

CHAPTER II. TIMES AND SEASONS.

Timeliness marks all the works and ways of God. Truth has its seasons and the kingdom of God has its periods.

The kingdom of heaven, says our Saviour, is as a grain of mustard seed, the least of all seeds, but when it is grown it is one of the greatest of plants, tree-like, in which the birds of the air may rest themselves and build nests for their young.

At the right time the seed of the kingdom is ripened and dropped into the earth, along the banks of the river of the waters of Life. And the sown-seed knows the spring-time, and snuffs the sunshine and showers: bursting its prison shell, it sends down its roots for moisture and strength, and sends up its stem for light and air; and comes out in spring freshness and beauty. It has also its summer time when it ripens its fruits, and its autumn for filling the garner.

This is true of every child of God — of every church of Christ upon earth, and of the whole church militant collectively taken. Revivals may have been a novelty in the days of Enos, when men first began socially to call on the name of the Lord; but from that day to this they have been the law of the Kingdom. Times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord may have taken Abel by surprise, at that first altar of God at the east gate of Eden, as they evidently did take Cain by surprise, making him gnash his teeth upon Abel as the murderer, of all martyrs have done. But they were understood to be the order of God's economy in the days of the apostles, and indeed in every age of the world.

Great periods have been marked by great revivals, and great revivals have been characterized by the developments, each one of some one great truth made prominent and powerful, in its application to the experience and life of the church.

The great truths which now have their unchangeable position in the faith and formulas of the church, have been born into the world one by one, and one by one have taken their positions in orderly array in the great family of truths. Like children they have come crying into the world, and like warriors in battle, each has had its own way to fight. Like Damascus blades, each has been tried and tempered in the fire and under the hammer of controversy, and like the martyr throng above, they have all come up to their permanent place in the bright galaxy of truth through much tribulation, with their robes made white in the blood of the slain.

The great foundation truth — the unity of God the alpha of all theological science and of all saving knowledge, had its battle of ages with polytheistic idolatry; but has finally driven its enemy into the dark corners of the world, and if appearances may be trusted, will soon drive it out of the world altogether. And the great top-stone of truth, the head of the corner, the trinity of God, is yet in its conflict, and is yet to be more clearly understood — though already it has battled its way to its place in the faith and holds it in triumph against the assaults of every enemy, while shoutings of Grace! Grace! unto it go up from all true believers.

It would be a work to enlarge the largest heart, and expand the most liberal mind, if it were done as it deserves, to sketch truthfully and graphically the biography of each one of the great evangelical truths comprising the faith. Each one has a life and times of its own, and in comparison the lives and times of men — even the greatest of men — would dwindle into insignificance. Indeed the historical prominence of the great men of the church from Abel and Enoch down to Whitefield and Wesley and Edwards, comes from the fact of their being each one the representative — the embodiment — the incarnation, of some one great truth of revealed religion, in some stage of its development, just as Newton and Copernicus were the representatives of astronomical principles.

Revelation had its stages — two great ones — the old and the new, with many minor ones marking them both; though in the new the various stages were crowded into the time of a single generation, whilst in the old many generations sometimes intervened.

Then when revelation was completed, and given complete to the world, no more to be added, nor anything subtracted, upon pain of God's curse, even then, since that, the *development and application* of the several truths revealed, has been also by stages. Each in its own time and each in its own way.

The question may have arisen already — and if not there is no reason to shrink from raising it now — why — if it is true that the experimental apprehension of the principle of sanctification by faith is the privilege of all — why has the fact not had greater prominence in the past? Why have eighteen centuries been allowed to roll away before it is brought distinctly and prominently before the mind of the church?

The answer is, that until now the time has never come for it. Now is the time. That it is no new thing, *practically*, is clear. Abel doubtless understood it practically, at least, and was made strong for martyrdom by it. Enoch lived in it, and was translated, taken bodily to heaven without death by it. Noah built his ark, in the faith of it, and out-rode the flood by it; and Abraham in the power of it forsook the home of his birth and dwelt amongst strangers, and waited patiently for the fulfilment of God's promise — and then himself, at the command of God, was in act to put the knife to the throat of Isaac, the son of promise, counting God able to raise him again from the dead. Prophets, and apostles, and reformers, and the great and good of every age have exemplified it. It is nothing new. And yet, until now, the time has never fully come to give it the *prominence which now it is destined to take* and to hold in the future history and progress of the Kingdom of God in the world.

It is now only *three hundred years* since the Bible itself was exhumed from its burial places in convent cells and library alcoves, and freed from its cerements of the dead languages, torn from it by the hand of the reformers, and put in its dress of living speech, and sent forth upon its great mission to the world.

And it is only *one hundred years* since the great truth of the new birth, as a distinct experience, the privilege of all, began to receive its full power of application to the heart and life of the church. And yet both were just at the opportune moment.

It is beautiful to mark the times and occasions of truth in its connection with the orderly march of events, as in single file, with solemn tread, they come forward at the command of the Lord.

The translation of Enoch was just at the time when the heavens had become over-cast with dark clouds of unbelief, and a window in heaven was needed that man might see it, and not forget *that there is a heaven above*.

The flood came just when the fear of God had died out, and violence had run riot filling the earth; just in time to let all after generations know *that there is a God of justice and judgment ruling over all, who does not shrink from wrapping a world in its own winding-sheet, regardless of its agonizing shrieks of despair, if the cry of its guilt and the call of justice demand it*.

