

The Closing Days of Christendom

Collective Restoration or Individual Faith?

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I have just been thinking how the great apostate systems, whether civil or ecclesiastical, are destined to advance in strength and magnificence, as their day of doom and judgment approaches. Witness the condition of the WOMAN in Revelation 18, and that of the BEAST in Revelation 18 and 19. –

And I ask, Is not this present moment through which we are passing giving pledges of this? Do we not see the great apostate ecclesiastical system advancing to occupy itself of the world with something of giant strides? And is not the world, as a civil or secular thing, spreading itself out in improvements and attainments, and cultivation of all desirable and proud things, beyond all precedent? Are not these things so, beyond the question of even the very least observant? And are they not pledges that all is now on the high road to the full display of the Woman and of the Beast in their several forms of greatness and grandeur, which are thus, according to God's word, destined to precede their judgment? These things, I own, are very plain and simple to me.

But again I ask, Is there any notice in God's word that the SAINTS or the CHURCH are to rise to any condition of beauty or of strength befitting them, ere the hour of their translation come? The APOSTATE THINGS, as we have seen, are to be great and magnificent just before their judgment; but I ask, Is the TRUE THING, to be eminent in its way, strong and beautiful in that strength and beauty that belong to it, ere its removal to glory?

This is an affecting inquiry. What answer do the oracles of God give us?

- PAUL, in 2 Timothy, contemplates "the last days" in their perilous character, and the ruin of the church which we have seen and do see at this day all around us. But what condition of things among the saints or elect of God does he anticipate as following that ruin? I may say, with all assurance, he does not contemplate any restoration as to church order, any rebuilding of God's house, so to speak, any recovery of corporate beauty or strength worthy of this dispensation; but he exhorts the pure in heart to call on the Lord together outside the "great house," and there also together to follow the virtues and cherish the graces which become them and belong to them.
- PETER, in his second epistle, contemplates "the last days" also, and very fearful unclean abominations among professors, and very daring infidel scorning of divine promises in the world. But he gives no hint whatever that there will be restored order and strength in the church, or in corporate spiritual action: he simply tells the saints to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour, and to be assured of this, that the promise of His coming and majesty is no cunningly devised fable. He speaks to them of an entrance into the everlasting kingdom, but never of a return to a restored order of things in the church on earth.
- JUDE also in like manner anticipates "the last time," and many terrible corruptions, such as "turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness." But what then? He promises nothing in the way of restored beauty and consistency as in earlier days, but just encourages the "beloved" to build themselves up in holy faith, and to keep themselves in God's love; but he is so far from encouraging any hope of recovered order and strength

in the church on earth, that he tells them to be looking out for another object altogether – “the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”

- JOHN, in his way, gives us the judgment of the seven churches in Asia, in Revelation 2 and 3. It is a very solemn scene. There is some good and much evil found in the midst of them. The voices of the Spirit heard there have healthful admonitions for us, both in our individual and gathered condition. But there is no promise that the judgment will work correction and recovery. The churches are judged, and they are left under the judgment, and we know no more of them on earth; the next sight we get of the elect is in heaven. (See Rev 4)

All this is serious, and yet happy; and all this is strikingly verified by the great moral phenomena around us, under our eye, or within our hearing, at this moment. For we know that the great apostate things, the things of the world, whether civil or ecclesiastical, are in the advance, ripening to full bloom of vigour and of beauty, while we see the true thing broken, enfeebled, and wasted, in no wise promising to regain what once it had in days of corporate order and power.

But it is well. It is gracious in the Lord thus to cast up before us in His word the high road along which we were destined to travel, and the sights we were appointed to see. And it is happy to know that our translation does not wait for a regained condition of dispensational order and strength. For, according to present appearances, we might have to wait long enough ere that could be.

But mark further on this same truth. At times, when the Lord Jesus was about to deliver the poor captive of Satan, the enemy at the very moment would put forth some fresh energy of evil, and his captive apparently be in its most grievous estate.

This was another form of the same thing that we notice throughout God's word, that the apostate thing is in peculiar strength and magnificence just at the time when its doom or judgment is at the door, and that Christ's thing is in weakness and brokenness, just as the deliverance He brings with Him is at hand.

Joseph, Moses and David are samples of this also. One was taken from a prison to feed and rule a nation; another was drawn forth from an unnoticed, distant solitude, where he had the care of flocks and herds, to deliver a nation; another was raised up and manifested from under the neglect and contempt of his own kindred, to sustain by his own single hand a whole people and kingdom. And what may really amaze us in the midst of such things is this, that some of these were in the place of degradation and loss, through their own sin, and the judgment of God. Thus it was with both Moses and David. Joseph was a martyr, I grant, and went from the sorrows of righteousness to the greatness of the rewards of grace. So was David in the day of Saul, when David at last reached the kingdom. But David in later times was not a martyr, but a penitent. He had brought on himself all the loss and sorrow and degradation of the rebellion of Absalom; and the sin that produced it all had this heavier judgment of righteousness resting upon it: “The sword shall never depart from thine house.”

