

These are the Last Days: So how should we live?

Introduction

Talk of the Last Days often gets us sidetracked in looking for so-called “signs of the end”. But the Bible has a much more dynamic and helpful understanding of the Last Days.

The whole of the time between the first and second comings of Jesus are the Last Days according to the NT. Because it is the time between those two events there is a certain tension in it. We are expecting and looking forward to the return of Christ. But we don't know when it will be. So we have to live both for the long haul as well as be ready for a sudden end.

And it is not as though we are just waiting with nothing else to do.

Living in the Last Days means living in a world

- under the ongoing judgement of God
- where Satan is waging a war of destruction on God's people
- where we are proclaimers of the gospel of the Lordship of Jesus
- where we are vitally involved in the building of Christ's eternal church

Which means life is difficult and conflicted and not very peaceful.

Perhaps it is a world from which we prefer to escape – like a hermit. Although our experience of Covid-19 isolation provides a reality check on that.

How shall we live in these Last Days as disciples of Jesus? Retreat or escape is attractive but not really possible, and not part of the plan. Although the Christian world has tried a few false trails. For example the collusion between clergy and people whereby the clergy get the kudos and live the spiritual life and the people applaud and live to a lower standard (a big deception I'm afraid). Or the activists of various colours who want to attack the difficulties head on.

Living in the Last Days means facing a number of difficulties, opponents, aggressors and our own weaknesses. But it is a life lived with one great Helper. We can usefully group these challenges into three famous groups: the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.

1. The World

Being disciples of Jesus in the Last Days brings pressure from our fellow citizens and our culture in at least two ways.

Peer pressure.

Paul warned Timothy in these words:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. (2 Tim 3.1-4)

There is more in that chapter. It describes a social and moral environment which presses in on us in many different ways. For us it sometimes comes from friends or work colleagues. Sometimes via media. Sometimes in other ways. Although this passage may seem to be a strong description, our culture also affects us in subtle as well as obvious ways.

And sometimes from our past:

3 For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do— living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. 4 They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. 5 But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (1Pet 4.3-5)

The pressure to conform to the society around us is constant and everywhere.

Opposition

Sometimes the pressure becomes outright attack, as Paul knew.

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, 11 persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. 12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (1 Tim 3.10-14)

Persecution is a way of life for those who live like Christ and not like the world. It takes different forms: intimidation, exclusion, ridicule, violence, etc

At different times for different people it will become overwhelming. Paul understood this suffering as a share in the suffering of Christ; as a display of the death of Christ in our bodies, so that through our suffering the life of Christ might be displayed in us. The upside of this persecution is that it shows that God is pleased to reveal the treasures of his grace in jars of clay.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but

not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (2 Cor 4.7-12))

In a world where competence, success and power are highly valued, to live as weak, humble and powerless is difficult. Being hard pressed ought not stop us speaking the gospel (v13), nor should we lose heart (v1,16). Or give up, or be pressed to conform to our society. How we do that we will come to.

2. The Flesh

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy. Our sinful nature still exerts its influence in us. A battle continues in our wills and spirit to resist the rebellious nature, to kill off, with the help of the Spirit, the deeds that arise from that nature. To choose to live for Christ. Here is Paul.

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. (Rom 13.11-14)

Clothing ourselves with Christ is a wonderful image. He is the armour of light that allows us to live in the light of God's presence and Word. Resisting the power of the sinful nature is about choice. But choices made in the presence of Christ, in the light of his word and by the help of the Holy Spirit. But choices nevertheless.

For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. (1 Thess 5.1-8)

We will come back to the armour, and to how to overcome the influence of the sinful nature.

3. The Devil

The Last Days are days of destructive warfare on the part of Satan. This war is not primarily between us and Satan but between God and Satan. We are caught up in it, and we are the ones Satan targets.

He does it by lies, and testing. Deception is a major weapon of the enemy.

Deception

The evil one targets unbelievers, as we saw in 2 Corinthians 4, blinding their eyes to the truth. Sometimes through deceptive religious events, and the deceit of wickedness.

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, 10 and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (2 Thess 2.9-11)

How does wickedness deceive? Usually it offers something: pleasure or power, security or hope are some of the main enticements. What it delivers is usually not quite what it promised. Ultimately it delivers death.

