

DANGEROUS TIMES

by Ray C. Stedman

There was a full-page advertisement in the Los Angeles Times last week that heralded in large black print, "Christ Is Already Here." The ad went on to say that Christ is now in some secret place on the earth, and that within two months a worldwide announcement as to where he is will be made over television and radio. Not only that, but this Christ will also be revealed as Buddha and several other major religious leaders of the past.

I do not know who placed that ad. I do know that a full-page ad in the Los Angeles times costs tens of thousands of dollars; and, according to the advertisement, a similar ad was to appear in major newspapers all over the world. Somebody is either attempting to perpetrate a gigantic fraud, or else to arouse interest in some religious announcement that may perhaps launch a new cult.

These kinds of things which are appearing frequently in our day arouse the expectation in many peoples' hearts that perhaps we are right at the edge of the promised return of our Lord to earth, that these days in which we live are the last days. The nuclear threat that hangs over us, the constant advance of the great superpowers of earth toward a headlong clash, make many people feel that we are indeed in the last days before the great tribulation breaks in terrible fury upon the earth. So people today are asking with great sincerity, "Are these indeed the last days?"

The passage to which we have come in Second Timothy is one that many have taken to refer to the last days before the coming of our Lord. Writing to Timothy in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul says:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.
{2 Tim 3:1-4 RSV}

That reads like a summary of the six o'clock news, doesn't it? I remember reading that in grade school when I was just a boy -- which is not exactly what you would call recent. When I read it, I was filled with fear and trepidation, even that long ago. I was confident that it was being fulfilled in that very day, 50 years ago. The Great Depression was beginning; there was a great deal of trouble and strife in the United States. Fear had settled upon the nations of the world. Already the looming shadow of World War II was gathering on the horizon of life. Many were feeling that those were the last days, when we could expect the return of Christ.

So when I read that, even as a boy, I was aware that this passage was taken by many to predict the last days of the church. But I was unaware that many similar times had come into human history during the course of the 2,000 years since the first appearing of our Lord. Many people take the phrase, "these last days," to refer to the time just before Christ's return, but the biblical usage of that phrase indicates that it refers to the whole period of time between the first coming of our Lord and his second coming. In other words, for 2,000 years we have been living in the last days.

In the account in Acts 2, we read that, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter quoted the prophecy of Joel, in which the prophet said that "in the last days" God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, {cf, Acts 2:17}. That, Peter said, was beginning to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, almost 2,000 years ago. The first words of the book of Hebrews are: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son," {Heb 1:1-2a RSV}. So it is clear, from that, that "the last days" is a period which has now grown to 2,000 years' duration. The Apostle Paul is saying that within this extended period of time there will come repetitive cycles of distress, times of stress, perilous times, when all the conditions which he describes with these chilling words will obtain.

As we look back through human history during these last 2,000 years we can see how true that is. Again and again in our Western world we have had periods of relative peace and prosperity, only to have them interrupted by these terrible times of stress and agony that repeatedly come into human affairs. So these words are not necessarily a prediction of the last days for the church, rather, they are a recognition of the cycle of days like this that will keep coming. And, of course, one of them is going to be the last one.

Whether we are living in those times or not is difficult to say. Perhaps we are. Surely these times of stress we live in exactly fit the description the apostle uses here. But whether the actual last cycle to come into history before our Lord returns is difficult to say. As in the past, the clouds of peril may disperse and the sun may break out again. Some degree of peace and prosperity may return again to the world.

But what the apostle wanted Timothy -- and us -- to know, he clearly outlines: "Understand this," he says, "that these will be dangerous times, times of great stress, times when our faith will be pushed to the limit of its endurance, when we will be under attack and under threat." Furthermore, Paul reveals a rather startling thing, these times of stress will be characterized by and caused by two major factors, which he goes on to describe.

The first factor is very startling indeed. The striking thing about this paragraph is not what I read in Verses 1-4, but what is in Verse 5:

... holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Avoid such people. {2 Tim 3:5 RSV}

In other words, Paul says that the primary cause of these repetitive cycles of stress and danger is the hypocritical lives of Christians who outwardly look pious, religious, committed and devoted, but are actually unchanged inside and have no power to overcome evil in their lives. Hypocritical Christianity -- that is the bottom line in these times of stress.

