

Has the Church Continued in God's Goodness?

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon addresses the decline of the church's faithfulness to God's goodness and the implications of apostasy as foretold in scripture.

Scripture: Matthew 13:24

Topics: "Apostasy", "Faithfulness in the Church"

Description

John Nelson Darby addresses the question of whether the church has continued in God's goodness, arguing that the professing church has deviated from its original purpose by relying on ceremonies and sacraments instead of Christ. He emphasizes that if the church does not remain faithful, it risks being cut off, similar to Israel's fate, and warns of the apostasy that has already begun, as evidenced by the corruption within the church. Darby cites Jude and other scriptures to illustrate the historical decline of the church and the need for believers to contend for the faith. He concludes that the church's current state is a sign of impending judgment, rather than the fulfillment of God's promise to fill the earth with His glory.

Transcript

Matthew 13.

Has the church continued in God's goodness? Is that which we now see in Christendom what God set up in His church in the beginning, or anything like it? Has not the professing church turned to ceremonies and sacraments, and all kinds of things other than Christ, in order to be saved by them? They have not continued in God's goodness. You can see that most plainly. Our own consciousness testifies to it. But, if they continue not in God's goodness, the whole of Christendom, the apostle says, will be cut off, and the Jews will be grafted in again. There cannot be the least doubt of that. "And they too, if they abide not in unbelief, shall be grafted in; for God is able again to graft them in. ... For I do not wish you to be ignorant, brethren, of this mystery, that ye may not be wise in your own conceits, that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the nations be come in". As soon as the Lord has gathered the real church of God, and taken them up to heaven, He sets up the Jews again.

What I have been reading is conditional; it shews what will take place if they continue not in God's goodness. We shall see now if they have continued. You will find that Jude brings it out in a very striking way, because he takes up the whole history of Christianity from beginning to end. "Jude, the servant of

Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called" - that is, the true saints - "Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be multiplied. Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints". That is, I would have written in order that you may be built up in the truth, but through the coming in of evil I am obliged to exhort you that you should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. "For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation; ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ".

We see, then, the cause of the falling away - that already in Jude's time these men had crept in unawares into the church of God, and were bringing in corruption. And he warns them that the same thing had happened in the case of Israel, when brought out of Egypt, and had caused them to fall in the wilderness: they had not maintained faithfulness. He refers them also to the case of the angels who kept not their first estate, because the principle of apostasy crept in. And mark the way in which he speaks of these men that had crept in unawares - of these tares that Satan had sown. Look at verse 14: "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all; and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him".

That is, under the inspiration of the prophetic Spirit of God, he sees the mischief and evil done by these persons, and sees that it was to grow and ripen up to judgment, as we shall soon see appears elsewhere. And he tells the saints that the mischief has begun, and therefore he warns them that they "should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints". And the Lord executes judgment, because, instead of the world becoming filled with the blessedness of the gospel, the church has got corrupted. That it is prophesied that the filling the world with blessedness is to be brought about by Israel and not by the church But here we get a remarkable prophecy, shewing that (as in Romans 11 was declared that, if they did not continue in God's goodness, they should be cut off) they will not continue in God's goodness; and it gives us the history of the church in the world from the beginning to the end of it, when the Lord shall come with ten thousands of His saints to execute judgment. It is as plain and distinct a declaration as it possibly could be; and you will find that the whole testimony of Scripture concurs, as of course it must concur, in the same truth.

Turn now to Habakkuk, where you have one of those passages which are constantly in people's minds, as shewing that the gospel is to go on and spread until it fills the world. I refer to them merely for the negative purpose of pointing out that they shew nothing of the kind. Habakkuk 2:12: "Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and establisheth a city by iniquity. Behold, is it not of the Lord of hosts that the people shall labour in the very fire, and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity? For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea". The people are all labouring in the fire, and wearying themselves for very vanity, and then the glory comes and fill the earth.

Turn now to other passages, where it is not stated conditionally, or in a general prophetic manner, but where distinct details are given of that which would come about. Turn to 2 Thessalonians, and you will find there the connected details of the course of that of which Jude has already given us the beginning. But the general fact we also have stated in the Philippians, where the apostle says, "I have no man like-minded; for all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's". That surely was an early period in the

history of the church to say that Christians were in a state of such decline and decay that they were not seeking the things of Jesus Christ, but their own interest. When we return to the second epistle to the Thessalonians we get this very distinctly brought out. "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit nor by word, nor by letter, as from us, as that the day of the Lord is present".

The whole point of the apostle's statement rests on this, that the Thessalonians thought that the day of the Lord was here - that it had already come - that their having got into so much dreadful tribulation and persecution proved that it had come. ... Therefore the apostle says, "Let no man deceive you by any means, for that day shall not come, except there come the falling away first" - that is, the not continuing in God's goodness.