The Devil also tries to trick Christians. Especially by sowing discord in the church. Even something as simple as unforgiveness, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (2 Cor 2.10)

Tricking Christians is often done by other Christians

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.(Eph 4.14). See also Col 2.8-23.

There is lots of confusion, leading astray, and error from the ignorant and those who wilfully reject scripture. Sometimes mixing faith with religion (Col 2), sometimes mixing faith with secular culture, sometimes repeating attractive but half-baked ideas from the internet.

Testing

Satan also brings pressure, temptation, or persecution on us to test us – with the aim of taking us away from Christ.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Pet 5.8-9)

The test lies in how we react to the trial that we are under. We want to respond with faith and hope in God. With confident perseverance.

It is easy to be confused about who is against us. Usually it seems to be people. But this is a spiritual battle waged by Satan. So we need to look beyond the human opponents.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph 6.12)

Consequently we need to adapt our response to spiritual powers rather than to use normal human methods of conflict.

Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. (Eph 6.13)

Standing against the Devil's schemes requires God's power. The exotic armour listed in this passage can distract us from seeing what the armour means. This armour of God is the gospel in pictures.

- Truth – of God's Word
- Righteousness – The Righteous God vindicating Christ the Righteous one who shares his Righteousness with us.
- Peace - reconciliation with God and with each other
- Faith – faithfully trusting the faithful God
- Salvation – from sin and death into the life of God.
- Word of God – proclaimed, taught and believed

Notice that this is all about God's action. There is no licence here for storming Satan's castle, except by the gospel and prayer.

Which leads us on to consider the great Helper we have in the face of these challenges.

4. The Helper

The helper who comes along side us and helps us live by faith and hope during these Last Days is Christ himself.

- Christ in his death and resurrection,
- Christ in his Word and
- Christ by his Spirit.

Christ's Death delivers us. The armour of God reminds us that Christ died and was raised for us to deliver us from the power of the enemy and from our fear of death. It reminds us that Christ by his death has overthrown and conquered the Devil. It reminds us that Christ is now exalted to the right hand of the Father where he prays for us. The enemy may fire flaming darts of accusation and discouragement at us, but it is Christ who died, indeed Christ who intercedes for us (Rom 8.33-34). That is one reason why Paul's discussion of armour goes on immediately to encourage us to pray.

Christ helps us by his Word.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15.7)

In the face of deception, and conflicting values and influences, the sure guide of what God himself has told us keeps us safe.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3.14-17).

Surely one of the great needs of the modern church is the knowledge of God's word. Praise God that so many of St Mark's are reading, marking, and inwardly digesting God's word. That will build strong disciples and a strong church. May many more join in.

And in the face of unbelievers being deceived, the gospel is the great revealer of Christ's glory. We do not need, we must not, resort to human methods of manipulation or persuasion when we testify to the gospel. Listen to this encouragement by Paul.

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light

shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4.1-6). See also 2 Tim 4.1-5

Christ in us. Above all it is Christ in us who helps us live for him in these Last Days. Paul understood the life of Christ in him to be a result of Paul's death with Christ. (Rom 6.1-7; 2 Cor 5.14-15). This is how he puts it in Galatians.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2.20).

To live by faith is to live in the trust that our old life came to an end when we believed in Christ – actually when Christ died since it was our death that he died. It is to live in trust that Christ's life is being lived in and through us. To live by grace is to live in complete dependence on Christ's free mercy and kindness. To know that nothing remains to be done by me for God to accept me fully as one of his own. And to know that the way to live for God in the Last Days is to live depending on his kindness and mercy.

All this depends on Christ living in us by his Spirit. Later in Galatians Paul changes the language of living by grace and living by faith, to the language of living by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. And it is by the Spirit that Christ lives in us. The Spirit is the great Helper who comes alongside us to encourage and guide. That is why Paul can say that if our life comes by the Spirit we should keep in step with the Spirit.

As for the deeds of the sinful nature, we put them to death by the Spirit.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Gal 5.16-18)

5. SO

The Last Days have many challenges. There is confusion, deception, pressing opposition. Although it may appear that we are weak, put upon, and insignificant, the truth is that we are God's children. Christ's fellow workers. Holy Spirit filled agents of grace. We have the sure and living Word of God in our hearts and on our lips. We live with Christ in the heavenly world, not just in this world. We have a sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life. We are confident we will share the life of Christ in the Age to Come because we already have the promise of the Spirit.

So encourage one another. Don't lose heart. We serve the King.

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