I do not think any of us really grasps the revelation of Scripture about the nature of the church. The New Testament everywhere seeks to convince us that the church is the most important body of people in the world. God builds society around what happens in the church. The church is in control of history. "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus said {Matt 5:13a RSV}. If the salt loses its savor, becomes saltless, without flavor, the whole world will go to pot. "You are the light of the world," he said {Matt 5:14a RSV}. If the light dims, the whole world will sink into darkness. That is what the Scriptures tell us. Immorality in the world is caused by insincerity in Christians. Darkness among the nations is an outgrowth of ignorance and darkness in the church.

Right now I am involved with a number of Christian leaders trying to plan a conference of national proportions that will encourage pastors to once again return to the expository treatment of the Scriptures. The reason for this is that, everywhere I go, I am saddened and depressed by the biblical ignorance of church members. There is a terrible biblical illiteracy across the face of this apparently Christianized nation. People have only the most superficial knowledge of the Scriptures.

Sometimes this can be observed in the ignorant answers they give to biblical questions. One man said, "I thought Dan and Beersheba were husband and wife, like Sodom and Gomorrah."

Worse than that, they understand nothing of the great secrets of life which the Bible reveals, such as to how to handle their lives, how to understand humanity, and what is happening in the world. That kind of ignorance results in immorality, not so much the blatant, open, sexual type (although that is increasing in the church), but much worse, an inner hardening of the spirit, a manifestation of totally godless attitudes.

Remember that this terrible list, although very similar to a list at the close of Chapter 1 of Romans which describes conditions in the world, is nevertheless really only a description of what is going on in churches and among Christians who have a "form of religion," of "wholesomeness" (the word is godliness, as it has been translated many times in these letters of Paul to Timothy), "a form of godliness but denying the power thereof."

Let us take a closer look at this analysis by the apostle. It falls into four groupings:

The first one flows out of that first term, "lovers of self." That is the basic sin of humanity. Self love, the worship of another god, is the vilest form of idolatry. It deprives God of the worship due to his name, and it places a rival god, oneself, on the throne of an individual life. That is where some Christians are, Paul says. They have not really been changed, they are still lovers of self.

When this condition obtains in the churches, it will also be much more clearly and widely exhibited in the world. Today, we have what is known as the "Me" society. The focus is all on "my" -- my rights, my needs, my views, is all we hear about on every side. The first question that is asked about anything is, "What am I going to get out of it?" Christians oftentimes point the finger at non-Christians, saying, "Look how selfish they are," but the apostle points his finger, and says, that is what is happening in the church. People are not changed, they are "lovers of themselves."

This philosophy has been put rather graphically in a jingle that says,

I had a little tea party
this afternoon at three.
'Twas very small, three guests in all,
just I, myself and me.

Myself ate up the sandwiches,
and I drank up the tea.
'Twas also I who ate the pie,
and passed the cake to me.

That is the way many people live -- a self-centered existence. Out of this flows all the other things in the list.

The first and primary expression of it is in the next words, "lovers of money." Why are Christian people such materialists today? Why do they, like everyone else, seek a constantly increasing standard of living, a much more luxurious lifestyle? It is because money is a way of indulging ourselves. Instead of using it as the Scriptures exhort us to -- to meet the needs of others, to be ready to quickly respond to human need around us, and to delight to use our excess to that purpose -- we oftentimes merely plan to use it to increase our own possessions, to add to our own enjoyment in life.

I read a startling statistic the other day. There are more people in Russia going to church -- that is, in the visible, open churches -- on any given Sunday than go to church in all the rest of western Europe. Isn't that shocking? I have frequently pointed out that when the missionaries were driven out of China in the '50s, everybody said, "Woe to the church. It is going to go through terrible times." And it did. Yet the church in China has increased seven-fold in these years of persecution.

But it is not persecution that destroys a church, it is prosperity. The churches of western Europe have been wide open for anybody to attend them, but they are virtually empty because they have been destroyed by the love of money, materialism, and sensuality which have gripped and possessed the Christian people of Western Europe. This is the fate that awaits us in the United States if we continue to move along these lines.

