

CHAPTER FIVE

THE INTERVAL

THE two centers being recognized, the question occurs, What is written concerning the *interval* between?

This interval is called in Scripture the “last time,” or the “last days.” It began with the first coming of the Lord, even as is evident from the words of Peter, when he quotes Joel’s prophecy concerning the last days, and applies it to his own time; and as is also evident from the words of the Apostle John, “Little children, it is the last time.” Thus, then, we learn its commencement. I do not mean as to precise date of day or year, but in a wider, though still definite sense. We can at least say this—the last days *had begun* in the time of the apostles.

But when do they end? Here also we have inspired testimony. The Apostle Peter, in the third chapter of his Second Epistle, points out their termination, and tells us that they end in the second coming of the Lord. I need not cite the verses at length. The perusal of that chapter will satisfy any reader as to this statement.

Thus, then, we have discovered both the beginning and the end of the interval, an interval often alluded to by the apostles. We see that the period called “the last days” begin with the first and ends with the Second Advent. How far on the Church may now be in that period,—how near the close of the interval, is not the object of our inquiry. A most interesting one it is, no doubt,—no mere curious question, but an intensely solemnizing one,—yet it is not ours at present; so we pass it by, remarking merely that it is the longest period of the kind that the Church has yet enjoyed, and, with eighteen centuries behind us, we may be looking out for some signs of its close.

But what is the nature of this interval? What purpose is it designed to serve? It is called “the accepted time,” the time in which God is sending forth His messages of peace, making known the method of a free acceptance. It is “the day of salvation,”—the day in which God is presenting salvation to the sinner through Him who came to seek and to save that which is lost. It is the era of grace. God is now bearing testimony to His own gracious character, that men, believing that testimony, may turn to Him and live. Yet in spite of the gracious nature and design of this period, “there are few that be saved” [Luke 13:23]. “Many are called, but few are chosen” [Matt. 22:14]. The world is not converted; nor does God ever speak if its being converted before the coming of His Son from heaven, at the “times of the restitution of all things.” The dispensation is, then, emphatically one of *election*,—a “choosing of men out of the world,”—a “taking out of the Gentiles a people for His name.” And the eighteen centuries that have gone by have borne decided enough witness to this truth. They have fully interpreted the design of the interval, and illustrated most clearly the meaning of such expressions as “the remnant,” “the election,” “the little flock.”

But further, we enquire what is the *character* of this interval? Is it good or evil; bright or dark? Scripture answers, Evil, not good; dark, not bright.

1. *With reference to Israel, it is evil, it is dark.* “Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. ;” and then, to show that these times and this down-treading were not to end till the Lord should come, it is immediately added, “and there shall be signs in the sun, and in the stars, . . . and then shall they see

the son of Man coming in a cloud, with power and great glory" (Luke 21:24-27). Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, are full of predictions regarding Israel's long and sore calamity; a calamity which, though it may be said to have commenced at their first captivity, yet did not descend upon them in full measure till after the sack and the erasure of Jerusalem, when they went into total dispersion and exile among the nations. Daniel thus describes the termination of their woes:—"At that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince that standeth up for the children of thy people (Israel); and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, everyone that shall be found written in the book" (Dan. 12:1). And, to prevent doubt as to the time when Israel's sorrows were thus gloriously to end, it is added, "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake" [Dan. 12:12]—showing us that it is the morning of the resurrection, and therefore the coming of the Lord.

2. *With reference to the Church, the interval is evil, not good; dark, not bright.* During all this period she is a little flock,—a lily among thorns. Her lot is tribulation, persecution, shame, and tears! As an oppressed widow, she cries against her anniversary day and night, "How long, O Lord! how long?" Satan rages on every side, seeking to devour her. The world, like a flood, circles her about with its swelling waves. The haters of the Master are haters of the servant too. Nor does time soften the hostility or abate the persecution. The evil increases, the darkness thickens into deeper darkness as the crisis approaches. Satan pours forth his fiercest, fullest rage when the time of his binding draws near. And, besides all these, the absence of the Bridegroom keeps her sad and weary. So long as he is not with her, earth must be a wilderness, even though no enemy threatened, no sorrow wounded, and tempest wasted her. Nothing but His return can satisfy her.

3. *With reference to the world, the interval is evil, not good; dark, not bright.* Evil men

and seducers shall wax worse and worse." "In the last days perilous times shall come" (II Tim. 3:1). "There shall come in the last days scoffers saying, Where is the promise of His coming?" (II Pet. 3:3-4). "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Besides these passages, there are other considerations equally explicit. In the Apocalypse, all the successive stages of the different visions are from bad to worse. In the seals, the trumpets, the vials, we see this. Wickedness swells on and up like a flood, and each succeeding judgment is heavier and more terrible than its predecessor. I do not now attempt to date the commencement of these visions. But, date them early or late, it matters not. They all end in fiery judgment. They land us by successive stages of wrath and gloom in the coming of the Lord. It is plain, then, that the whole interval after the Advent is evil for the world. But, again, the Apostle John thus writes, "little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; *whereby we know that it is the last time*" (I John 2:18). The mark or characteristic of the last time was to be the prevalence of antichrists. This began to appear in primitive times. It has since become more visible. And, as the time runs on, it is to prevail more widely. Paul tells us that in his day the evil had begun, and that it was to go on working and rising until the Advent; "then shall that wicked won be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume by the spirit of his mouth, and destroy by the brightness of his coming" (II Thess. 2:8). We may remember, too, that our Lord, when giving the signs of his appearing, makes mention of nothing but wars and rumors of wars, storms and earthquakes, without interval or cessation, *up till the day of His arrival*. Nay, so far were these from subsiding as ages rolled away, they were to grow worse. Iniquity was to abound, and the love of many shall wax cold.

