

The Seventh Vial Chapter XIII. Death Of The Witnesses



Continued from [Chapter XII. War With The Witnesses](#)

“THY way is in the sea, and Thy path in the great waters, and Thy footsteps are not known.” – Psalms 77:19 Such was the exclamation of the Psalmist, as he recalled the past events which had befallen the Church, and thought how much of mystery her history had wrapped up in it. A retrospect of Divine Providence at this day would furnish abundant cause to repeat the exclamation.

One would have thought that after Christ had come, and, by His death, put an end to the comparatively dark dispensation of Moses, and introduced the more glorious and spiritual economy of the gospel—that after Christianity had been published to many of the nations, and established in many of the countries of the Gentile world, it would incur no risk of ever being suppressed. We would have expected that now a final end would be put to all the trials and calamities of the Church—that her path henceforward would be one of unbroken prosperity and ever-enlarging triumph—that her light would wax brighter and yet brighter, till it shone in the full splendor of the Millennium, ushering in that day, long foretold and long ardently expected, when earth, transformed into a majestic temple, shall resound with the songs of ransomed nations.

This is what the Old Testament saints doubtless expected. They looked forward to the coming of the Messiah as the end of the Church’s troubles, and the introduction of an era in which the truth should have no opposition to encounter, and its friends no suffering to endure. This was what the primitive Christians also expected. When the Word of God grew mightily and prevailed—when the Church, which had been confined hitherto to the land of Judea, went forth among the Gentiles, and the desolate parts of the earth were inhabited—little did they anticipate that her period of greatest darkness was yet to come, and that her severest trials were yet awaiting her—that all she had suffered in Egypt, all she had suffered in Babylon, was as nothing, compared with those more dreadful sufferings which she had yet to endure at the hands of an enemy to arise within herself.

Even we, when we look back, and think of the little progress the gospel has made, and that of the countries once enlightened, some are plunged again into

darkness, while others are Christian only in name—wonder why God has allowed so great obstacles to impede the progress of the gospel, and not to impede it merely, but actually to roll it back, and to leave those countries once covered with its fertilising waters to be scorched and burned up by the fiery rays of idolatry. We feel persuaded that God has some special and great end in view in this arrangement—that the early triumph of the gospel would, in some way that we know not of, have marred its ultimate and final destiny—and that the long delay of its success was, some way or other, connected with the happiness of future ages. We feel assured that God has some end of this kind in view in this arrangement, which shall be clearly understood by the men of future ages, and which we ourselves, in other stages of our being, shall know and admire; but, meanwhile, it is a mystery unfathomable to us.

It yields, however, no small satisfaction to know that all has happened according to the Divine arrangement. If we compare the events of the past eighteen centuries with the prophecy before us, we find that there is an exact accordance between the two. In the Apocalypse, John was warned, and we through him, that even after the truth had been widely spread, and the Church planted in all the more important countries of the world, she would be brought into a more depressed condition than she had ever formerly been in, that truth would be all but totally suppressed, that for twelve hundred and sixty years the whole world would apostatize, that two witnesses only would appear in behalf of Christ, and that these should have to maintain a terrible warfare, waged against them by the beast, the issue of which would be truly disastrous, that the Church, like her Head, must die, and, to reach her glory, pass through the grave.

We have already sketched the outline of the war with the witnesses, we have traced its beginning to the edicts of councils, and have shown that the form in which it first displayed itself was that of the anathemas of Popes—those thunders from the seven hills which have ever betokened woe to the world—that scarcely had these anathemas been launched, till hosts began to muster, and immense armies to roll towards the Alps, amid the deep valleys and inaccessible cliffs of which the witnesses dwelt. When it was seen that the sword was inefficient to exterminate them, the Inquisition was called into existence. To the fire and sword of war, the racks and wheels of the Holy Office were now added. Undismayed by the hosts that gathered round their hills, and bidding defiance to the terrors with which they were menaced, the witnesses still maintained their testimony. The world was in arms against them, but greater was He who was in them than he who was in the world.