Out of this grows another word: "proud." The word is boastful, braggarts. It bothers me to hear churches brag about how many millions of dollars they set aside for missions every year. I welcome the fact that the money is given, but to advertise it, to print it up in brochures that are handed out to others -- I do not know what this does to non-Christians who read it. I am sure it does not impress them very much. They see it as nothing more than the empty boasts of people who are trying to draw attention to themselves rather than to their Lord. That is an outcome of this loving of self.

The word that immediately follows is, "arrogant." Proud people are arrogant people. They have a secret contempt for others; they regard themselves as above them. This is the attitude frequently displayed in many churches and by many Christians today. It often takes the form of a self-righteousness that looks down its nose at people who have fallen into open, blatant sin. Such Christians use derisive terms for homosexuals, for whoremongers, for prostitutes and pornographers. They gather their robes of righteousness around themselves

and pronounce judgment with the same attitude of scornful cynicism revealed by the Pharisees in our Lord's day. That is why Jesus spoke so sharply to the Pharisees and so warmly to the prostitutes.

"Abusive" is the next term. This word describes people who use insulting, pejorative terms that put people down. This is the manifestation of an unhealthy, unwholesome, unchristian spirit within the Christian church.

Then there follows a second grouping that centers around family life. This seems to be addressed primarily to younger Christians. The first term is, "disobedient to their parents." Today there is a total breakdown of the home and a rebellion against parental authority. I read a shocking article this past week about the murder in Milpitas that awakened the concern of the whole nation. Teenagers who knew about the murder of a young girl were actually taken by the murderer and shown her body. They were indifferent to this, seemingly apathetic about it, and failed to report it to the authorities.

The reporter who wrote the article found that, as she talked to these young people, many of them expressed the fact that they deliberately carried on basically deceitful lives. One of them said to her, "What we do is act goody-goody at home so we can get out and smoke all the pot we want, sniff cocaine, and have sex any time we like." That is basically deceitful. The young person who said that had no consciousness that it was wrong or hurtful to act that way. This is what the apostle is talking about.

With this Paul links the word "ungrateful." He is referring to younger people, particularly, who are uncaring about the hours of labor their parents have gone through to provide a home and opportunity for them.

This is Mother's Day. I know that many a mother here this morning is being encouraged by her family who have taken time to show in some loving way, not only on this day, but frequently through the year, that they love and appreciate what their mother, or father, has done. Nothing has blessed my life more than to have my children do, as some of them have done, write me a note now and then to say how much they appreciate my love and concern for them. But this attitude is rare in many homes where young people take for granted what is given to them at great cost by their parents.

The next word is "unholy." This word means an unwillingness to observe even the basic decencies of life. It is a flaunting of ungodly actions, a kind of shamelessness that takes pleasure in doing shocking things to provoke reactions from people. With that is linked the word, "inhuman." This means lacking in normal affections, brutish, beastly, cruel. With that is the word, "implacable" -- meaning beyond reason, unappeasable, having a bitter, unrelenting attitude that nobody can talk to or soften in any way.

All of these attitudes occur within the framework of a Christian profession -- of people who say they are Christians, and act as such on Sunday, but during the week, at home and in business, have an entirely different outlook and attitude. They are cruel, vicious and implacable.

Then the list moves to those areas that touch what we call 'interpersonal relationships.' The next word is, "slanderers" -- literally, devils; "profligates" -- people who are ungovernable, who have to satisfy their lust and their passions immediately; "fierce" -- savage people; "haters of good" -- that was our Lord's charge to the Pharisees, that though they were morally respectable, within they were opposers of God and haters of good, and they proved it by putting to death the best man who ever lived; "treacherous" -- the word is used of Judas, the betrayer; and "reckless" -- careless of what happens, entering headlong into things, impulsively reacting without fear of the consequences. Then the last thing, "swollen with conceit," which literally means, swollen-headed, people who think of themselves more highly than they ought.