4. *With reference to the earth, the interval was to be evil, not good; dark, not bright.* Since the day that the curse came down on account of Adam's sin, creation has groaned. But its groans deepen and louden as man's sin

and oppression grow heavier. "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Rom. 8:22). This is its ruined condition. But we also know that "the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God." And we are *told* when this groaning is to cease: it is in "the day of the redemption of the body"—(v. 23,)—that is, the resurrection, which we know is at the coming of the Lord. Creation is thus to continue under the curse till the sons of God are manifested; that is, till they "shine as the sun in the kingdom of their father" (Matt. 14:3), till they rise from the dead and receive their immortal bodies, when the voice of the archangel and the trump of God summon them from their long dwelling in the dust. The earth is to remain under the power of Satan, and oppressed by the curse until the resurrection and the coming of the Lord.

Thus, then, we have the interval set forth under four different aspects; with reference to Israel, to the Church, to the world, to the earth or material creation. The state of these four is described as evil, not good; dark, not bright; up till the Advent of Christ. There is no hint given respecting any break towards the close,—a thousand years' interruption of the evils,—a period of blessedness, brightness, peace, —before the arrival of Him who comes to deliver Israel, to glorify his Church, to destroy antichrist, and to renew the face of the earth. If, then, He comes in order to accomplish these things, how is it possible that the millennial rest can be previous to His advent?

The only way to meet this is by taking up the position, that Israel is delivered a thousand years before He comes; but then what becomes of Daniel 12:1?—that His Church is to be raised and glorified a thousand years before he comes; but then what becomes of I Thessalonians 4:15?—that Antichrist is to be destroyed a thousand years before He comes; but then what becomes of II Thessalonians 2:18?—that the earth is to be renewed a thousand years before he comes; but what then becomes of II Peter 3:13?—I ask postmillennialists manfully to take up this

position, if they can, and to demonstrate it from Scripture. It is not enough that you demolish our theory; you must demonstrate your own. Merely to negative our doctrine is naught, and cannot satisfy. Grant that you have disposed of all our proofs,—that you have shown that Scripture *can* be so interpreted as not to testify in our favor,—is that any demonstration of your theory? What I ask from you is *positive* evidence from Scripture that the millennial kingdom is to be before the Advent. I have endeavored to establish the opposite *directly from Scripture*. I may be at fault in my evidence; I may have misunderstood the Word. But still such is the *line of proof* I have attempted. May I not ask you to adopt the same? May I not say, you have hitherto contented yourselves too much with merely picking flaws in our evidence; try something more direct and positive. You have asserted that the Millennium is to proceed the Advent: bring forth your *positive* demonstrations from Scripture; adduce your *positive* texts. Have you any passages which explicitly and by themselves prove Christ is not to come till after the Millennium? Quit your mere negative inferential standing, and advance to something more direct, and unequivocally *textual*. Of what avail is it to prove that *we* are wrong, if you do not prove that *you* are right?

But let your proofs be *bonâ fide* scriptural ones. It is vain to say to us, there are such difficulties in your system that we are compelled to pronounce it unscriptural. For what is that but setting up your own judgment as the standard of doctrine? What is it but saying, that however plainly the document had been revealed, you could not have believed it? It is equally vain to say there are fewer difficulties in the post-millennial system. Granting that such is the case, is not that a poor reason for believing it? You think there are fewest difficulties in your system, and *therefore* you receive it! Is this simple-hearted faith? What would Abraham have said to this? What would aged Simeon have said to it, when he clasped a helpless infant in his arms and worshiped it as God? But, besides, I think that your system has many

more difficulties than ours, and these far more serious and insuperable. The obstacles that stand in our way are the objections of human reason, which calls everything a difficulty which it cannot grasp. The difficulties in your way are *the plain words of God*. To drive through these is a more arduous task than to surmount all the objections of reason or education or prejudice. You have two things to do: you have first to show that these plain words of God which we adduced are not against you; and you have, secondly, *to show that there are words equally plain and full on your side*. You have often attempted the former; *but the latter you have left unattempted*.