Their numbers were thinned, their dwellings were laid in ashes, their valleys were stained with the blood of their dear brethren and their beloved relatives, they were compelled to abandon the low plains, and betake themselves to the high valleys, and there, amid rocks and eternal ice—"the place prepared of God"—they maintained, with noble constancy, from age to age, their testimony against the corruptions and idolatries of Rome. Throughout the whole of the fourteenth, and fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, was the war carried on. At last it became apparent that the end approached; not because the fury and rage of the Church's enemies had abated, but because her members had been well nigh all cut off. This happened towards

the end of the fifteenth century. There is something so truly pathetic and mournful—something so much in the spirit of the Apocalyptic prediction itself—in Fleming’s account of this transaction, that we shall here give it at length, though doubtless already familiar to many of our readers:—

“Now, the slaying of these witnesses began in the year 1416, when John Huss, and afterwards Jerome of Prague, were burnt, but came not to its height until the Bohemian Calixtines complied with the Council of Basil, 1434; after which the faithful Taborites were totally ruined, as well as their brethren in Piedmont, France, &c., which happened about the year 1492. For they, being destroyed, the Calixtines were no better than the dead carcasses (as they are called, verse 8), or corpses of the former living witnesses, over which the Popish party did triumph; for they looked upon them as standing trophies of their victory, and therefore did not think fit to kill them further, or bury them out of their sight.

For it is said, verses 7, 8, that after they had finished their testimony, the beast did make war upon them, (Greek words), &c, he killed them, and their corpses also (for the additional words in our version, shall lie, are not in the original, and do but mar the sense), or their bodies in the street of the great city, i.e., in Bohemia, one street of the Papal dominions, or the great city Rome, in a large sense. For I find that towards the end of the fifteenth century, the witnesses were, in a manner, wholly extinct. For Comenius tells us, that about the year 1467, the Waldenses in Austria and Moravia had complied so far as to dissemble their religion, and turn to Popery in profession and outward compliance. The Taborites, in the meantime, upon their refusing to do so, were so destroyed, that it was much that seventy of them could get together, to consult about continuing their Church, and about finding out some qualified person to be their minister, for they had none left, 1467. And so low was the Church of Christ then, that when the hidden remains of the Taborites (who were called Speculani, from their lurking in dens and caves) sent out four men (as the same author relates in another book) to travel, one through Greece and the East, another to Russia and the North, a third to Thrace, Bulgaria, and the neighbouring places, and a fourth to Asia, Palestine, and Egypt, they did all, indeed, safely return to their brethren, but with this sorrowful news, that they found no Church of Christ that was pure, or free from the grossest errors, superstition, and idolatry. This was in the year 1497. And when they sent two of their number, two years afterwards—via, Luke Prague, and Thomas German—to go into Italy, France, and other places, to see if there were any of the old Waldenses left alive, they returned with the same melancholy news as the former had done, that they could neither find nor hear of any remaining; only they were informed of the martyrdom of Savonarolla (who suffered in the year 1498); and they were told of some few remains of the Piemontois, that were scattered and hid among the Alps, but nobody knew where.

Now, a few years after this, even the few remains of the Taborites were found out and persecuted, hardly any escaping; so that, A.D. 1510, six suffered together publicly; and the year following, that famous martyr, Andreas Paliwka, who, I think, was the last of that period, from whose death, in the end of the year 1511, or beginning of 1512, to the dawning of the Reformation

by the first preaching of Carolastadius and Zuinglius (who appeared at least a year before Luther, as Hottinger and others tell us), there was only about three years and a half, which answers, as near as can be, to the three days and a half of the unburied state of the witnesses; so that the Spirit's entering into the witnesses, verse II, began with the year 1516, if not the year before, though this appeared most remarkably when Luther opposed the Pope publicly in 1517."

The two witnesses were not individuals, but organized societies—Churches. Their death, therefore, must needs be symbolic: not their death as individuals, but their extermination as organized societies—the suppression of that public testimony which these Churches had borne before Christendom.

