

Perilous Times Part 1: Recognising and Responding to Seasons of Exceptional Apostasy

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‘In the last days perilous times shall come’ (*2 Timothy 3.1*).

The remarkable picture of the present age given in the prophecy of Paul in *2 Timothy 3*, is breathtaking both in scope and detail. Humanly speaking, not even the massive intellect of the apostle could have led him to see the unique features of apostasy in today’s western world.

It is the voice of God that speaks in this passage, providing his people living in days of apostasy with the explanations, warnings and guidance so sorely needed for their safety and survival. Do we have an adequate understanding of such times of unusually severe godlessness? What are the special dangers? Where must we most carefully set watch against the wiles of the devil? Do we know exactly how atheism will reshape society, and influence even true churches?

God’s people today are deeply disappointed at the slow progress of their evangelistic efforts, feeling almost crushed when they read of the success and blessing of past worthies. But these are days of unique hardness – ‘perilous times’ – and Scripture here tells us how to recognise and respond to them.

Mighty warriors for the faith such as C H Spurgeon never had to face days like ours. His trials and tribulations were many, but they were largely of a different order. He never had to proclaim the Gospel to a granite-hard wall of total indifference. His generation of preachers did not face a society so corrupted, perverted and overrun by fornication, nor had the people degenerated to the point of approving the wholesale murder of unborn children out of selfish whim. There is no doubt that public morals are considerably worse than even forty years ago, and we must understand our situation, or discouragement will overpower us.

Irresistible grace

To acknowledge the unusual depravity of our day will drive us to appreciate the absolute necessity of an irresistible work of grace in bringing any soul to conversion, and cause us to value highly every trophy of grace. It will teach us what ‘new’ sins must be exposed in the preaching of the Word, and it will alarm and move us to protect the Church of Jesus Christ from infiltration by surrounding evil. Paul begins his great prophecy with the words, ‘This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.’ He does not mean the very last days (the final few years of the age) because he says that in these last days, ‘perilous times [in the plural] shall come’. In other words, a number of perilous times (seasons) will arise during the period of the last days, indicating that this period is of long duration. The term last days (or last times) is mostly used in the New Testament to describe the entire ‘church age’, which began with the coming of Christ.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter interpreted Joel’s prophecy (‘It shall come to pass in the last days’) as applying to the events of that very day, when the Spirit came upon the infant church. Peter knew that the last days had begun at that time.

Hebrews 1.2 speaks of the early days of the church as – ‘these last days’. The apostle Peter speaks of Christ, who came to shed his blood – ‘in these last times for you’ (*1 Peter 1.19-20*). The apostle John said most emphatically that he lived in the ‘last time’, because many antichrists were already on the scene (*1 John 2.18-19*).

The last days, therefore, began with the coming of Christ and the establishment of his New

Testament church, and they will continue until Christ returns on the clouds of heaven, in great power and glory. The entire church age, the Gospel age, the final period of history up to the Lord's return is – the last days.

So far, the last days have amounted to a period of over 2,000 years, and within this period there have already been a number of seasons of conspicuous godlessness, characterised by abandonment of the faith and hostility to the Gospel.

According to Paul these extreme anti-Christian seasons will come and go in cycles (but not necessarily uniformly throughout the world). They are to be expected from time to time throughout the Gospel age, and God's people must beware, and take special precautions. These evil times or seasons will not arise without warning. The words of Paul – 'perilous times shall come' – indicate that such seasons will set in, or settle in, rather in the way that a great storm comes. There will be a build-up of indications: a spiritual chill, a darkening over of Gospel knowledge, and a developing wind of cynicism. All these signs have been manifested in Britain over the last fifty years.

The impending storm

The very earliest sign of an impending storm in the West came even before this period, with the rise of Darwinism and scientific humanism. Then, after the First World War, the general obligation to worship began to fade, even though millions went on attending church. Even those who did not attend continued, on the whole, to believe in God, and to respect the moral law written in their consciences. Nevertheless, the decline had begun. At the same time liberalism stole into the mainline denominations, undermining belief in the Bible.

After the Second World War the storm clouds gathered menacingly, and by the 1960s the gale of atheism began blowing more fiercely to uproot every pleasant plant of faith and holiness. Soon afterwards, the full fury of the storm burst upon us. Now true believers are few and far between, and the mouthpieces of Satan (through the media, through the world of entertainment and in schools and universities) roar out their hatred of purity, chastity, the Word of God, and faith in Christ.