Finally, the last grouping deals with the religious pretensions of such people -- "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion [the outward form -- the word is *eusebeia* -- of godliness, or wholesomeness, a Sunday morning godliness] but denying the power thereof." Why? Why should people who are exposed to the Bible, who profess the truth, sing the hymns, and go through the ritual that is being carried out in thousands of churches across our land today reflect during the week the attitudes described here in such a way that destroy the fabric of society? The answer is in this one phrase: "they deny the power thereof."

We do not have to guess at what that power is. The Apostle Paul tells us very plainly in First Corinthians, where he says, "The word of the cross ... is the power of God," (1 Cor 1:18 {RSV}). When you let the cross have its effect upon you then you will experience and realize the power of God released. It is the denial of the word of the cross that constitutes this kind of Christianity without Christ, godliness without God, spirituality without the Spirit. The word of the cross is that which puts to death the natural life -- denies self, in other words.

Jesus put it very plainly: "If any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me," {Luke 9:23, cf, Matt 16:24, Mark 8:34}. This is saying that until we are willing, as Christians, to say "No" to what the cross has denied, what it has put to death within us, we cannot enter into that eternal life that is available to us now. Unwilling to deny self means that we are unable to experience life from God. That is the problem.

That is why we lay constant stress upon the fact that we must practice what we preach. We must say "No" to all the risings of the flesh within us in order that we might lay hold of the supply of power and life and vitality which enables us to walk with God in righteousness and truth. Otherwise we contribute to, nay, even cause, these terrible times of stress that repeatedly come upon humanity.

Dr. R. C. Sproul, an emerging young theologian of our day, has pointed out that the Bible divides life into four divisions of humanity:

1. The first group is those who are not saved and know they are not saved. They are the godless, the pagans, we call them, the people who do not profess any form of religion, the atheists, the agnostics of our day, who have no interest in the things of God, and say so openly.
2. Then there are those who are saved, but they are not sure of it. They really have come to Christ, they really do love the Savior, they know they have been born again, but, because they have not been taught properly, they do not understand the promises of God. For one reason or another they think that they will lose their salvation if they slip or fall in any way. When they do, they succumb to despair for weeks and months in a painful condition of uncertainty. This group is not sure of anything about their faith.
3. Then there is the group who are saved and they know it. These are the ones we would call the strong, mature Christians who are growing, evincing a new, changed life. Though they have the normal struggles of everyone else, they show from year to year evidence of progress and growth in these areas. They know they belong to God; they have no doubts about it.
4. Finally, there is a great group, which Scripture faces, of those who are not saved but think they are. That is the group that is being confronted in this passage. Jesus said, "Many shall come to me in that day and say 'Lord, Lord, have we not done many mighty works in your name, and cast out devils in your name, and preached in your name?' And I shall say to them, 'Depart from me, I never knew you.'" {cf, Matt 7:22-23}. They are the cause -- think of it -- of the times of stress that come upon humanity, times such as we are going through right now.

The second factor is described in Verses 6-9. In this section the apostle is describing the rise of strange cults which embrace very confusing concepts and immoral practices; these are begun by people who have been hypocritical Christians. Verse 6:

For among them are those who make their way to households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth. As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith; {2 Tim 3:6-8 RSV}

Here Paul reveals two favorite tactics of the devil. Growing out of a morally corrupt and hypocritical church, Christians who talk one way and live another way will come infiltrating into homes that may not be connected

with the church at all, and strange, exotic cults will emerge. This always happens in times of stress.

It happened in the 19th century, when cults like Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, Mormonism and others arose. It is happening again in our day. Out of these times of stress are emerging these new cults -- the Moonies, the Eastern-related cults, metaphysical groups, est, and other mind-manipulative groups.

Notice the tactics that are employed:

- The first is infiltration. Certain misguided men, for their own benefit and advancement, make their way into households and take captive silly women, rendered vulnerable because of their sense of guilt within, burdened with sin, who will believe anything they are told. Everybody who is a sinner -- and that includes all of us -- cannot escape a sense of guilt. This manifests itself in many ways that are not called guilt, for what people seek to do today is to escape the label *guilt*. But they cannot avoid the fact. It shows up in inner tensions, in a sense of despair, emptiness, and meaninglessness, or sometimes in a wildly rebellious spirit that seeks to lay hold of pleasure and an unending round of amusement. All this is a manifestation of guilt.