Now, if we look back, we discover but one period in the history of Christendom to which the prediction can apply—the period we have indicated—the beginning of the sixteenth century, just before the Reformation. During that period, all public testimony of the witnesses against the Papacy was silenced in every part of Europe, and Rome appeared to be universally and completely triumphant. Fleming has told us in his own affecting language, with what wonder and dismay the few individuals who were left after the slaughters and massacres of three centuries, beheld the universal triumph of the Beast—with what terror they witnessed that total obscuration of the light which shrouded the earth when the gospel had ceased to be held forth by any constituted Church. He has told us that, as if only half-believing the tremendous fact, the survivors sent out four messengers to search throughout the earth, if haply they might discover somewhere a pure Church of Christ. The messengers returned, like the dove to Noah, but with no olive leaf plucked off—they returned to tell those who had sent them forth that the faith of the apostles existed nowhere—that error and superstition everywhere prevailed—that a second deluge had rolled over the world, and that its dark waters stood above the tops of the highest hills.

But the most satisfactory and convincing exposition of the fulfillment of this Apocalyptic prediction is that which Mr. Elliot has given. By a variety of historical references and documents he has shown, that from the 5th of May, 1514, to the 31st of October, 1517—three years and a half precisely—all public testimony against the Papacy was suppressed; and that at the latter date that testimony was suddenly and gloriously revived. The importance and interest of the subject will justify us in giving a series of extracts from that part of the "Horae Apocalypticae," to show the eminent clearness of Mr. Elliot's demonstration. "And thus," says Mr. Elliot, "what was the aspect of things when the new (sixteenth) century opened? Let Milner's be my first historic testimony. 'The sixteenth century opened,' he says, 'with a prospect of all others the most gloomy in the eyes of every true Christian. Corruption both in doctrine and in practice had exceeded all bounds; and the general face of Europe, though Christ's name was everywhere professed, presented nothing that was properly evangelical. The Roman Pontiffs were the uncontrolled patrons of impiety. The Waldenses were too feeble to molest the Popedom; and the Hussites, divided among themselves, and worn out by a long series of contentions, were at length *reduced to silence*.'

To the same purport is the testimony of Mosheim. 'At the commencement of this

century no danger seemed to threaten the Roman Pontiffs. The agitations previously excited by the Waldenses, Albigenses, Beghards, and more recently by the Bohemians, had been *suppressed* by counsel and the sword; and the wretched surviving remnant of Bohemian heretics were an object rather of contempt than fear.'

So, again, Mr. Cunninghame (whose historic sketch of the epoch I may the rather quote because his prophetic explanation is independent of it):—'At the commencement of the sixteenth century Europe reposed in the deep sleep of spiritual death, under the iron yoke of the Papacy. That haughty power, like the Assyrian of the prophet, said, in the plenitude of his insolence, 'My hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people; and as one gathereth eggs, I have gathered all the earth,- and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped.'

Once more, in language strikingly to the point, the writer of the article on the Reformation in the "Encyclopedia Britannica" thus describes the era:—'Everything was quiet—every heretic exterminated—and the whole Christian world supinely acquiesced in the enormous absurdities inculcated by the Romish Church—when'—I only break off the quotation at his notice of just such a speedy, sudden, and extraordinary revival of the witnessing as we saw from the prophetic sequel ought to follow the event intended by *the death of the witnesses*."

Having adverted to the proofs arising from the Apocalyptic description of the scene of the slaughter—"The street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified"—and of the public rejoicings on account of their death held by them, of the peoples, and kindreds, and tongues, and nations, to which we ourselves shall afterwards have occasion to refer, Mr. Elliot proceeds as follows:—

"In turning from prophecy to history—from the symbolic picture to the thing symbolized—it seems almost impossible to mistake the precise scene and occasion alluded to. It can surely be none other than that of the very *Lateran Council* held from 1512 to 1517, under the pontificates of Julius the Second and Leo the Tenth, just before the Reformation."

