 15 an attempt to introduce Jewish rules for the Christians at Antioch was promptly stopped by the Spirit of God.

Doubtless the celibacy of the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church, and the prohibition of meat eating in the Seventh Day Adventist cult stem from the same root. They are both from the error of the "latter times" against which Paul by the Spirit of God wrote.

We would add a word of caution, however. A servant of the Lord may forego marriage because he deems that he cannot fulfill the work the Lord has given him to do and at the same time rightly carry out his responsibilities of marriage. This was the case with Paul, but he did not do it to attain special holiness, nor did he speak disparagingly of marriage; rather, he upheld its divine sanction and admonished that its obligations be not neglected or despised. In seeking elders or overseers in the Church, married men who had not neglected their responsibilities were the only ones who qualified.

In the same way, a saint may go without food for a time because of earnestness of prayer before God in some exercise of soul, but this is a special fasting and not for the purpose of attaining holiness. Or one may because of ill health have to forego the use of meat, but that is not despising meat "which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth." It is well to note the word here regarding thanksgiving. While partaking of the Creator's bountiful provision we are not to forget Him; all is to be received with thankfulness to Him. It has all been sanctified by His Word and will not defile us; we are brought into a position of knowing His will and freely speaking to Him.

The "last days" are described as being difficult or trying times, not because "some shall depart from the faith," but because the whole tone and state of the Christian profession would have fallen. That which named the name of Christ would be largely an empty profession, while the deeds of the heathen world as described in Rom. 1 would be reproduced in Christendom. The empty form of Christianity would be retained to cloak all the unlovely works of the flesh. Each particular vice or evil may have been found at any time to some degree, but all of them together are to be so prevalent as to give a distinct character to the time.

Let us review the list and ask ourselves if we are not actually living in the "last days." "Men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, evil speakers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, profane, without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, of unsubdued passions, savage, having no love for what is good, traitors, headlong, of vain pretensions, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; having a form of piety but denying the power of it." 2 Tim. 3:2-5; J.N.D. Trans. Are not these things true now? Is not our day marked by men being lovers of self, money, and pleasure? And remember, this is not the heathen world; it is not China or Russia, where the outward form is thrown off, but the Western nations where we live.

We are living in times of great stress. We rub shoulders with those who claim to be Christians, but who are living to themselves. When we seek to walk as Christians should, as the grace of God has taught us—"soberly, righteously, and godly"—we are laughed at and despised. More and more situations develop which make it hard to stand aloof from the ungodly in school, in the office, in the shop, or elsewhere. Pressures of all kinds increase to have the saints of God join associations for the advancement of various causes: labor, industry, education, etc. Problems multiply with our children forced to attend institutions of public education, and there pressures are applied to have them join this and join that, to attend this and attend that. Parents are urged to open their homes to the literature of the day, much of which is diametrically opposed to the heavenly calling of the Christian. How is the Christian to stand out against all the current of a world headed for destruction in the mask of Christianity? By unswerving obedience to the Word of God, and by asking for wisdom from Him who gives liberally and upbraideth not.

We would say to our inquirer and to all our readers, WE ARE LIVING IN THE LAST DAYS. These are times of stress for those who would walk with God. Many dear Christians have succumbed to the baneful influence; many more are weakening under constant and increasing pressure; but the word of God for us, in the same chapter that tells of the trials, is "Continue thou." No matter what happens or who falls in line with the trend, there is never an excuse for us to give up. "Continue" means to go on, and on, and "thou" is so limited that we cannot pass it off. For all this we need "grace to help in time of need," and we know where it may be found—at the "throne of grace" (Heb. 4:16). PM.

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