

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 202

The Last Time – A Warning

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 3rd February, 2002**

Text: *"Little children, it is the last time" (1 John 2. 18).*

Let me begin by trying to answer two questions. First of all, why is it the Apostle John called his readers "little children"? And second, what does he mean by "the last time"? Well, John was now a very aged man and these people to whom he wrote were his spiritual children. He was their father in the faith. They stood in that relationship to him as children to a loving father. So he uses this as a term of endearment. Especially he uses it as a term of endearment because he has to say some fairly close and solemn and separating things to them, but he wants to make it clear he is not doing it in a harsh way or a critical way or an abusive way, but rather like a loving parent to a tiny child. "Little children." You will find that quite a few times in this epistle John speaks to them as his little children.

Well then, the other question: what is meant by "the last time"? I think you will find in Holy Scripture this expression is used in two senses. One is, it refers to everything following the coming of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The coming of the Saviour, the end of the old Jewish economy, the abolition of the ceremonial law, ushered in the last time and it is in this sense that John uses the expression here: "Little children, it is the last time." For instance, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these *last days* spoken unto us by His Son." Then the other sense in which this expression is used, "the last time": those days which precede the end of the world, and it is in this sense that we are thinking of the expression, "the last time" today. "Little children, it is the last time."

Now beloved friends, this is a very solemn word. Perhaps there will not be much for your comfort this morning. There was a well-known book written some years ago entitled, "Nought for your comfort." But this has rested with me for some considerable time recently: "Little children, it is the last time." Now no-one is to predict exactly when the last day will be or when the end of the world will be. The Lord Jesus Himself said that was wisely hidden from all. But it must be clear to all who fear God that we are living in the last time. We have all the signs, the signs of apostasy,

the signs of wickedness, all the signs of the last time about us. When the Word of God speaks of the end of all things, the end of the world, the return of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to this earth, it always speaks in this sense: of being ready. “Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.”

Mind you, there is a mystery because again and again the Word of God says, before the end comes, this must take place, that must take place, something else must take place. In Matthew 24 (which I read to you this morning), the Lord Jesus was speaking of different things which must take place, and of course that does seem a mystery to us, that any moment the Lord may return, and yet have all these things yet been fulfilled? I think the point is, we have to leave whether all these things are fulfilled or not. Perhaps some of them we do not quite understand. Perhaps some of them we are not clear about. But, “Little children, it *is* the last time,” and how long it will be before the world ends, and how long it will be before the Lord returns, we cannot say. Most generations have felt they were living right in the last days. The godly Puritans in the 1600’s were so sure that before long the Lord would be returning. Well, three hundred, four hundred years have passed away. But one thing is clear: we are so much nearer to the end than they were.

“Little children, it is the last time.” And the Lord Jesus spoke so much concerning His coming. Not as when He came the first time to Bethlehem, but now coming in great power and great glory with all His holy angels with Him; every eye shall see Him, coming to judge the world in righteousness, to usher in the end of the world, when the elements shall dissolve with fervent heat, the heavens shall be rolled up as a scroll, when all things here shall be dissolved. Now the coming of the Lord Jesus draws nigh, and, “Little children, it is the last time.” I do feel we ought to pause and stop and solemnly consider these things. “It is the last time.” You know I do not like to speak fancifully, but if the Lord Jesus came before the service this evening, how many people in this chapel would say, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus,” and you would receive Him in love and adoration, you would open your arms to receive Him, this dear Lord on whom your hope of heaven is built, this Saviour you love so dearly, who means so much to you, and now the end of all your sin and sorrow and suffering? Now how many of you would say, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus”?

You can look at it in two different ways. First of all, are each of us ready for when the Lord Jesus shall come?

“When Thou, my righteous Judge, shalt come
To take Thy ransomed people home,
Shall I among them stand?”

The only way we can be ready is if we are born again of the Holy Spirit. “Ye must be born again.” And if born again of the Spirit, we are blessed with true repentance, true faith, love to Jesus, fleeing for refuge to Him, Jesus our only hope. O we do want to be ready!

Of course, it may be that many here will die before the Lord returns. When He will come, we do not know. We are told not to reason it, or pry into it. We are fervently told we need to be ready as if it should be any moment. But really, the day of a sinner’s death is the end of the world for him. So in reality it is the same thing, those who live till the Lord returns and those who are taken before He does.

“Let me among Thy saints be found
Whene’er the archangel’s trump shall sound.”

“But can I bear the piercing thought:
What if my name should be left out,
When Thou for them shalt call?”

“Little children, it *is* the last time.” Now the second way in which the holy Word of God speaks of it is to the Lord’s people, those who *are* “saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation,” those who *are* born again. And they are also called to be ready. Now it comes very close. “Little children, it is the last time.” If the Lord were suddenly to come, those of you who know and love and fear the Lord, those of you who have openly professed His name, are there any things in your life at present which are not just right and you would like to have them put right before the Lord returns? Now that is the point the Lord Jesus spoke of just as much as the need to be ready in a way of salvation; the being ready in a way of gracious and consistent profession, with oil in your lamps, your lamps trimmed and burning, nothing to be ashamed of when the Lord comes, nothing to put right, nothing that you have left omitted and that you wish you had done. Yet not trusting in this but in Christ alone. These are close and these are solemn things.