Nor did it. And thus he was under judgment; he was in the ruins which his own iniquity had brought on him; he was the witness of God's visitation in holiness, when suddenly his house, in the person of Solomon, broke forth in full lustre and strength.

And so Moses before him. Moses was a martyr, I grant, in his earlier days, in Midian, and comes forth from the place where his faith had cast him, into the honour and joy of being Israel's deliverer. But, like David, in later days Moses was under judgment – judgment of God for his unbelief and sin. He trespassed, as we know, at the water of Meribah, and so trespassed as at once to forfeit all title to enter the land of promise. And nothing to the end could ever change that divine purpose. In that sense the sword never departed from Moses' house, as it did not from David's. He besought the Lord again and again, but it was in vain. He never entered the land; and thus he was judged, and still under the judgment, when grace abounds; for he is (in principle) translated, borne to the top of the hill, and not to the fields of Canaan; to the heights of Pisgah, and not to the plains of Jericho and Jordan.

These things were so. But it is better to be judged of the Lord than to be condemned with the world, for the poor, weak, and judged thing is drawn forth in the light and redemption of God, while the proud and the strong bow under Him.

So, I say, there is no New Testament promise that the church shall recover her consistency and beauty ere her translation comes. She passes from her ruins to her glory, while the world goes from its magnificence to its judgment – ruins too, I add, which witness the judgment of God. The sword has never departed from the house.

May I not say, beloved, in the light of these truths, Comfort yourselves as you look abroad, and see what it is that is strong nowadays, and what it is that is weak. But let me add, Let not the weakness of which I speak, the corporate or church weakness of the saints, be the least occasion for personal moral relaxation. This would be a sad and terrible use to make of the truths we are speaking of, and gathering from scripture. We are, most surely to be separate from evil as distinctly as ever, and to cherish all the thoughts and ways of holiness as carefully as ever.

But further, we may find some hesitation in knowing exactly how to speak of Israel's history – whether it be that of a martyr or a penitent. It has something of each in it; more, however, I judge, of the latter. But whether so or not, their recoveries and redemptions illustrate the mystery which we have now before us, that the apostate thing goes to judgment in the hour of its chiefest strength and greatness, and the true thing rises from amid its infirmities and ruins to its glory and blessedness.

They were in a low condition in Egypt, as brick-kilns and taskmasters tell us, and the exacted tale of bricks without the accustomed straw, just as the Lord was sending Moses and his rod for their deliverance.

So again in Babylon. The enemy was insulting their bonds, making merry in infidelity despite the captivity of Jerusalem and her temple, when, that very night, the deliverer of Israel entered Babylon.

So again in Persia. The decree had fixed a day for their destruction, and that decree would not, could not, be changed. Their Amalekite persecutor was in power, and all, as far as the eye could reach, was utter destruction. But Haman fell, and the Jews were delivered. And so will it be again with the same people. (Deut 32:36, and Isa 59:16) "At evening time it shall be light." The city will be taken; all the people of the earth will be round it in its day of siege and straitness; half of it will go into captivity; the houses shall be rifled, and all will be waste and degradation: but the Lord from heaven shall, in that instant, plead their cause. "At evening time it shall be light." The shadow of death shall be turned into the morning. (See Zech 14.)

And again, Caesar Augustus was in strength and majesty. His proconsuls were in far-distant provinces: his decree had gone to the ends of the earth, and the whole Roman world was set in beauty and order, just as Jesus was born. (Luke 2.) But the remnant were feeble. The family of David lived at Nazareth, and not in Jerusalem. The Hope of the nation lay in a manger at Bethlehem. A devout, solitary, expectant saint or two, frequented the temple; and it was shepherds during their nightly watches who had glories revealed to them. Israel had thus fallen, together with the house of David, and fallen, each of them, by their iniquity, and the judgment of God. The sovereignty of the Romans could command the chief of Israel's sons from Galilee to Judaea, to be taxed and estimated, like the rest of Roman property. But the Lord was at hand. The Child, who was to be for the fall and the rise of things and people was just born.

Let us be emboldened according to God, and judge, not according to flesh and blood, but by the light of the Lord.

And again I say, as the apostle teaches, it is better to be judged of the Lord than to be condemned with the world. Judgment has begun at the house of God. He abaseth the proud, and exalteth them that are cast down. The candlesticks are visited in the keen and searching power of Him whose "eyes were as a flame of fire"; and as far as we know them here on earth, there they are left; but the place of judgment proves itself to be next door to the place of glory. (Rev 1-4.)

It is all right and comforting to faith; strange to the reasoning and religion of nature. The church will go from her ruins up to glory; the world will pass from its proudest moment of greatness to the judgment. God taketh the beggar from the dung-hill to set him among princes.

Would that the saints of God were apart from the purposes and expectations of the world. "Come out of her, my people."

The feeble saint shall win the day,
Though hell and death obstruct his way.

The Lord will vindicate His own principles, and establish His own thoughts for ever and ever, though the voices that witness them be feeble, and well-nigh lost in the din of the world's exultation.

May the heart of the humbled, broken saint be comforted in Him!

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