

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE APOCALYPSE

A LECTURE DELIVERED AT THE OPENING OF SESSION 1878-79
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(Continued.)

And first as to the order of events. When we come to inquire what is relied on to give us this, we find that it is simply the fact that the visions are given in a certain order or the scenes described in a certain order. And it is assumed that this was meant to indicate the order of events in future history. Now, if the book were actually a book of history, the assumption would be natural enough; but in a book of visions it requires to be proved, and there is no proof forthcoming. In the absence of it the presumption is rather in favor of the contrary view that it was not meant to be so, for on examining the old prophets the historical order is not usually observed, and there is no special reason why it should be so here. You take up any volume of pictorial views, and turning over the leaves you examine them one after another, but you never dream of supposing that because they occur in that particular order in the book that that is the order in which you must visit them if you wish to be guided by the book. You describe to a friend a beautiful landscape, and sketch to him the old-fashioned tower on the hill, the tall pines or gnarled oaks of the forest that lies to one side, and the snow-capped mountains that form a background for it all, but he never imagines for a moment that because you mentioned the tower first and the snow-capped mountains last, you meant to convey to him the idea that the tower was built before the mountains existed. So neither are we to suppose that in these visions because some things are mentioned before others they are to occur before them. It is quite probable, indeed, that in many cases the order of revelation may be observed in fact, but to assume that it must be so in all cases, or even to determine with anything like precision when it is so and when not, is entirely unwarrantable. We must give up, then, all idea of fixing the order of events in the future. They may occur in almost any order, and many of them may be contemporaneous with one another.

The question as to time is a little different, and somewhat more complicated, arising from the fact that there do appear to be in the book of Revelation certain hints as to the time when certain great and important events are to occur. It is said, e.g., that the persecution of the Church in Smyrna should last ten days; that the holy city should be trodden down of the Gentiles for forty-two months; that the two witnesses should prophesy 1260 days; that the dead bodies of the saints should be in the streets three and a half days; that the woman fleeing from the dragon should remain in the wilderness 1260 days, and again for three and a half times; that the devil should be bound for a thousand years, and that the Most High should reign for forty-two months. And it is thought by very many that if we can read these numbers rightly we may be perfectly certain as to the results. All the theories as to the reading of these numbers so as to fix dates may be reduced to two. (1) That of those who take them literally as they stand, to represent periods of ten days, forty-two months, one thousand years, etc. This was a favorite theory in very early times, and is yet in certain quarters, but it is so unlikely in itself and yields results which in the past have been so far astray that very few will be content to accept such a literal explanation.

(2) The second is that which is commonly known as the *year-day* theory, which considers a prophetic day as being regularly equivalent to a year in actual time. It is on this theory that nearly all our modern predictions have been based, and it is the one which has found most general acceptance since the Reformation, at any rate among Protestants. It is therefore deserving of a little careful consideration. At the very outset, however, one cannot but be struck with the amazingly slender foundation on which it rests. There are, so far as I am aware, only three passages of Scripture which can with any relevancy be pleaded in its favor, and none of these are conclusive. They are the following: Num. xiv. 34, where the forty days spent by the spies in Canaan became typical of forty years' wandering in the wilderness; Ezek. iv. 6, where the prophet lies a certain number of days upon his side to

symbolize years of punishment to Israel; Dan. ix. 24, the prediction that in seventy weeks Messiah would come. The word here, however, is not *weeks*, but *heptades*, which may be years as well as days. This is all the support the theory has in Scripture, and it must be admitted by every one that it is far from being conclusive as to furnishing us with a rule for explaining the Scripture periods of Revelation. Even those who adopt it, however, are usually very unwilling to carry it out consistently, for according to the period of one thousand years, commonly known as the Millennium, ought to represent the extravagantly long period of 365,000 years, to which they naturally demur. And, moreover, the calculations based on this theory have so often proved deceptive that we must find something better and more rational. According to it the anti-Christian Papacy ought to have been destroyed some half-a-dozen times, and it still stands with every prospect of standing for centuries to come to prove how untrustworthy a guide it is to follow.

These being the only two theories ever proposed for fixing dates from the prophetic numbers of the book of Revelation, and both proving insufficient, we are driven to the conclusion that some other way of explaining them must be adopted. We must be content to accept in their full force the words of Christ to His disciples before His ascension. "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power;" and we must give up all thought of being able to predict the order or the time of events in the future.

The vindication of this principle, which, had it been acted on in the past would have saved us from a great deal of the foolish prophesying which has brought this book into discredit, does not require us to give what we may consider the true explanation of these prophetic numbers, but it may be convenient to do so at this point.

