

TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 2

The Church in the Wilderness in Prophecy

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place. (2 Peter 1:19.) Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come (1 Corinthians 10:11.)

THE Biblical picture of the Church in the Wilderness and the emphasis of inspiration on its importance, especially as found in the writings of Daniel the prophet and of John the apostle, are now considered. These two prophetic studies shine with unusual brilliance among the sixty-six books which make up the Holy Scriptures. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets spoke particularly of the things already established in Israel; Daniel and the revelator on the other hand presented the prophetic blueprints of world history. Daniel spoke from his high pedestal as prime minister of Babylon, the first of the world's four universal monarchies. John, the last living star in the crown of the twelve apostles, was banished by the emperor of Rome, a ruler of the last of the four universal monarchies.

The Savior in His teachings referred to many passages in the books of the Old Testament; but none did He single out and command to be studied with more directness than the book of the prophet Daniel. (Matthew 24:15.) To the beloved apostle, in exile on the Isle of Patmos, Christ presented glories for which the Roman emperor would have exchanged all he had. These two books are not the concealing, but the revealing, of the will of God. In both these writings God unfolded the supremely thrilling story of the beginnings, the growth, the struggles, and the final triumph of His church. He also exposed the daring impiety, the alliances with the kings of the earth, the long cruelty, and the final overthrow of the "mystery of iniquity," the religious rival of His church.

With far-reaching vision, these two prophets, Daniel and John, foresaw the conflicts of the Christian Era and the final crisis. Using the well-known Biblical figure of a woman to symbolize a church, John the revelator said, "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days." (Revelation 12:6.) In the same chapter, in order to make the prediction prominent, the apostle John again said, "And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent." (Revelation 12:14.)

When one accepts the Bible rule that a day in prophecy stands for a literal year of 360 days, he can explain scriptural prophetic time periods. It is the rule laid down by God Himself. (Numbers 14:34; Ezekiel 4:6.) Furthermore, a "time" is a prophetic year, or 360 literal years. By these two direct statements of the prophetic period we know that the church was to be in the wilderness 1260 years.

The vision continues further to show that the remnant, or the last church, would be a successor to the wilderness church. The prophetic use of the word "remnant" is significant. Even as a remnant of cloth will identify the bolt from which it is taken, so the last church is a continuation of the Church in the Wilderness, and identifies it. In his vision John turns immediately from the scenes of the Church in the Wilderness to the outstanding work of the remnant church in the following words: "**And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.**" (Revelation 12:17.) These

scriptures plainly present inspiration's insistent call upon the children of men to know and recognize God's true church in all ages.

Mankind should ponder the fact that the history of the Church in the Wilderness is linked with a definite period of 1260 years. Not only are these 1260 years specifically presented seven times in the Bible, but this period is treated many other times in Holy Writ without using the definite number of years. (See Daniel 11:32-35; Matthew 24:21-29; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-7.) Was the history of this church during these long centuries a blank, as church historians usually treat it? Why have they ignored its vast achievements? Have the Holy Scriptures prophesied in vain concerning it? Is the allotment by divine revelation of 1260 years of history to this organization nothing in the judgment of historical researchers?

Any organization or connected movement among men which could hold the center of the stage for 1260 years ought to be a subject of vast importance. What other political kingdom or empire of prominence had so lengthy a history? Longer than the days of Great Britain, enduring more years than imperial Rome, even rivaling the centuries wherein the Jews were the chosen people, is the record of the Church in the Wilderness. No study of the nineteen centuries of the Christian Era can be harmonized with God's revealed purpose unless it recognizes the dominant place of the Church in the Wilderness.

How Her Rivals in Religion Counterfeited the Prophecies

Apostolic Christianity, as a religion supremely superior to paganism, caused widespread upheavals in the world. So strong were her prospects of success that Jesus and His apostles were fearful of the great deceptions that would come because of imitations and counterfeits. To make a clear-cut distinction between these counterfeits and genuine Christianity, new light from heaven was needed. Such revelations were provided in the last books of the New Testament. All the truths needed to chart the future course of gospel believers were to be found in the messages from the apostles.

There is little point in claiming that a certain church or doctrine came down from the days of the apostles. Sin came down from the days of the apostles, and the devil also was active at that time and before. It is not so much what came down from the days of the apostles, as what came down from the apostles themselves. Even in his day the apostle Paul wrote:

"The mystery of iniquity doth already work." The growth and final form of the mystery of iniquity which was already operating before Paul's death is seen more clearly in the story of the Church in the Wilderness.

Approximately thirty-six years stand between the writing of the first three Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - and the writing of the last - John. This gave that many years for the mystery of iniquity, already at work in Paul's day, to develop more powerfully. The outstanding difference between the character of the Gospel by John and the first three gospels has long been recognized? 1 It was the task of the beloved apostle to emphasize those events and teachings in the life of the divine Son of God which would enable his followers to meet the devastating growth of the organized "mystery of iniquity." This power was pointed out in the symbols of the book of Revelation, and it had already advanced in a threatening manner in the days of the last Gospel writer. 2 In order to understand properly this significant background it is necessary to take a short retrospect of the movements which swept over the nations in the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christ. This will explain why powerful bodies, Christian in name, but antagonistic in spirit to Bible believers, sprang into existence soon after the appearance of the gospel.