Having stated that the object for which this Council was assembled was the suppression of all that might yet remain in Western Christendom of witnesses for Christ, and particularly the *Bohemian Hussites*—for both the *Lollards* of England and the *Waldenses* of Piedmont had been reduced to silence—Mr. Elliot resumes—

"In a Papal Bull, issued with approbation of the Council, in the very next or eighth session, held December 1513, a charge was issued, summoning the dissidents in question (the Bohemian witnesses), without fail to appear and plead before the Council at its next session, unless, indeed, they should have previously done so before a neighboring Papal legate—the object declared being their conviction and reduction within the bosom of the Catholic Church; and the time finally fixed for the said important session, May the 5th, in the spring ensuing."

"Thus was the crisis come which was to try the faith of this bleeding remnant of witnesses, and exhibit its vitality or death. And would they then face their Lord's enemies? Would they brave the terrors of death, and plead His cause before the lordly Legate, or the antichristian Council; like the Waldenses at Albi and at Pamiers, like Wickliffe and Cobham in England, like Huss and Jerome at the Constance Council, or Luther afterwards at Augsburg and at Worms? Alas! no. The day of the ninth session arrived. The Council met. But no report from the Cardinal Legate gave intimation either of the pleading, or even of any continued stirring, of the Bohemian heretics. No officer of the Council announced the arrival of deputies from them to plead before it. Nor, again, was there a whisper wafted to the Synod from any other State, or city, or town in Christendom, of a movement made, or a mouth opened, to promulgate or support the ancient heresies. Throughout the length and breadth of Christendom Christ's witnessing servants were silenced; they appeared as dead.

The orator of the session ascended the pulpit, and, amid the applause of the assembled Council, uttered that memorable exclamation of triumph—an exclamation which, notwithstanding the long multiplied anti-heretical decrees of Popes and Councils—notwithstanding the yet more multiplied anti-heretical crusades and inquisitorial fires—was never, I believe, pronounced before, and certainly never since—

'Jam nemo reclamavit, nullus obsistit!'

'There is an end of resistance to the Papal rule and religion: opposers there exist no more.'

So did 'they, from the people, and kindred, and tongues, and nations,' assembled in the (Greek word), or Broad Place of the Great City, look on Christ's witnesses as (from thenceforth) dead. Let the reader well mark the description, for it is a description from the life; and let him well mark the day, for it seems scarce possible that we can be mistaken in regarding it as **the precise commencing date of the predicted three and a half years, during which Christ's witnesses were to appear as dead corpses in the face of Christendom. It was May 5, 1514."**

So ended the long and furious war waged by the Beast against the witnesses. After existing for fifteen centuries, Christianity, as regarded the public profession of it, had become extinct. There were still a few individual saints upon the earth; but there was nowhere a Church. There were now none who dared open their mouth and proclaim Rome to be Antichrist. The event was astounding; and yet it was only what the prophecy had foretold:—"The beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and KILL THEM."

We may lay it down as an axiom, that whatever has obtained a conspicuous place in the Apocalypse, holds a place of equal prominence in history. The prophecy of John was intended to disclose only the great facts of the Church; and in great events only are we to look for its fulfillment. Facts which are found lying concealed in the nooks of history, and which can be discovered

only after great search, are obviously not those which the Holy Spirit had in His eye in this Revelation. The catholicity of the Apocalypse requires that its grand symbols be interpreted by events which affected not a part only, but the whole of the Church. The death and resurrection of the witnesses is a grand epoch of the Apocalypse; and we must look for its fulfillment in some grand epoch of the world. We are at once arrested by the dark ages, and the awful state of matters in which they terminated.

And though to determine the very day, as Elliot has done, may be to commit the fault of over-exactness, nevertheless we feel assured that the years that immediately preceded the Reformation is the era in question; and that in the fact, which rests on undoubted testimony, that till the voices of Zwingli and Luther broke the silence, there was no public testimony against Rome, and no public profession of the gospel, we behold beyond all peradventure the "death of the witnesses."

This dark night was but the prelude to a glorious morning.

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