

SPIRITUAL WARFARE

IN THE LAST DAYS



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“Can you give us some good news?”

The question seemed to come out of nowhere.

It happened while I was co-hosting “Today’s Issues” on the American Family Radio network.

We were about halfway through the first segment when Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, asked for some good news.

I think we had been talking about the Debt Ceiling, which is hard to explain on the radio. Or maybe it was rising inflation, which disturbs us all. Or possibly something about politics, which aggravates everyone.

Whatever we were talking about was depressing. That’s why Tim asked for some good news.

I can’t say that I blame him.

Over the years we have covered hundreds of stories. *By necessity, a lot of what we report is bad news.* This is not surprising because we are biblical realists. We believe what the Bible says: **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked”** (Jeremiah 17:9).

Many days good news seems in short supply. The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us (if we needed a reminder) that we live in troubled times. We’ve endured political turmoil, unrest in our cities, massive demonstrations, rising prices, supply shortages, and deep disagreements over lockdowns and mandates.

So, yes, there has been a lot of bad news. But in this message I want to give you some good news, possibly the best news you’ve heard in a long time.

I believe the Lord is using this pandemic to prepare his church for what is to come. But what comes next? *We know history is His Story because he holds the whole world in his hands.*

What should we expect? *If we could write tomorrow’s headlines today, what would they say?* That leads me to my topic: Spiritual Warfare in the Last Days.

Those of us who are conservative Christians are sometimes accused of being pessimistic. I understand why people say that.

But there is more to the story.

We like to say Jesus wins in the end.

That's true.

But what does it mean for this present crisis?

For many years I've read about great revivals in the past. Note the last three words. "In the past." *Sometimes those stories sound so amazing you wonder if such things could happen in our day.*

Could there be another Welsh revival in our day?

Could there be a Third Great Awakening?

Could there be another Laymen's Prayer Revival?

Could we see whole nations shaken and changed by the preaching of the gospel?

Instinctively we know the answer is "yes."

We know those things are possible in our day. *God is not limited by the moral decay around us, nor is he bound by our unbelief.*

My message focuses on one key question.

If these truly are the last days before the coming of the Lord, could these things still happen?

The answer is yes.

The Bible teaches us to expect it.

THE STORY JESUS TOLD

Let's begin with a few familiar verses from Matthew 13:24-30. These are the words of Jesus:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field.

But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew.

The farmer's workers went to him and said, "Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?"

"An enemy has done this!" the farmer exclaimed.

"Should we pull out the weeds?" they asked.

"No," he replied, "you'll uproot the wheat if you do. Let both grow

together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.”

When Jesus interprets this parable, he tells his men the field is the world, and the Lord is the sower. He also said the enemy is the devil, the good seed represents believers, the weeds are unbelievers, and the harvest is the end of the age.

We can summarize the message this way. *In this age the saved and lost live side by side.* We shop at the same stores, eat at the same restaurants, work in the same offices, and we cheer for the same football teams.

You can't always tell the wheat from the weeds. The Lord knows, but we often don't. When the harvest comes, everything will be made clear. There will be no middle ground.

You are part of the wheat.

Or you are part of the weeds.

That's the story Jesus told.

Jesus is telling us there will be two parallel harvests coming in at the same time in the last days:

A harvest of evil.

A harvest of good.

What will the world be like in the last days?

Let's follow two lines of biblical evidence.

IT WILL BE THE WORST OF TIMES

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days” (2 Timothy 3:1).

The key word is terrible. Other translations say “perilous” or “dangerous” or “violent.”

What will the “last days” be like? The word translated “terrible” occurs only here and in one other place in the New Testament. Its other occurrence refers to the two violent men who were possessed by demons in the region of Gadara (Matthew 8:28). They were wild, uncontrollable men who lived among the tombs.

The “last days” will be fierce, violent, dangerous, and frightening. Savage times will come as men cast off all moral restraint and society begins to disintegrate.

Three decades ago, theologian Carl Henry predicted that paganism would grow bolder as America progressively loses its Judeo-Christian heritage. What we saw in the last half of the 20th-century was a kind

of benign humanism. Carl Henry predicted that by the start of the 21st-century, we would face a situation not unlike the first century when the Christian faith confronted raw paganism—humanism with the pretty face ripped off, revealing the angry monster underneath.

His words have come true and are coming truer with every passing day. So Paul warns Timothy, “After I am gone, things are going to get worse before they get better. Buckle up, Timothy. Terrible times are coming.”

That’s why Paul said, “Mark this,” or “Understand this,” or “Pay attention to this.”

Don’t be naïve and think everything is going to be okay.

It’s not all going to be okay. But forewarned is forearmed. If we know what is going to happen, we won’t be surprised when it does.