A little examination will show that all of these numbers are reducible to the four periods: ten days, three and a half days, three and a half years, and 1000 years—the forty-two months and 1260 days being equivalent to three and a half years. Now, it is plain from many passages in the Old Testament that seven and ten were considered to be among the perfect numbers, indicating completeness. And following out the idea of this symbolism, multiples of these numbers would indicate the fullest degree of completeness or perfection; fractions of them, incompleteness. According to this, the period of 1000 years is simply the highest multiple of 10, and symbolizes the completeness of Christ's reign on the earth. The period of three and a half days or three and a half years is simply the broken seven, indicating the partial nature of the triumph of Antichrist. On the same principle we might explain that mysterious number 666—the brand of Antichrist, which has occasioned so much wild speculation. It represents as it were the highest power of six, and symbolizes this fact, that the effort of Antichrist after fullest completeness falls ever short of its aim, attaining only the highest power of six instead of seven. This will serve to show the general nature of the method of explaining these numbers. And it is plain that if this or any similar method of explanation be adopted, it must for ever put an end to all attempts to fix dates in the future for any of the events predicted in the Apocalypse, and establish our second principle, that the book was not intended to reveal to us the future in any such way as to enable us to forecast the details of history.

3. The third principle which we must lay down for our guidance is that every prediction, while it has one chief fulfilment in the fullest sense, may have other fulfilments of its fundamental idea. It has been the custom to look upon the predictions of prophecy as being simply the revelation of things in the future—instances of the divine foresight made known to man for certain ends—and to forget that these things in the future will be brought about by the operation of those laws by which God governs the world. But of the fact there can be no doubt. The only miracle necessarily connected with prophecy is in the foresight. There is usually no miracle in its fulfilment, or at least need not be. And ordinarily the events are the outcome of constant and invariable laws. Now, it is evident that the continual working of these laws may, and probably will, at intervals produce results that are very like each other. This is, in fact, only another form of putting the common saying that "history repeats itself." And if history repeats itself, it is plain that to the same extent prophecy must repeat itself also.

There are two extremes that must be avoided in this matter. One is, that prophecy was intended to have and can have only one fulfilment; the other is that of the rationalistic school of thinkers, that it was not intended to have any special fulfilment, but is simply the poetic expression by gifted and far-seeing men of great principles which run through all history. Both are to some extent true, but neither expresses the whole truth, which lies mid-way between the two. It is now pretty generally conceded in regard to the Messianic predictions of the Old Testament that there is at least a double reference, one to the near future and another to the more distant future—both of them being fulfilments, but one in a fuller and higher sense than the other. The same thing seems to be substantially true of all the predictions of the New Testament, though it does not necessarily follow that only two fulfilments may be expected. There seems no reason why we should limit the number at all.

And there is no practical difficulty about the application of this principle to even the greatest and most important events predicted in the Apocalypse, such, for example, as the coming of Christ and the rise of the great enemies of the Church. There can be no doubt that there is indicated in the book one grand and final coming of Christ, which shall be the consummation of the whole conflict between good and evil, when the wicked shall be cast out and the righteous glorified. But it does not by any means follow that that is to be the only coming of Christ under the new dispensation. It will certainly be the only final coming, and probably the only visible coming, but His comings to execute such partial judgments of the world as necessity demands, or to infuse such life into the Church as to fit her for the accomplishment of her great mission, may be frequent enough. In the last address which Christ gave to His disciples, recorded in the gospel of John, we have statements which strongly confirm the idea that there was to be a coming of Christ previous to the grand final coming, and which also throws some light upon the nature of it. "I will not leave you comfortless," He says, "I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world seeth me no more. . . . He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him and will manifest myself unto him. Judas saith unto Him, Lord, how is it that Thou wilt manifest Thyself unto us and not unto the world? Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me he will keep my words, and the Father will love him and we will come unto him and make our abode with him." There was thus to be all along a coming in the hearts of His people—a manifestation of Himself which His own could perceive by faith, though invisible to the world.

It is no objection to this to say that Christ comes to His people now not directly, but through the Holy Spirit. He Himself indicates that in the very same context. The Comforter whom He would send was to be the Holy Ghost. But we have studied the doctrine of the Trinity to little purpose if we cannot so far identify the Holy Ghost and Christ as to make the outpouring of the one in some sense a coming of the other.

We can easily understand from this how Christ could come to the churches of Asia to judge them for their sins, as He more than once warns them He will do. We can easily understand, too, how the well-known dispute has arisen between the two parties of pre-millennarians and post-millennarians, and as easily understand how that dispute may be reconciled; so far, at any rate, that the only question left between them shall be whether His coming before the millennium is to be visible to the world. We can easily understand, too, how the warning or promise, as you may choose to regard it, of Christ's speedy coming, which has ever been the great stimulant to the Church, ought to lose none of its force even supposing there are many things to indicate that His final coming is to be long delayed.

In a similar way we might show how the predictions relating to the enemies of the Church that were to arise, though finding of course one chief fulfilment, have also numerous fulfilments. It has been customary with many writers to identify the three chief enemies as follows:—Pagan Rome with the dragon, Papal Rome with the beast, and Mohammedanism with the false prophet. Then again also Babylon with Rome. And the fact that such identifications were possible and that the descriptions seemed to fit so well has led most to conclude that these were the things intended by the Spirit of God, and the only