Therefore, as the apostle had stated that if they did not continue in God's goodness they would be cut off, we have here the positive revelation or prophecy that they would not continue in God's goodness, that there would come the falling away, and that the day of the Lord cannot come until that falling away or apostasy takes place. So it is plain on the face of it that, in place of the church continuing in God's goodness, the distinctly opposite is the case. The apostle shews how the declension goes on: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there 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, or that is worshipped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth, that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work". That is the important point here, that already, as to its general principles, it was going on in the apostle's day. Even then the enemy was at work, sowing tares. Only it was a mystery; it was going on secretly, in a hidden way. There was Judaism, and Antinomianism, making high professions of grace with a corrupt practice, and other forms of heresy, such as the denial that Christ was a real man, all of which are mentioned in Scripture - we do not require to go to church history at all to find them. They denied the Lord's humanity, quite as soon as they did His divinity.

We find then that this mystery of iniquity was already at work in the time of the apostle, and it was then only hindered from going on; it was not to be set aside. The time will come when it will be set aside, when Babylon will be destroyed, but not by the word. I may first refer for a moment to this point. In Revelation 17 you find that it is the ten horns and the beast which shall destroy the great whore, and burn her with fire, and then men will be given up to even still greater evil - giving their power to the beast; and then judgment.

Returning to the passage in Thessalonians, we find the apostle says, "The mystery of iniquity doth already work; only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming". We get here this very important truth, as regards the responsibility of the church, that what was working to corrupt it in the time of the apostle himself would go on until what hindered the full development of iniquity was removed, and then that wicked would be revealed, etc. This, as I have said, is the very opposite of continuing in God's goodness. It is intimated to us, that what was mysteriously working then would ripen and mature up to the open revelation of the man of sin, whom the Lord will consume and destroy - "Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish, because they received not the love of the truth that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie". The professing church will be dealt with in that way. Having

refused to retain the truth - the real truth of God, God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie - "that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness".

The Lord then comes and destroys the wicked, the evil being open and evident; it is no longer a mystery. This is for us a very solemn view of God's dealings. It is not the pleasant and bright side. The pleasant bright side is the blessedness the saints will have at the coming of the Lord Jesus, in being gathered together to Him. The apostle says to the saints, You will all be taken up to meet the Lord in the air, and therefore you cannot think that the day of the Lord is here, for that day will not find you here at all. That day is the execution of judgment on ungodly men. ... That is the reason why, when it is said "Lo here" and "Lo there", we know it does not apply to us. To a Jew it is different. If you say to a Jew who is expecting Christ, "Lo here" or "Lo there", it is a snare to him. But if it is said to us, we can only answer, It is impossible, for we are going up to meet the Lord in the air, not to find Him here; and I am not there yet. So he beseeches them by our gathering together to Him not to be troubled as if the day was come.

In this passage then which I have read you have the positive declaration, that what had begun in the apostle's time goes on, until Christ comes to execute judgment; and you find another distinct and definite declaration of this kind in 1 Timothy 4. "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron".

Then, in 2 Timothy 3, we have very definitely and distinctly stated what the last days will be: "This know also that in the last days perilous times shall come" - not that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord (that is a blessed time), but that "in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof". That is the character of the last days. There will be a great form of godliness, much superstitious worship, but a denial of the power of godliness. That is not a continuing in God's goodness, when the professing church in the last days, with a great form of godliness, denies the power thereof.

It is a remarkable proof of the power of Satan, that in the face of these passages, men, wise in their own conceits, will bring reasoning to prove that they are to go on and fill the whole world with the gospel - that, at the very time that judgments are hastening upon them, men will cherish the expectation of the earth being filled with a widespread blessedness - is the strongest possible evidence of the power of that delusion of which the apostle speaks. It is not that God is not working, and turning men from darkness to light. It was the same before the destruction of Jerusalem; three thousand were converted in a day. If we had three thousand converted in a day now, would it be a proof that the millennium was coming? No, but rather that it was judgment which was coming. It was because the judgment was coming that this happened. It was the Lord's gathering out His saints before the judgment, and adding to the church such as should be saved. And, if He is now working in a special manner to gather out souls, it is not because the gospel is to fill the world, but because judgment is coming upon the professing church.

The apostle shews that the declension will go on, that it will not be set aside. For "evil men and seducers", he says, "shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived". And then he gives the resource under such circumstances. "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been

assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus". It is as much as to say, You cannot trust the church, which will have but a form of godliness, denying the power; your resource must be the holy scriptures of truth.

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