The first five verses of 2 Timothy 3 offer a sobering catalog of corruption. This is what happens when a nation turns its back on God. First, there is a total rejection of God. People are unholy, ungrateful, lovers of themselves, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Second, this leads to a total moral collapse. People become lovers of money, without love toward others, boastful, proud, unforgiving, conceited, “not lovers of what is good.”

Third, the end result is the total breakdown of society. People will be treacherous, rash, slanderous, brutal, disobedient to parents, abusive, and without self-control.

In the end, anything goes. *No rules, no moral absolutes, no restraints of any kind.* Every man does that which is right in his own eyes, and woe to the person who dares to question someone else’s “lifestyle choices.”

We can summarize this line of biblical evidence by saying the entire age will be characterized by rebellion as men continually reject the truth and follow their own desires.

But we haven’t gotten to the really bad news yet. That comes in verse 5: **“Having a form of godliness but denying its power.”** The word “form” means something like “having the outward appearance” of godliness. *Strange as it may seem, as men turn away from God in the last days, they will become more religious, not less.* Religion will become more popular as we approach the end times because people will seek refuge in a world that has increasingly lost its way. They will ask the right questions but will follow the wrong answers. They will join the church (or some other religious organization), they will be baptized, attend the services, sing and pray and give and go through the motions, but their hearts will not be in it. They will deny the very power they profess to believe. They will embrace a kind of postmodern religion that allows them to do anything, believe anything, endorse anything, live any way they choose as long as it makes them happy. They will say things like, “We don’t need to be bound by the outdated rules of the Bible. Those were written 2,000 years ago

and don't apply to us today." That's not far-fetched. You can say things like that today and be elected a bishop in some denominations.

When Jesus uses the image of "birth pangs" in Matthew 24:8, he is telling us we should expect these hard times to increase as we near the end of the age. *The moral collapse of the end times will be like the labor pains before a new world is born where Christ reigns as king.*

As we approach the end times, all these things will increase in intensity and frequency, until we have the situation portrayed in the book of Revelation, the total implosion of the social order as men utterly rebel against God and destroy themselves and the world in the process. Perhaps this is why Jesus said that unless those days were shortened, no one would survive (Matthew 24:22).

But that is not the end of the story. There is another line of evidence to consider. Remember, I am simply asking, "What should we expect in the last days?"

IT WILL BE THE BEST OF TIMES

For this we go to Acts 2:17-21, the beginning of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. He starts with a quotation from Joel 2:28-32:

But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;

even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Let me suggest several important implications from this passage:

1. We are living in the Age of the Holy Spirit.
2. God intends to pour out the Holy Spirit on a wide swath of humanity.
3. This will climax in the final days of human history.
4. There will be amazing signs in the heavens and on the earth surrounding the Day of the Lord.
5. There will be a great movement of evangelism in the last days.

We can connect this with Revelation 7:9-10 and the vast, innumerable multitude of believers from every tribe, tongue, and kindred standing before the Lamb. They wear white robes (symbolizing purity), and they hold palm branches (a sign of victory), as they cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God!"

Who are they? Revelation 7:14 tells us these saints have come out of the Great Tribulation. They came to Christ during the final convulsion of evil led by the Antichrist. Most of them will be martyred because they would not accept the Mark of the Beast.

What does all this teach us about spiritual warfare in the last days?

There will be parallel harvests of good and evil in the days preceding the coming of the Lord.

Evil will be more outrageous than ever before, and good will be easier to spot. Evil-doers will become more brazen, and there will be a corresponding harvest of righteousness in the last days.

The Lord's work will prosper amid shocking moral decline.

That means the greatest revivals in history are still ahead of us. We've all heard it said that the darker the night, the brighter the light shines. When a jeweler wants to convince you of the brilliance of a diamond, he places it against a black background.

It is sometimes said that those of us who believe in the return of Christ are too pessimistic about the future.

I don't feel pessimistic at all.

If we are indeed living in the last days before the return of Christ, we should expect things to get better and worse at the same time.

We should believe God for amazing answers to prayer, culture-shaking moves of the Holy Spirit, and unprecedented open doors for evangelism.

We should pray for the gospel to spread like wildfire across India and China.

We should expect a mighty turning to God among the Muslim nations.

We should expect to see *hundreds of millions* of people coming to Christ in the years to come.

At the same time, the devil will do all he can to ignite an explosion of evil around the world. As multitudes come to Christ, we will see the persecution of true believers on a scale never seen before.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

I have a friend who is not given to speculative comments. Yet several times this person has said to me, "I believe the world is ending soon."

Is it? Perhaps it is.

We will know the answer soon enough.

If the world ends tomorrow, then my friend was right!

And I do think this might indeed be the beginning of the end, so to speak.

Suppose that Jesus is coming soon.

How then should we live?