Paul tells us that – 'Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse...' (*2 Timothy 3.13*). The Greek word translated wax literally means – to strike forward, or to cut out a track, so as to advance. In an evil season the forces of unbelief campaign militantly against divine Truth and godliness, as if hacking their way through a forest. To them, faith and holiness are obstructions to be cleared out of their path. They forge ahead in the promotion of self-worship, materialism, self-indulgence, pleasure-lust, and liberty from all moral restraint.

Such evil seasons have always grown in sinfulness until God has ended them, either by a mighty work of judgement, or by a merciful reformation or revival.

We are not told how many evil seasons there will be in the period of the Gospel age, but we see an indication in this passage that each one will be significantly worse than the previous one, until the last such season comes – when there shall come 'a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God...' (*2 Thessalonians 2.3-4*.)

The progressive worsening of succeeding evil seasons is surely implied in *2 Timothy 3.13*, bearing in mind that this verse is to be read in the context of verse 1. In other words, we may read, 'In the last days perilous times shall come...evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse.' When the verses are thus connected, Paul appears to be saying that the degree of evil will grow worse not only within each specific evil season, but also over the entire series of them.

Will our present season of godlessness develop into the greatest and last such time? It may well do so. It is already staggering in its defiance of God's standards. We have certainly never before seen such open detestation of God and his laws in places where the light of the Gospel has previously shone. And when we remember that other tokens of the end of the age (such as *Matthew 24.14*) are

now well advanced, there scarcely seems time left for another complete cycle of reformation, blessing, decline and apostasy, before the end.

However, the central issue for us is the counsel of God about how we are to confront an evil season. A vital warning comes to us through the Spirit's choice of word, 'In the last days perilous times shall come.'

A perilous time (or season) is a hard-to-deal-with time. The Greek indicates a hard, fierce influence which is weakening and undermining in its operation. Different translations propose alternative terms, such as difficult, grievous or terrible times. But perilous is probably best, because the rigour and pain of such times is united with the danger and insecurity which they present. How, precisely, will perilous times undermine churches, and in what respects should we be specially watchful?

At the most obvious level, an evil time is perilous because it conditions us. How dangerous it is to be surrounded by immorality, filthiness, self-seeking and pleasure-lust! Even believers soon grow accustomed to these things, cease to be horrified by them, and then, gradually, begin to absorb new values. A younger generation grows up never having seen anything better, to whom the perversions of Sodom are the normal state of affairs. These are our children, and the converts of the Sunday School and youth classes, and we should be filled with anxiety for them. Is it any wonder that the occurrence of adultery and marriage breakdown has increased within Gospel churches, as well as in the world? This is a perilous time.

When every programme on television (including even many documentaries) is introduced with, and filled with, the images and music of a debased culture, it becomes an accepted and essential feature of life; the reasonable idiom of the day. Younger people are often amazed to hear that these things are not fit to be admitted into the worship and work of a Holy God, nor into the hearts of his people.

Self-interest prevails

Because the world around is so full of self-interest, believers soon find themselves reacting to circumstances just as worldlings do. 'I am going to assert my rights, and walk out!' they say, and the Lord (through Paul) says in vain, 'Let your moderation be known unto all men.' Even believers may become defiant toward employers, rude toward colleagues, and testy toward fellow-believers. Worldly reactions seep into them, and self-interest and pride become freely exercised.

There is a further reason why times of extreme apostasy and godlessness are perilous, or undermining. Not only may the churches be tainted and ruined by the standards of the world, but they will find that it is so much harder to win a hearing for the Gospel. Humanly speaking it is now much harder to witness than it was fifty years ago. Society is now so brainwashed by evil ideas, and so infatuated by sinful lifestyles, that the people are much further away than they previously were. The media and the world of education has decided that there is no God, no soul, no absolute standard of right and wrong, and that no one has the right to challenge others on these things. Everyone is entitled to do that which is right in his own eyes.

This is an age of unprecedented arrogance and self-determination, no former age having seen such extensive 're-programming' of the human conscience to 'call evil good, and good evil'; to 'put darkness for light, and light for darkness'.

Society's tremendous resistance to witness and evangelism is also dangerous to churches, because, as we have noted, pastors and people become demoralised and disheartened, and faith fails. Some good churches have already given up evangelism, and have lapsed into introspection and decline, while even more have fallen into an entirely different trap by redesigning their churches and methods to make themselves more attractive to worldlings. Worship has been turned into entertainment; something for the pleasure of earthly-minded people, and not something for God. Numerous churches have become little more than social clubs, but with an added benefit

attached – the supposed favour of God towards the members, along with a place in Heaven. The brokenness of society prophesied in *2 Timothy 3*, needs to be taken account of by us, so that our outreach may be relevant, and our protection of God's people adequate for the time. So we turn to the features of behaviour in a time of apostasy.

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