“Little children, it is the last time.” So the great, the vital point for you and me is to be made right, to be made ready, to flee for refuge to the hope set before us in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. May the Lord in love and mercy sanctify these things to us each.

“Little children, it is the last time.” Now there have been many things which have rested on my spirit. You see the marks of the last time. September 11th, that dreadful attack on America which shook the world and which shook the country and which shook us. Since then, there seems to be nothing but terrible things taking place: disasters, murders – and unprecedented murders, uncalled for murders, unreasonable murders – cruelty, wickedness, lawlessness, crime; and then the dreadful prevalence of immorality and wickedness and sin. And these are all marks that, “Little children, it is the last time.” As I have spoken so often recently, and this is very solemn, it seems that little by little, as now the last time has come, the Lord is withdrawing that kind restraint that He has put upon sin and wickedness, and we are told that as the devil knows that his days are numbered, evil will wax worse and worse and the devil will be more daring than ever he has been since Adam fell, because he knows that his days are numbered. But this kind, watchful providence that is over the whole world and over all God’s creatures, distinct from saving grace, distinct from the decree of election, this general goodness of the Lord, this general kindness which has been abused for so long, and now the Lord is withdrawing it. So the powers of evil are abroad in the earth.

“Little children, it is the last time.” Our children and young people are growing up in an increasingly-evil world and when I think about this, our only hope for ourselves in this increasingly-wicked, increasingly-evil world is to be found sheltering in Christ “under the shadow of the Almighty.” And what a mercy that He *is* almighty! What a mercy that He is still on the throne, He still reigns! The government is upon His shoulder. He is still in control. But our only hope for ourselves and our children is to be found under His shadow, under the shadow of His almighty protection – a sovereign Protector, unseen, yet for ever at hand. Under the shadow of His merciful providence, like old Jacob was, like Joseph was, ordering all things after the counsel of His own will for His own honour and glory and for the good of His people. Under the shelter of a Father’s love, a Father’s tender care. And above all, sheltering under the Redeemer’s most precious blood. There is safety and there alone. O to be like Israel in the houses

under the blood and to be like Rahab in her house with the scarlet cord securely fixed in the window!

“Little children, it is the last time.” And now more solemn even than the withdrawing of that kind, merciful providence which in theological circles is usually called *common grace*, more solemn than that is the withdrawing of the Holy Spirit’s influence from the world savingly and graciously and from the professing church of God. And there are two very solemn things. There are very, very few people today being effectually called, born again, wrought upon by the Spirit of God. It seems less and less as the number of the elect is being brought to its conclusion. And the second thing: where the Holy Spirit is working, His work is not as clear, not as distinct as it was in former days. Well, if there are very few being born again, then may you and I in love and mercy be found amongst them. May we be like that dear man who said, “If there is only one person going to heaven in this town, Lord in love and mercy let me be that one.”

“Little children, it is the last time.” Then it is not just the awful wickedness and evil in the world; it is the professing church of God. O the evil, the wickedness, the lack of grace there is in the professing church of God. If I may read you the whole verse here: “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come.” Of course, the old Westminster Confession and the other old confessions held that the pope is antichrist. “As ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” “There are many antichrists.” That is, these religious people, these religious leaders are antichrist. Their religion is not the religion of Christ. It is the opposite of the religion of Christ. It is dishonouring to the religion of Christ. But we read that “evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse.” We read of false teachers, and we read that “if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” Now beware of being deceived. Beware of being led away by all these false teachers. Beware of being led away by all these antichrists.

“Little children, it is the last time.” And what of our own chapels? Well, there are so many things which are not as they should be. And this, little children, marks that it is the last time. What a temptation there is, as there is so much wickedness generally in the world, when it comes to the church of God to think, Well surely with all these abominations taking place we do not need to be concerned about this and to be bothered about

that. Now it is “to the law and to the testimony.” If the Lord has commanded it, we are to walk in obedience to it. Look at the dreadful Sabbath desecration. In measure there always has been Sabbath desecration, but years ago it was not so blatant, so open. But to think now it is even coming into the homes and lives of so many who are the professed people of God. “Little children, it is the last time.” And one mark of it is this: “Men shall be ... lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.” You can open your daily paper and read page by page and write this across the whole lot of it: “Men shall be lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.”

“Little children, it is the last time.” Now the Lord says this: “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.” Really, there are three things there which should be our attitude, our spirit as we realise “the end of all things is at hand,” and as we realise, “Little children, it is the last time.” “Be ye therefore sober.” There is not the seriousness, the sobriety. You would have thought following the dreadful tragedy of September 11th and all the disasters, all the evil, all the sorrow, that people would be more sober, more serious. But it is not so. Rather it is the opposite: “Let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.” But amidst our young people, our own congregations, there is not really that seriousness, that sobriety there ought to be. Now I hate sanctimoniousness (that is not it), and it does not mean people are to be miserable. But it is such a serious day. We are dealing with such serious things. “The end of all things is at hand.” “Little children, it is the last time.” And we just go on our way carelessly, casually, unthinkingly, yet the call of the Word of God is that we should be more serious in our thinking of these sad days in which we live, of the approach of the end of all things, our own state and condition, our own lives, our own families, the cause of God and truth in the world.