1. BE ALERT!

The last days will be a time of confusion and spiritual delusion. Don't be sucked in by the spirit of the Antichrist that is already in the world. That spirit tries to make us think sin isn't sinful and there is no such thing as right and wrong. It also seduces us into silence when we ought to be speaking out.

Ponder the words of 1 Peter 5:8: **“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”**

Don't let that “someone” be you.

The devil is hungry, and you're on the menu!

A great deception will come to the earth in the last days. Many will be deceived. It's easy to say, “That would never happen to me.” Don't be too sure. Many will be deceived who today would laugh at that suggestion.

This is no time to play church.

It's time to get serious with the Lord.

This is no time to take it easy.

It's time to get right with God.

This is no time to go through the motions.

It's time to make Jesus first in your life.

No matter how good the world seems in terms of technology, the moral compass is pointing in the wrong direction.

This is a time for the people of God to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Don't be naive about the true nature of sin in the world.

Bad things happen because evil people cause them to happen. They hijack planes and fly them into skyscrapers. They strap bombs on young people who blow themselves up on a crowded bus. They loot and kill and destroy and defraud and break the laws of God and man, and then they go on TV and brag about it.

If we are indeed living near the coming of Christ, then we ought to brace ourselves for further outbreaks of hideous evil.

2. BE BOLD!

Believe God for great things in the last days.

Pray big prayers.

Ask God to bring in the end times harvest.

This is no time for compromise. Christians ought to be bold and open about our faith. Raise the flag of Jesus high above your head and then take your stand under that flag so those near and far know you are a Christian.

Open your mouth and say a good word for the Lord. Speak up for the Savior. Let your voice be heard so loudly that no one can doubt whose side you are on.

3. PUT ON THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

Take time to read Ephesians 6:10-18. Here are your marching orders!

If we intend to live victoriously in the last days, we need to put on . . .

The Belt of Truth

The Breastplate of Righteousness

The Shoes of Gospel Peace

The Shield of Faith

The Helmet of Salvation

The Sword of the Spirit

We must do it by faith, always praying, never giving up, asking God to help fellow believers stand strong under pressure.

No one said being a Christian is easy. Any representations to the contrary are false and dangerous. When you signed up for Team Jesus, you put on a new uniform.

You're in the army now.

You signed up to fight for the Lord. He doesn't have any desk jobs where you can stay far behind the lines and let others risk their lives. We're all in this together as soldiers of Christ.

No one gets a break from the battle. We are under attack 24/7. Because Satan doesn't sleep, we don't have the luxury of going to sleep spiritually. But God has provided everything necessary so that we can fight and win every battle we face.

4. MARCH IN TIGHT FORMATION

Hebrews 10:24-25 points us to a crucial ministry of encouragement in light of the Lord's return: **"Think of ways to encourage one another to outbursts**

of love and good deeds. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near" (NLT).

Eugene Peterson paraphrases the first phrase of verse 24 as "Let's see how inventive we can be." Other translations speak of "spurring" other believers on to spiritual growth. How? By a kind word. By a phone call. By a note or an email or a text. By a friendly smile. By a kind word of thanks. And especially by meeting together—in Sunday school and in small groups and in fellowship meetings and at the Lord's Table and in Sunday worship services. Don't be a Lone Ranger Christian.

Jesus is coming back! The signs are all around us. *You can encourage other believers by showing up on Sunday morning instead of staying in bed, playing golf, watching TV, or walking your dog.* Do those things some other time. In these "end of the world" days, when we see "The Big Day" approaching, let's make sure we come together to worship and to encourage each other. Take time to lift up a fallen brother. Say hello to a discouraged sister.

This is no time for believers to wander off on their own. We need to line up shoulder to shoulder and march in tight formation.

Stay tight with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Stay tight with your local church.

Stay tight with your Sunday School class or your small group.

Stay tight with your Christian friends at work.

Stay tight so you can't be easily picked off by the enemy.

When we march in tight formation, we are a formidable force. When we try to go it alone, we become easy targets for Satan's attacks.

5. LIVE WITHOUT FEAR!

When Jesus explained the course of this age to his disciples (Luke 21:8-19), he mentioned wars and rumors of war, a rising tide of spiritual counterfeits, earthquakes, pestilence, and famines on the earth. He predicted there would be fearful events and signs from heaven. God's people will face a rising tide of persecution. Amid all the ominous warnings, he added these words: "**Do not be frightened**" (Luke 21:9).

Christians ought to be the calmest people on earth because we know the Lord, and he holds the future in his hands. If we read about "perilous times" to come and then give in to fear, we have missed the great point that Jesus wins in the end. We must live in hope because our God is a God of hope, and in Christ we have great hope for the future.

The church has always done its best work in bad days and hard times. When the skies are the darkest, the glory of the gospel shines the brightest.

That means Christians are fundamentally optimistic.