I have pointed out four separate lines of events, each one of which preserves throughout the same character of evil, evil augmenting, not diminishing with their progress. These four terminate in the Advent. They maintain the evil until Christ and his coming removes and reverses it. The point and force of this demonstration it is not difficult to comprehend and appreciate. I may, however, illustrate it. Four vessels left the harbor to proceed upon a long and adventurous voyage. One who knew that seas they were to traverse, who could truly foresee both the weather and the course, from the outset to the landing, gave instructions to each of their crews. He told them that the voyage would be an important one, though how long He said not. He told them that the way was perilous throughout. He especially told them that from the beginning to the end of their ocean journey they would be swept over by the breaking tempest; a tempest which would continue without cessation, and would rage with fiercest fury just towards the close of their course. He told them, moreover, that there were no peaceful islands out at sea, where they might repose from the rage of the driving hurricane. They must proceed right onward, till the Son of the Sovereign of the realm they were bound for should meet them, just as they were about to be utterly sunk and broken. *He* would say to the winds "Peace, be still!" and there would be a great calm; *He* would bring them to their desired haven.

What should we think if the crew or the passengers, still more if the captain, were to maintain that the latter half of the voyage was to be calm and prosperous,—that when they had reached within a thousand miles of their destination the storm was entirely to cease, and they were to linger and rest in certain "islands of the blest," at which they would then arrive? The storm was not to cease till the King's Son came to hush it; and how could they imagine that they were to have a calm, bright sail of a thousand miles before they came within sight of the kingdom or saw the Prince?

But what is the object of the interval?

1. To show what sin really is, how hateful, how malignant, how terrible. Had the scene closed up at the First Advent, or shortly after, how little would have been known of its horrid blackness! But we have seen that there is no extremity to which sin will not proceed. It aims at nothing less than the dethronement, or rather the annihilation of Jehovah. This has been amply proved already. It is to be more folly and fearfully proved in the last mighty crisis and conflict of evil.

2. To show the nature and extent of human wickedness. Man's heart is laid bare before us, and exhibited in ten thousand different hues and aspects. What streams of hellish pollution have burst forth from that one source, a human heart! What hatred of God, what enmity both to His law and His love, what infinite abominations! Law and love, threatening and tenderness, have availed nothing to check it. The streams are flowing darker than ever, and with a still broader current. Man sinned in Eden. He continued to sin after the penalty had been inflicted for this transgression. He sinned with the warning of the Flood before him, and he sinned with the terrible remembrance of that Flood behind him. He sinned in view of Sodom and Gomorrah's smoking sepulchers. He sinned under the awful shadow of Sinai. He sinned with the tabernacle of God in the midst, and the bright cloud of glory overstretching him. He sinned in spite of prophets and seers coming straight to him with messages from Jehovah on their lips. He sinned with an

incarnate God dwelling beside him: nay, he hated that Divine Savior, and rest and not till he slew Him. He has been sinning with the same desperate deliberation during these ages past. He is seeking out new ways of sin, and new forms of insulting and dishonoring God, as if his hatred of Jehovah could never be satisfied. And the last outburst of it in the form of Antichrist is to be the embodiment and concentration of all human wickedness from the day of Cain. Such is the exhibition of a human heart that has been made! There is a still more awful manifestation of it yet in reserve at the close of the millennial period. And it will then be seen that even in the visible presence of God and of His glory, man will rush into rebellion!

3. To show satanic power and wickedness. Sin is not a thing confined to one order of creatures. In Satan and his angels we have a manifestation of malignity, revenge, rebellion, as dark as man's, with this only palliation, that it is not against love such as man has tasted. Very fearful has been the power of Satan, both in the church and world hitherto, in every age. But the most fearful display of it is reserved for the great Antichristian apostasy, which he is to lead on and energize in the last time, immediately before he is bound.

4. To bring out the gracious character of Jehovah. What long-suffering has His been! Infinite, unutterable! Many waters are not quenched, nor have the flood's drowned it. It has been slighted, denied, rejected, yet it

wearies not; and it is long, very long, before it gives way, and is exchanged for wrath. There lives not on earth the sinner which it is not longing to bless. There is not one soul upon the surface of this many-peopled soil over which it does not yearn with tenderness unutterable. Had it not been for this long interval of sin, how little we should have known of the infinite heart of God, how little of the heights and depths of love that it contains!

5. To gather in a people to Christ. It is now that the members of Christ's body are preparing. It is now that the father is making ready a Bride for His Son out of the sinners of this fallen earth. And what honor for us to be of those who are thus to share His affection and His throne, to sit down with Him at His marriage-supper, in the day of the gladness of His heart!

Such, then, are some of the objects which Jehovah has in view during this interval. They are not only important in themselves, but fitted strongly to enforce our whole argument throughout this chapter. For are not these objects totally inconsistent with the idea of a millennium of holiness *before the advent*? If the great feature and characteristic of the interval be ANTI-CHRISTIANITY; if this began in the days of the apostles; if this is to "wax worse and worse" as time moves downward,—then how is it possible that there can be a millennium of holy blessedness before it close?

Come divine effectual power,
Fallen nature to restore;
Wait we for thy presence here,
Long to see thy throne appear;
Bid the new creation rise,
Bring us back our Paradise.

Now our universe create
Fair beyond its first estate,
When thine eyes with pleasure viewed,
When thy lips pronounced it good:
Ruined now by sin and curse,
Speak it fairer than at first.

*Charles Wesley
on Isaiah 65:17*