The wise virgins as well as the foolish virgins slumbered and slept, and beloved friends, we slumber and we sleep, and it is in that order. First we slumber, and then we sleep, and we sleep on enchanted ground, and we drift along, and like the foolish in Isaiah’s day, we say, “To morrow shall be as this day.” But to morrow will not always be just as today, and our today is certainly not as yesterday. Now, “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober.” O that there might be a more serious, solemn, right, gracious attitude to these eternal realities!

“Little children, it is the last time.” “Be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.” So the second thing is to be watchful. Have you seen that little bird in the garden? Whether it is looking for seeds or looking for worms or whether for a few crumbs of bread, it keeps looking round. It keeps watching here and there. Now we are called to be watchful. Now we cannot be watchful if our eyes are closed. We cannot be watchful if we are asleep, and we cannot be watchful if we are half asleep. What have we to watch? We have to watch a lot of things. We have to watch out for Satan. We have to watch out for temptation. We have to watch out for antichrist. We have to watch the Lord’s hand. Above all we have to watch our own heart, we have to watch our own spirit. What does John say? On the opposite page of this Bible: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” And many people say, “That is easy. I love trying the spirits. I know he is wrong and she is wrong.” Well, you have to try *your own spirit* whether it is of God or not, because so often we are in a wrong spirit and we are not always good judges of our own spirit. The Apostle John himself knew that. On one occasion he thought he was a really zealous man for the truth, and he was only a young disciple. Some have thought John was probably only in his teens when he said, “Lord, wilt Thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them?” The Lord Jesus said, “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.” Now the Lord Jesus rebuked him, corrected him. “Try the spirits whether they are of God.” But it is our own spirit more than anything else.

“Little children, it is the last time.” “Be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.” That is the third thing and that is the most important of all. Our hymnwriter says, “Help us to be much in prayer, and upon Thee cast our care.” Now does prayer languish? Is there the prayer there should be? Are we really waiting on the Lord? Are we praying for Him to help us, to uphold us, to keep us? Especially that point of being kept. O we do need to be kept, and we cannot keep ourselves. But that prayer to be kept, that prayer for grace to endure.

“Let but Thy own almighty arm
Sustain a feeble worm,
I shall escape, secure from harm
Amid the dreadful storm.”

O may the Lord bless us with a spirit of prayer – a spirit of prayer for the Lord’s honour and glory, a spirit of prayer for those who are strangers to God and godliness, a spirit of prayer for our children and young people, a spirit of prayer for the church of God, a spirit of prayer for God’s blessing to rest on the preaching of the Word. O but especially as you have to walk in this dark, trying, evil world, the spirit of prayer that the Lord will be with us and the Lord will keep us.

“Little children, it is the last time.” Then the Lord bids us to redeem the time. We have it in two of the epistles: “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” And what is it to redeem the time? Well, it means we have not to waste it. It means we have to seek grace to use it, and use it for the honour and glory of our God. Now, “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” We know the days are evil. O how much time we waste! How much time we spend in useless things, unnecessary things, inferior things! Of course, we cannot always be reading our Bible – there are the lawful things of this life – but when we come to the end, the time spent in reading God’s Word and time spent in prayer will not be time to be repented of. It will not be time that has been wasted. Even those who profess the Lord’s name – the pleasures, the things of this world – O the world is too much with us. Earthly pleasures, carnal pleasures, sinful pleasures, worldly pleasures more and more encroach upon us, and weighed in the balances of this word we are found wanting: “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”

“Little children, it is the last time.” I want to read two Scriptures to you. “Knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” The other I want to read to you: “This I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.”

“Little children, it is the last time.” These are very solemn things, needful things, necessary things. And do not forget that the apostle backs them up, emphasises them with this: of these solemn words, of these exhortations, he says, “And so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” Do we need to be separate from the world? “So much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” Do we need to be in prayer? “So much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

“Little children, it is the last time.” Well then, I said at the beginning there would be little for your comfort this morning. But, “suffer the Word of exhortation,” because, “Little children” – and may you feel it – “it *is* the last time.”

Just two or three things in closing. O we do need to pray the Lord to be with us, to uphold us, to preserve us, to keep us. “Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.”

“Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;
Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou, who changest not, abide with me!”

And perhaps especially this: some have lived in times of great spiritual prosperity. Perhaps at times we have thought we wished we lived then. Well, they were also times of persecution and suffering, weren’t they? When people suffered, it was then that hundreds flocked to the house of God. But we read in one of the Psalms of those who were called to serve the Lord in the night time, and some of the old divines have said it is a special privilege to the people of God if their lot is cast in a very dark and evil and cloudy day, if it is then their privilege to be witnesses to the truth and to shine as lights in a dark place.

Well, may the Lord in love and mercy uphold us, hold us fast in our profession, hold us fast in our witness to the truth as in Jesus for, “Little children, it is the last time.”