The overthrow of Babel and the confusion of tongues, was just at that moment when the pride of man and his desire to cast off fear and restrain prayer had concentrated and culminated in the great city and tower, which were to be at once both the glory and the safety, and the bond of union of the whole human race. The plan of the mighty hunter and hero and builder, Nimrod, was laid and almost completed. With every successive course of bricks upon the tower, the pride of the people and their feeling of security rose, and the bond of their union was strengthened, and the fear of God weakened. Dependence upon God had ceased. They were now no more afraid to give loose reins to idolatry, and when at the same time through them, in their humility, God could teach the world through His servants in the court, and their influence upon the king, the worship of Jehovah as the one only true God, just in time for the second greatest battle and victory of the true God over idols.

The *coming of Christ* is happily marked by the apostle as just then when the *fulness of time* had come. When the Jewish dispensation was waxing old and ready to pass away, and

when the Greek was the written language of the world, and the Roman power the governing power of the world, and when the world was all connected in the one empire of Rome, and all open to the apostles and primitive Christians to go with the gospel to every creature, and when idolatry in all the civilized world was in its dotage, the bye-word and laughing stock of the learned. When, in short, there was an open field for a fair contest, such as there never had been before.

The *advent of the Holy Spirit*, when Pentecost had fully come, was just when the time for it had fully come, also.

Just when the great work of atonement had been finished, the resurrection accomplished, and the risen Saviour had ascended to the right hand of power. Just when a demonstration of his power as the living and almighty Saviour was needed to revive the drooping disciples and convince a gainsaying world. And just when the disciples themselves needed that very baptism of light and love, and peace and power to inspire them with wisdom and boldness and strength for their great commission of giving the gospel to the world.

The breaking down of the Jewish walls of prejudice by Peter's vision and Paul's commission, together with the conversion first of Cornelius and his friends, and afterwards of the Gentiles at Antioch, and the proceedings of the apostles and elders in consequence, was just in time to open the way and set the gospel free to fly abroad, run and conquer, and win the day.

The Reformation, passing by the events of fourteen hundred years — each as timely as any before or after — the Reformation came again just when all things were ready. The corruptions of Rome had gone so far that all good men everywhere longed for reform. And the darkness had become so great as to be felt, and felt, too, in all its oppressive power, so as to create a deep and earnest desire for the light of God's word. The church was in the condition of one in a cavern, or in the catacombs, in whose hand the light has gradually sunk, until at last it has flickered and flared, and expired. When, then, he has wandered on, blundering and stumbling in the dark, until at last he has become afraid to take another step without a light. Just as such an one would hail the light with unspeakable joy, just so the people of that day were prepared to hail the light of the Bible. O, what joy it gave them, when it came forth; now no longer speaking in an unknown tongue, but in every man's own language, wherein he was born. Germans and Brittons; Hollanders and French; Italians and Spaniards; Hungarians and Bavarians; Normans, Danes, Swedes, and all.

Then, too, it should not be forgotten that this was just at the time when the newly discovered art of printing had prepared the way to give wings to the word of God, like the angel of the Apocalypse flying, mid-heaven for its mission, to the nations of the world, as never could have been done before.

The Great Awakening, two hundred years later, now one hundred years ago, was just in time to arrest the lapsing church in its downward course, and give it a great impulse upward and onward in preparation for what has come since, and what is now coming, and what is yet to come in the future. To the great central doctrine of justification by faith revived before in the Reformation, the fact of the new birth, as an experience for all, was now added to the faith of the church in the great awakening. And this just at the moment when the churches of America were in the plastic state, ready to take the Whitefieldian and Wesleyan and Edwardean type, as older churches in older lands were slow to do. And at the moment, too, when India fell under British rule, to be opened to Christianity in due time.

And now in the intervening hundred years, O how great events have thickened. The old slow march seems to have hastened into double quick time, and the single file to have formed up into the order of platoons. The Missionary Era, commencing fifty years ago, just when simultaneously Bibles began to multiply through the multiplying power of Bible societies, and missionaries began to rise up, to go out into all the world, and the church began to combine to send them, and the nations began to throw open their doors to receive them, and commerce

began to spread its wings anew to take them, and steam power began to develop the superiority of Christian nations in all the arts of life, and stimulate commerce to carry Christian fabrics into all heathen nations. Just then a new life began in the church, wider the unfolding power of the great commission, which for ages had been allowed to sleep, but now was proclaimed from every pulpit and by every Christian press of Christendom.

As years roll on the natural sciences unfold and lead even skeptical minds to abandon atheism and pantheism and come upon the platform of revelation. All machinery is improved. Railroads are invented. Ships are enlarged, and steam is harnessed in to be our servant of all works on sea and land. Electricity is drilled also into service, and a network of veins and arteries is created, producing a grand system of thought circulation, fast binding the nations together into one, or at least bringing them face to face within speaking distance of each other. The printing press is increased by a thousand-fold in its productive power, and the gold fields of California, Australia, and the north open up their treasures, and pour a golden current into the commercial arteries of the world. And just now, in the midst of all this, God comes down in the power of His spirit and arouses the young men and the business men, the laymen and the laywomen, as well as office bearers in the church, to meet and pray and work for the Master, and such a revival begins as the world has never witnessed before. Hope rises up and begins to stretch forward to the great battle and final triumph. And what now is needed? What now would be the timely work? and what now the timely truth? There is now more than ever needed two things. First, the millennial type of Christian character and life.

Second, the spiritual strength and endurance to carry the church onward and upward unswervingly to and through the conflict and triumph before us. And these two are one, and this one is the experience of full salvation through full trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.