

## Walking Into the Darkness as Lights

By Nathan Warner

The Gospel is the Truth. It is the good news of Jesus brought to life by the Spirit of Truth in our hearts. The Gospel is the foundation of our Faith, and it is as relevant today as it was when Paul entered Rome in the first century after Jesus ascended into Heaven.

After recent events in our country, there is a temptation to think we have things pretty bad. I know I am tempted to think that way - after all, things are worse than they were yesterday and there seems to be no reasonable expectation that they will get any better without a miraculous moving of our God in the hearts of the people and the leaders of the world. We should be praying for the people who brought this nightmare into reality. As hard as that can be sometimes, we must pray for their eyes to be opened.

### Experiencing the New Testament

With everything that has transpired the last ten years or so, a thought has slowly been growing in my heart. Perhaps we never fully understood what the Apostles' lives were like when we read the New Testament in years past. I remember reading the Gospels and the Book of Acts just as I would read any other adventure story: from the safety of my couch in the warmth of my own home, eating cookies and potato chips – all the while thrilled by the heroic feats and miracles - but in a detached way because I was sitting safely on that couch watching from a distance and could not fully take in the danger, the courage, the difficulties God's people faced. Though I might not have been able to rest my finger on it, the New Testament felt so far away – it was so difficult to really absorb the full meaning of what was transpiring on each page because I could only relate vicariously here in “moral” America.

In many ways, reading the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles was like reading an instruction manual about mountain climbing while I was crawling along in Minnesota prairies and jumping on small boulders in the garden, all the while thinking I was now a mountain climber because I had read about it. It is the difference between theory and practice. The old saying explains that “experience is the best teacher.” Perhaps now we are just beginning to understand what the early Church was facing, as chronicled in Acts and the Epistles. Perhaps now we can taste the first-fruits of the godlessness that has been fermenting in the cup of God's wrath...the wrath Paul talked about in Romans 1: *“For the **wrath** of God is **revealed** from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”*

### The Symmetry of the New Testament and the Last Days

The New Testament Church is relevant to our lives today in a way our grandparents probably never knew. It is relevant through experience. We are living it again. In many ways, it feels as if we have made a complete circuit. It is as if we are entering the epistles from the last chapter in Acts and are working our way back to the beginning of Acts where Jesus ascended into Heaven, though only this time, He will return for us, and we will be caught up to Him (1 Thessalonians 4:17). What an incredible thought! We already have a sense that we are headed right back into the spiritual blackness that once covered the entire earth. We are headed into the same night that tried to stamp out the few small kindled flames on the heads of the disciples during Pentecost, which were blindingly bright in that darkness. After Jesus ascended, only the hands of a small

elect held the seeds of the Gospel in that barren wasteland of the world. Only a few people out of the entire world were witnesses of the Light. We owe the fact that we believe in Jesus today, here in America or wherever, to the Holy Spirit's working in these few people in the first century AD. What a difficult task. No, rather, it was impossible without the Holy Spirit.

Jesus foretold what it would be like for His disciples as lights in the darkness after He would leave: *"But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives"* (Luke 21:12-19).

Similarly, you could read the same description in Mark as speaking to those living in the last days, as the emphasis is a little different: *"And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved"* (Mark 13:10-13).

### It Is All or Nothing with Jesus

I think many of us are beginning to see dividing lines emerge in our lives where we least expect them. New fractures and fault zones seem to be appearing everywhere in our families, our relationships, in our work, and in our play. Standing on the line, relating to people of all persuasions, used to be so much easier because that line looked like it was as wide as a river without clearly defining black and white – just gradations of grey. That line is shrinking rapidly and now is so fine that we can hardly stand on it without being on one side or the other. Soon, it will be impossible to claim we are hanging out in the middle. Just as there was no room for moderates to stand in the early Church, there will be no room for moderates in the Church of the last days. Nor will there be room for fence-sitters in our own families.

It is all or nothing for Christ, as He said, *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me"* (Matthew 10:34-38). We must be careful to not compromise with sin so that we can just "get along" with our families and friends. Jesus must come first in our lives.

### We Are in the Last Days Book of Acts

All of these passages make it seem as if we are entering Jesus' words from right to left when He says in Acts 1:8, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the*

*earth.*” We are starting out in the ends of the earth, where the Gospel has been preached to all peoples, and we are headed back to being witnesses in smaller and smaller areas of the world – lights becoming smaller and smaller in a growing, global darkness. Just as the apostles began their ministries with small lights in the world’s utter darkness and watched that light grow, so we are watching the light dim towards utter darkness. But our light will never go out. We will not be left in darkness. Jesus will come for us, and take us with Him when God withdraws His Spirit of Truth just before the Great Tribulation (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

The Apostles were pinpricks of light that God used as a foundation to preach the Gospel in all the world, dispelling the spiritual night that had held it captive. Just think about it: the Gospel started out with people meeting in their homes in a few small places in Judea (rejected by their friends and relatives) and spread throughout the entire world over the course of two thousand years. By the power and working of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, these Apostles worked the mightiest of all witnessing: carrying the Light to all nations in the earth against the tides of darkness. After having received the Light for a time, how rapidly the world is reverting back to the darkness it has not fully known since Jesus ascended into heaven, saying, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:18-20).

Now more than ever, the words of Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, Jude, and James make sense because we see happening around us the very things they saw happening around them! Instead of imaging how it must have been, or going to a country on the other side of the world, now we are experiencing the Epistles at the thresholds of our homes, in the lunchrooms of our workplace, and the towns where we grew up! Now we are seeing the Epistles acted out in the Churches we once attended.

### Perilous Times - What Are We Supposed to Do?

When Paul describes the works of the flesh in Galatians, he says they are “evident” (Galatians 5:19). He didn’t say, “If you look hard, you’ll see them.” He said they were “evident.” The times he was living in parallel exactly Paul’s caution about the end times: “*But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth...while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived*” (2 Timothy 3:1-7, 13).

What then are we as believers supposed to do in these last days? Exactly what the Apostles did by the power of the Holy Spirit. They were steadfast witnesses of Christ – as Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:1-8: “*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening*

*to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” Amen.*