There may be many reasons for despair, but God's heart is big. Our God will not be defeated. There will be no empty thrones in heaven. It's easy to say, "Us four and no more," as if some sinners are so evil they can't be saved. Away with all such poor-meism and unbelief!

As we look at the cultural decline around us, it's tempting to conclude the bad guys are winning.

They aren't. God keeps score in his own way.

And even when it looks like he's losing, he's not. He only appears to be trailing.

But in the end, God wins. And he wins big.

There will be more people in heaven than we have dreamed possible because our God is greater than our limited imagination.

The Bible predicts a time in the last days when God will shake the nations so that only those things that cannot be shaken will remain (Hebrews 12:26-27). When Eugene Peterson paraphrased the last part of verse 27 in *The Message*, he said God will shake the earth, "getting rid of all the historical and religious junk so that the unshakable essentials stand clear and uncluttered." Unshakable essentials. That says it all. God is shaking the earth so that we will figure out what matters most.

What will spiritual warfare look like in the last days? Expect the devil to pull out all the stops because he knows his time is short. Look for the stakes to be raised and the battle to be joined on every front.

Tough times are coming. Don't be surprised.

There will be great days for evangelism. Be ready.

You may face opposition. Be bold. Jesus is coming!

TRAVEL LIGHT

It's time to do some spiritual housecleaning. Time to look under the rug and behind the couch. Time to vacuum the corners of your soul. Time to clean out the rec room. Time to seal the cracks in the foundation. Time to shore up the sagging walls of your heart.

Romans 11:20 puts it very succinctly: "**You stand by faith.**" Paul means more by this than simply believing the right things.

Standing by faith means you have received God's mercy, confessed your sin, and run to the cross for forgiveness. *But even that is not the end of it.* To stand by faith means you live each day by faith, trusting in God's mercy in Jesus Christ, knowing you have no other hope.

I have no Plan B. Jesus is my only hope. I am living and dying by faith in him.

*On Christ the solid rock I stand.
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Can you say that? When you stand at the gate of heaven and God asks, "Why should I let you in?" what answer will you give?

"I was a member of Wesley Methodist Church." That's not good enough.

"I was an elder at Wayside Chapel." You'll be in big trouble

"My father built the church." That's good, but it's not the right answer.

"I lived a good life." We're happy for you, but you weren't good enough.

"I gave money to feed the orphans in Namibia." That's truly wonderful, but that won't open the doors of heaven.

"I was baptized by Father O'Reilly." I'm sure he was a good man, but that's not enough.

"I listen to Christian radio every day." That's admirable, but it's not the right answer.

If you want to go to heaven, you must trust in Jesus Christ and him alone. *You must go "all in" on the Son of God who loved you and died for you.* You must believe in him so much that if he can't take you to heaven, you aren't going to go there.

We are saved by grace, we stand by faith, and we depend entirely on the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Don't be proud or cocky or arrogant. *If you make it to heaven, it will only be because of God's kindness to you.* Between now and then, stand by faith. Live by faith. Walk by faith. Run to the cross every day. Lay hold of Christ and never let go.

BETTER AND WORSE

Charles Dickens began his epic novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with these words:

"It was the best of times.

It was the worst of times."

That describes what lies ahead as we approach the end of the age. Satan will unleash his full arsenal, knowing his time is short. Therefore, we should not be surprised when hard times come.

But this age will also end with an unprecedented spiritual harvest around the world.

I can't imagine a better time to be alive.

If you're looking for some good news, here it is. *The harvest is already coming in.* Do not say, "Let's wait four months, and then the harvest comes." Open your eyes. Look around! The fields are white and ready for harvest.

These are great days to be alive, the greatest days in all human history. Think of it.

We may be the generation privileged to see the return of Jesus Christ.

If that is true, there's never been a better time to be a Christian.

If that is true, there's never been a better time to tell someone else.

If that is true, there's never been a better time to raise a Christian family.

We are fighting a battle we cannot lose. The Lord is looking for some soldiers who will serve in his army.

Will you answer the call?

Father, we thank you that your heart encompasses the whole world. Thank you for making a way through your Son for anyone to be saved anywhere, any time.

Grant that we might not despair, not even a little bit, because of the darkness of this hour.

Help us to shine the light of Jesus everywhere we go.

We pray for a huge harvest of souls in these last days.

We say with the saints of all the ages, Even so, Come, Lord Jesus.

In Jesus' Name, Amen!

GOING DEEPER

1. In what ways will things get better and worse at the same time as we approach the Last Days?
2. “There’s never been a better time to raise a Christian family.”
Do you agree with that statement? Why or why not?
3. Why is it important for Christians to “march in tight formation”?
4. Suppose the Lord asked you, “Why should I let you into heaven?”
what answer would you give?
5. Take a moment to pray out loud the prayer at the end of the message. Ask God to make that prayer come true in your life.

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