Here Paul speaks of those people who remain at home. In that 1st century culture, and still today, it is the women who remain there. Not all women are weak, by any means; not all fit this category. But some do. There are some women, as there are some men, who are morally weak and vulnerable; and they are intellectually weak -- they will believe anything that is told them, so they can never arrive at the truth. When you believe everything you hear you will never arrive at truth because you are taking in a lot of error along with the truth. With these infiltrative tactics new cults arise.

- The second tactic employed by the enemy is imitation, counterfeit faith. Paul says, "Like Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these people will oppose the truth." In the book of Exodus we read that when Moses was sent by God to Pharaoh's court, his brother Aaron did certain miraculous signs in order to impress Pharaoh that he was dealing with the Living God, not a couple of strange shepherds from the country. There were magicians in Pharaoh's court (whose names, Jannes and Jambres, are given to us here, although they are not named in the Old Testament), and they did miracles, just like Aaron did. Finally, Aaron cast Moses' rod down and it became a snake. These magicians cast their rods down and their rods too turned into snakes. But they did it by sleight of hand. Any good magician can pull rabbits out of hats, or snakes out of sleeves. These magicians imitated the miracles of the Living God.

That kind of corrupt, counterfeit faith is what we run into in times of stress, such as we are living in today. The cults offer to do what only God in Christ can do -- give peace of mind, an untroubled heart, forgiveness of sins, a sense of purpose in life. All the riches offered to us in the gospel are also held out by the cults. Many people fall for them, and for a while they think they have found these things. Today you can read testimonies of how people have found, especially in these metaphysical cults, peace of mind, a sense of harmony or a quality of enjoyment of life they never previously possessed. That is true, they do possess that for a while, but it does not last.

As the apostle goes on to say in Verse 9:

But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men. {2 Tim 3:9 RSV}

When the serpent which Aaron's rod had formed saw the other two snakes, it ate them up. This was a visible sign that God's power is always more powerful than the devil's. The apostle says that this is what will happen with counterfeit groups. Do not panic, he says to Timothy, evil has its limits. The devil always overreaches himself. His very success at winning converts will ultimately leave people so empty, so hungry of heart, so searching for ultimate truth they become wide open to the appeal of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what is

happening in our day.

When you read the Great Awakening stories about the Whitefields and the Wesleys of the 18th century you see that these men, though they preached to huge crowds, did not gather them by sending out press agents and advertising in the newspapers. They merely went out on the street corners, even the fields, and began to talk to a few people about the gospel. But the whole English nation was so hungry, so empty, so lonely, miserable, and depressed that they began to flock to hear these men. The word so spread that whenever they started preaching people would come running to hear them. John Wesley and George Whitefield often found that, though they began by speaking to just a few people, before they were through they would be addressing a crowd of ten thousand or more. I think that is what we are headed for in the future. Times of stress are also times of great opportunity, when God uses the devil's very deceitfulness to outwit him, and to prepare the hearts of people for a genuine pouring out of the blessings of God.

Remember, then, that hypocrisy and insincerity in the church is what was produced the times of crisis that are described here. We are living heirs today of the lukewarmness of the churches of the '20s and '30s of this century. God's righteous judgments always are based upon reality. He knows what is in the heart. If we think we are fooling God by our coming to church, by singing hymns, by faithfully attending Bible studies, but not allowing the Word to get at our self-indulgent lives and change us, we will awake sooner or later only to find we are fooling ourselves.

These are strong, searching words from the apostle's pen.

He goes on in the next section to tell us how to oppose these conditions, what to do in the midst of them, how to live in these times of stress.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for how accurately you describe what happens in our world. Thank you also that there is something we can do about it. We can be real, not phony, people; we can be genuine, not hypocritical; we can allow the Word to change us from the heart outward, and not dress up the outside merely to impress others. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Dangerous Times
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in Second Timothy
Scripture: 2 Tim 3:1-9
Message No: 8
Catalog No: 3789
Date: May 9, 1982

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