

An extract from...

CAN YOU FACE THE END OF THE AGE WITHOUT FEAR?

Surviving the Last Days

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This is an edited transcript of No. 4382 “How to Face the Last Days Without Fear” by Derek Prince.

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Surviving the Last Days

The Bible has a great deal to say about the end times. It starts in the first book, Genesis, and continues all the way through the last book, Revelation.

I was in a medical facility once for some routine medical tests and at one point I had a doctor and two nurses there with me. They asked me, “What do you think about the condition of the world today?” I said, “I believe we’re living in the last days.” Rather to my surprise, all three of them said they believed that was true. It was quite surprising.

In this book we are going to explore how to approach the last days. I believe that it will be a time of testing—the severest testing that humanity has ever experienced. There are some very serious statements made in Scripture about the last days.

Trouble in the Last Days

In 2 Timothy 3:1 Paul says to Timothy, “Know this.” It is very emphatic. You can be certain of one thing, this you must not forget.

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come. . . .

The Greek word that’s translated perilous here only occurs in one other place in the New Testament, in Matthew 8, where it is used to describe two demon-possessed men who came to meet Jesus on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee. And there it is translated fierce. It says they were “exceedingly fierce.” So, what the Scripture is telling us is that in the last days fierce times will come. I think that is a much better translation than perilous.

Paul goes on in 2 Timothy to give the reason these fierce times will come. The reason is the deterioration of human character, ethics and morals. He lists eighteen moral blemishes that will be conspicuous in the last days. Three of them are things that people love. The first is “lovers of themselves,” the second is “lovers of money” and the last one is “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (verses 2, 4). With unerring accuracy, Scripture pinpoints the great basic problem that faces humanity—to say nothing of America and the modern Western world. It is love of self. Self-love is the cause of the breakup of marriages, families, churches and society in general. The prevailing attitude is, “This is what I want. What you want is secondary. I know what I want and I’m going to have it.” That attitude is responsible for the state of the modern family. The breakup of the family is the precursor to the breakup of society.

We are warned again about what will happen in the last days in Matthew 24:7–13. Jesus is speaking about the birth pangs, or labor pains, that will issue in the kingdom of God on earth. One inescapable fact about the kingdom of God is there is only one way into it. You cannot join it; you must be born into it. Jesus said that unless a man is born again he can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). That is true not only of the individual; it is true of the earth. The earth can only enter into the kingdom of God through a birth. In Matthew 19 Jesus calls it the regeneration (verse 28). And like every birth it is preceded by birth pangs. In Matthew 24:7–13 Jesus lists some of the main labor pains:

“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise

up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”

The first indicator of the coming of God’s kingdom is nation rising against nation. Interestingly, the Greek word there for nation is *ethnos*, which gives us the phrase “ethnic conflict,” one of the conspicuous features of the present situation in the world.

Then Jesus says that kingdom will rise against kingdom, which I would interpret as political wars. These are followed by famines and pestilences and earthquakes.

As if those occurrences were not traumatic enough, Jesus goes further and makes it personal: “You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of Me.” The natural result of this will be that many turn away from their faith. Jesus indicates, though, that people will not simply walk away from following Him. They will go so far as to actually betray and hate each other. This, of course, produces a perfect breeding ground for the appearance of highly influential false prophets.

The next sign is abounding lawlessness. Anyone who has lived in the same nation for at least ten years would agree that lawlessness is on a continual increase. Jesus then completes His list by saying the love of many Christians will grow cold. The Greek word for love used there is *agape*, the word normally applied to the special love of Christians.

But Jesus is far from hopeless. He immediately follows His litany of end-time indicators with an admonition about the need for endurance. He says, “He who endures to the end shall be saved.” The Greek is more specific than the translation here. It says, “He who has endured to the end shall be saved.” You are saved now, but to remain saved you must endure to the end.

Let's recap this very significant list:

- Nation against nation
- Kingdom against kingdom
- Famines, pestilences, earthquakes
- Christians persecuted and hated by all nations
- Many Christians offended and betraying one another
- Many false prophets
- Abounding lawlessness
- The love of many Christians growing cold
- Finally, the need for endurance

None of this, obviously, is going to be very pleasant. One thing I have learned about the Bible, however, is to be objective. I started to study the Bible as a believer when I was 25, and I made up my mind then that I would try to find out what the Bible really says—setting aside human opinion, human interpretation, and my own prejudice. We all have prejudices—personal prejudices, racial prejudices, nationalistic prejudices, denominational prejudices, theological prejudices. But if you really want to hear what God is saying in His Word, you have to lay all of that aside and open your heart and mind in humility to hear what God really says. I have often told people, “If you’ve never been amazed by what you read in the Bible, you’ve never really read your Bible.” It is an amazing book.

Choosing the Right Response

Once we digest Jesus’ foreboding prophecy of the end times, we must each choose how we will respond. Some may live in denial, choosing to ignore this passage of Scripture, and presumably other passages—just because it is too uncomfortable to think about. Some may become consumed with the signs of the end times, connecting everything from the daily news to stubbing their toe to the coming

of the end of the age. I believe, however, that God Himself has revealed in His Word precisely how we, as His people, should live in the last days.

The first chapters of Revelation are the essential key to approaching the end days. If we do not come by this approach, we will be overwhelmed by the forces that will be released against us. But if we understand the picture God presents here to John, we can face the last days without fear. John says:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands . . .

Revelation 1:10-17

I have noticed in Revelation that when there is to be a personal revelation of God, the attention of the person receiving the revelation does not usually focus initially on the person of the Lord. It is as if we could not stand to be immediately confronted. So, first of all, John sees the seven lampstands. Then he says:

. . . and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth

went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead.

verses 13–17

Of any of the apostles, John likely had the most intimate relationship with Jesus while He was on earth. He was the one who reclined on the Lord's bosom at the Last Supper and asked the question, "Who is the one who betrays you?" (John 21:20). Even after the resurrection, he shared breakfast with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee together with a number of other disciples. But at this point in Scripture, John receives a totally new revelation of Jesus—a revelation so overpowering that he fell at His feet like a dead man. What was the revelation? I believe John encountered Jesus as Judge.

We hear very little in the church today about the fact that Jesus is not only Savior, but He is also Judge. He is the Judge of all men. He will judge the church and later on He will judge all the rest of the dead. It is extremely important that we come face to face with the fact that Jesus is the Judge.

As you read this first chapter of Revelation, you can see it was a terrifying spectacle indeed: eyes like a flame of fire, a voice like the sound of many waters, a sharp sword coming out of His mouth; feet like burnished bronze in a furnace. All of those are types of judgment. And when John encountered the Judge, he fell at His feet as one dead. Some may argue that John is even admitting that he fainted.

We will all encounter Jesus as Judge one day. No exceptions. This is a very important reality for us to grasp. Paul says:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

2 Corinthians 5:10

Notice that there are only two categories: good and bad. Whatever is not good is bad. There is nothing neutral in God's categories. Paul goes on to say:

Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. . . .

verse 11

I wonder how many of us have ever come to know “the terror of the Lord”? How many pastors ever preach from a full understanding of the terror of the Lord as it applies to themselves? This spectacle of Jesus was so overwhelming that John became like a dead man.

[Jesus] laid his right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.”

Revelation 1:17–18

Here Jesus is presented not merely as the Judge, but as the total victor over all forms of evil: sin, death, Satan, Hades. He emerges totally victorious; there is nothing missing in His victory.

Remember, Jesus did not go through death and resurrection for His own sake—He has always been victorious. Rather, He identified Himself with us that He might take our place and bring us into His victory. That is the essence of the grace and the mercy of God.

Let's look closer at the seven lampstands, which are the seven churches. John

saw Jesus standing in the midst of the seven churches. God’s primary concern in history is the church. In Titus 2 we learn that God wants to present to Himself “His own special people, zealous for good works” (verse 14). That is where the focus of the Lord begins—not on the nations, not on the politicians, not on the military commanders, but on His church. We are first in the list of His concerns. If you do not take hold of that—and believe it—you will be easily frightened. The first place John saw Him was in the midst of the churches walking to and fro, examining each church. Then Jesus says at the end of Revelation 1:

“The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.”

verse 20

I believe that the angels mentioned here represent the ministers of the seven churches. We who are in the ministry—pastors, evangelists, apostles, teachers, prophets—need to remember the Lord holds us in His right hand. What a solemn thought.

In the next two chapters of Revelation, Jesus dictates messages to be delivered to the seven churches. It is important to note that every message was sent to a church. My logical mind would tell me that anybody who was not in a church never got the message.

I believe—with certain extreme exceptions—that God expects every believer to be a committed member of a congregation. If the message of Revelation were sent today and you were not committed to any congregation, you would never get the message. It is only sent to the churches—to every individual in the churches. “If

anybody hears My voice,” tells me that it is not enough to be in the church, you must be able to hear the voice of the Lord.

I want to point out two important observations in these messages to the churches. In most of the modern translations, five times—to five of the churches—Jesus says, “I know your works.” That is significant. He did not say, “I know your denominational label.” He did not say, “I know your church program.” He did not even say, “I’m familiar with your statement of faith.” He said, “I know what you’re doing.” And that is what matters. It is not what we say, it is what we do that counts.

Also, five times—to five of the seven churches—His first commandment was to repent. People have asked me, “Do Christians ever need to repent?” My answer is that at least five out of seven churches in Revelation needed to repent. From what I know of contemporary churches, I would say the ratio would not be any lower. Remember, repentance is the key to everything else. If you bypass repentance, you can never have true faith. You can seek and call out for the blessings of God but they will never really come your way because the first condition is repentance.

When John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus, repentance was the first element of his message. When Jesus began to preach, His first public utterance was, “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:16). On the Day of Pentecost when the unconverted multitudes said to Peter, “What must we do?” the first thing Peter said was, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized” (Acts 2:38). In Ephesus, Paul said, “I did not fail to teach you both publicly and in every house repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20–21).

I have spent countless hours counseling Christians with problems, and have come to the conclusion that there are limits to what can be accomplished by counseling. I would say at least fifty percent of most Christians’ problems are due to the fact that they have not repented. I suggest that if you are struggling with problems in your Christian experience, ask yourself if you have truly repented. Turn totally from

everything displeasing to God and yield yourself to Him in unconditional surrender.

The messages to the churches in Revelation contain various main elements—commendation, praise for what is good, correction where things are going wrong, warning of judgment that may follow, and a promise. But notice that the promises are given only to one kind of person: to him who overcomes. I cannot find any promises in the New Testament to those who do not overcome. In Romans 12:21 Paul says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

There are only two options: to overcome or to be overcome. And the only thing powerful enough to overcome evil is good. At the end of the book of Revelation God Himself speaks and says, “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:7).