When Christianity boldly set forth, it faced a rising tide of Bible-counterfeiting religions. To grapple with all these, God imbued the Sacred Writings with latent power. The Holy Spirit and the Bible agree. Without the Spirit, the Bible is dead; and without the Bible, the Holy Spirit and His message would be circumscribed. The Holy Spirit occupied the ground of truth in advance, yet the revelations of the Old Testament, designed by the divine Author to warn against these evil forces, were employed by the enemies of truth as weapons for their own use. In the visions of the prophets, warnings as well as descriptions had been given beforehand - especially by Daniel - concerning apostate religions that would arise, counterfeiting the truth, and seeking supremacy over the nations. It is an astonishing and significant fact that within one hundred years after the death of the prophet Daniel, Zoroastrianism flourished in Persia, Buddhism arose in India, Confucianism arose in China, and a little later, Socrates, famous Grecian philosopher, became a renowned thinker.

This was at the moment when the visions of Daniel were sowing the world with electrifying conceptions. There is evidence which leads one to conclude that Daniel's visions were an influence upon the state religion of Persia. 3

Great Prophetic Time Periods

The fulfillment of such predictions as the doom of Tyre and the overthrow of the Jews has attracted universal attention. In events still more thrilling did the prophecies of the Church in the Wilderness, as given in the books of Daniel and the Revelation, meet their realization.

What value does the Bible place on prophetic time periods in general, and upon the 1260-year era in particular? For man to foretell in general terms with noteworthy accuracy some future situation, is a rare occurrence. To do this is not prophecy, but human calculations. Bible predictions of future situations, however, are given millenniums in advance; they tell of peoples yet to arise and of events to come of which at the moment of the prophecy there was nothing in contemporaneous events to inspire the prediction. Only divine foreknowledge could do this.

Time-period prophecies are found in the books of Daniel and the Revelation. The most important of these in Daniel are the following: the 1260-year prophecy of Daniel 7; the 2300-year prophecy of Daniel 8; the 490-year period, embracing the 483-year and the 486-year subdivision, of Daniel 9; the many smaller time periods of Daniel 11; and the 1290-year and 1335-year periods of Daniel 12. There are many similar time prophecies in the book of Revelation. The devout mind which has already discovered the eternal value of Biblical truth believes confidently that these divine scriptural predictions will meet their fulfillment.

Jesus Himself constructed His teaching in harmony with the time predictions of the Old Testament, principally those in the book of Daniel. When the Redeemer was covering in prophetic language the whole of the Christian Era, three times He referred to "those days" of Daniel (Matthew 24:22,29.) which were the 1260 years - a major part of the time intervening between His days and now. Also Peter, speaking of the Old Testament prophets, said that they searched "what manner of time the spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ" (that is, His first coming) "and the glory that should follow" (that is, His second coming) (1 Peter 1:11.) Paul warned the Thessalonian church against looking for the second coming of Christ until Daniel's prophecy of the long reign of the "man of sin" had been accomplished. (2 Thessalonians 2:3.) In truth, the prophetic time periods constitute the framework around which the New Testament writers built.

Christ came as the fulfillment of four thousand years of prophecy. Old Testament prophecy was substantiated by its fulfillment in the New Testament. With as great certainty and with no less volume,

the prime movements and events which would concern Christ's church to the end of time were also divinely predicted. Provision was made to forewarn His people, to discover for them beforehand the real meaning of movements - political, economic, and religious - in order to inspire their confidence and to send them forth determined to brave anything, even death, that this great salvation might be proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

The 1260-Year Time Period

Second to none among these chains of prophecy was the 1260-year time period concerning the Church in the Wilderness. Seven times it was given. (Daniel 7:25; 12:7; Revelation 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5.) God did not announce it once and leave it. He did not utter it twice and drop the subject. Seven times He pressed it home to the attention of men. What excuse can be made by mortal man for not having carefully read the message of his heavenly Father on this subject?

The importance of this subject will be seen by giving briefly the work of the church during this 1260-year period in Great Britain, France, Italy, Syria, Assyria, Persia, India, Turkestan, China, the Philippines, and Japan. Many books could be written upon it. Yet in all the thousands of published volumes treating of history during this period, how little is said concerning this topic so prominent in God's book!

There remains, however, a still more important phase of this subject. For what purpose did Jesus permit the Church in the Wilderness to suffer during the 1260-years? Surely there is a reason. Was it not to seal with the testimony of martyr's blood the permanent values in the Christian religion? Did not these centuries of severe testing help to substantiate what books constituted the genuine collection of the Bible, and to disclose the counterfeit writings? In fulfilling its remarkable destiny as the guardian of the treasures of truth, the noble children of this church fought and bled and marched, and turned and fought and bled again during the 1260 years. 4

It is in a very significant setting that this matter is presented. The twelfth chapter of the Revelation reveals the complete history of the true church under three phases. Employing the well-known figure of a woman to represent His church, God sets forth three distinct phases of her experience to indicate the three periods of His church upon earth from the first to the second coming of Christ. Depicting the apostolic church, the woman wears upon her head a crown of twelve stars. In time of tribulation she fled into the wilderness. The final portrayal in Revelation 12 reveals the remnant church. As a woman is neither imaginary nor abstract it may be said that this woman represents, not an invisible church, but one duly organized, visible, and tangible. It has an organization; it is visible and tangible. By the wilderness condition, God indicated that the true church, though under a long period of strong opposition and persecution, would continue to carry the gospel to the world.

The Church in the Wilderness was to do her great work in quietness. Surrendering to her hierarchical opponents the pompous show, and demonstrating fertility in a comparatively diminished condition, she was to mold the human race. Contrariwise, her rival, clothed in scarlet and living pompously with princes and kings, (Revelation 17:2-4.) would, during the same 1260 years, feed her members with those weak and beggarly elements of the world from which the gospel was designed to free them.

Where can one better find that sense of perspective touching the past, so necessary to the sense of correct value of the present and to definiteness of action, except in the divine prophetic time periods of the Scriptures?