

Of Former Times

by John Wesley

The speaker argues that the former days were not better than the present, and that true religion has increased in the present century.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 7:10, Philippians 4:6

Topics: "Gratitude", "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

John Wesley addresses the common belief that former days were better than the present, emphasizing that such a notion is often unfounded and rooted in nostalgia rather than truth. He argues that while there may have been a golden age in the past, the reality is that humanity has not significantly degenerated in stature, understanding, or virtue over time. Wesley highlights that true religion and benevolence have actually increased in the present age, citing the rise of charitable institutions and the spread of genuine Christianity. He encourages gratitude for the current state of the world, asserting that we live in a time of great spiritual awakening and opportunity. Ultimately, Wesley calls for a recognition of God's goodness in the present rather than a longing for the past.

Transcript

"Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this." Eccles. 7:10.

1. It is not easy to discern any connexion between this text and the context; between these words and either those that go before or those that follow after. It seems to be a detached, independent sentence, like very many in the Proverbs of Solomon: And, like them, it contains a weighty truth, which deserves a serious consideration. Is not the purport of the question this? It is not wise to inquire into the cause of a supposition, unless the supposition itself be not only true, but clearly proved so to be. Therefore, it is not wise to inquire into the cause of this supposition, that "the former days were better than these," because, common as it is, it was never yet proved, nor indeed ever can be.

2. Perhaps there are few suppositions which have passed more currently in the world than this, -- that the former days were better than these; and that in several respects. It is generally supposed, that we now live in the dregs of time, when the world is, as it were, grown old; and, consequently, that everything therein is in a declining state. It is supposed, in particular, that men were, some ages ago, of a far taller stature than now; that they likewise had far greater abilities, and enjoyed a deeper and stronger understanding; in consequence of which their writings of every kind are far preferable to those of later times. Above all, it is

supposed that the former generations of men excelled the present in virtue; that mankind in every age, and in every nation, have degenerated more and more; so that, at length, they have fallen from the golden into the iron age, and now justice is fled from the earth.

3. Before we consider the truth of these suppositions, let us inquire into the rise of them. And as to the general supposition, that the world was once in a far more excellent state than it is, may we not easily believe that this arose (as did all the fabulous accounts of the golden age) from some confused traditions concerning our first parents and their paradisiacal state? To this refer men of the fragments of ancient writings which men of learning have gleaned up. Therefore, we may allow that there is some truth in the supposition; seeing it is certain, the days which Adam and Eve spent in Paradise were far better than any which have been spent by their descendants, or ever will be till Christ returns to reign upon earth.

4. But whence could that supposition arise, that men were formerly of a larger stature than they are now? This has been a generally prevailing opinion, almost in all nations and in all ages. Hence near two thousand years ago, the well-known line of Virgil, --

Qualia nunc hominum producit corpora tellus.

[Thus translated by Pitt: --

"Scarce twelve strong men the ponderous mass could raise,

Such as disgrace these dark degenerate days." -- Edit.]

Hence, near a thousand years before him, Homer tells us of one of his heroes throwing a stone which hardly ten men could lift, -- *_hoioi nyn brotoi_*, -- such as men are now. We allow, indeed, there have been giants in all ages, in various parts of the world. Whether the antediluvians mentioned in Genesis were such or no, (which many have questioned,) we cannot doubt but Og the King of Bashan was such, as well as Goliath of Gath. Such also were many of the children (or descendants) of Anak. But it does not appear that in any age or nation men in general were larger than they are now. We are very sure they were not for many centuries past, by the tombs and coffins that have been discovered, which are exactly of the same size with those that are now in use. And in the catacombs at Rome, the niches for the dead bodies which were hewn in the rock sixteen hundred years ago are none of them six feet in length, and some a little under. Above all, the Pyramids of Egypt (that of King Cheops in particular) have, beyond all reasonable doubt, remained at least three thousand years. Yet none of the mummies (embalmed bodies) brought therefrom are above five feet ten inches long.

5. But how then came this supposition to prevail so long and so generally in the world? I know not but it may be accounted for from hence: Great and little are relative terms; and all men judge of greatness and littleness by comparing things with themselves. Therefore it is not strange, if we think men are larger now than they were when we were children. I remember a remarkable instance of this in my own case: After having left it seven years, I had a great desire to see the school where I was brought up. When I was there, I wondered that the boys were so much smaller than they used to be when I was at school. "Many of my school-fellows, ten years ago, were taller by the head than me; and few of them that are at school now reach up to my shoulders." Very true: But what was the reason of this? Indeed a very plain one: It was not because they were smaller, but because I was bigger than I was ten years before. I verily believe this is the cause, why men in general suppose the human race to decrease in stature. They remember the time when most of those round about them were both taller and bigger than themselves. Yea, and all men

have done the same in their successive generations. Is it any wonder then that all should have run into the same mistake, when it has been transmitted unawares from father to son, and probably will be to the end of time.

6. But there is likewise a general supposition that the understanding of man and all his mental abilities were of a larger size in the ancient days than they are now; and that the ancient inhabitants of the earth had far greater talents than the present. Men of eminent learning have been of this mind, and have contended for it with the utmost vehemence. It is granted that many of the ancient writers, both philosophers, poets, and historians will not easily be excelled, if equalled, by those of later ages. We may instance in Homer and Virgil, as poets; Thucydides and Livy, as historians. But this, mean time, is to be remarked concerning most of these writers; that each of them spent his whole life in composing and polishing one book. What wonder then if they were exquisitely finished, when so much labour was bestowed upon them! I doubt whether any man in Europe, or in the world, has taken so much pains in finishing any treatise: Otherwise it might possibly have equalled, if not excelled, any that went before.

7. But that the generality of men were not one jot wiser in ancient times than they are at the present time we may easily gather from the most authentic records. One of the most ancient nations concerning whom we have any certain account is the Egyptian. And what conception can we have of their understanding and learning when we reflect upon the objects of their worship? These were not only the vilest of animals, as dogs and cats, but the leeks and onions that grew in their own gardens. Indeed, I knew a great man (whose manner was to treat with the foulest abuse all that dared to differ from him: I do not mean Dr. Johnson -- he was a mere courtier compared to Mr. Hutchinson) who scurrilously abused all those who are so void of common sense as to believe any such thing concerning them. He peremptorily affirms, (but without condescending to give us any proof,) that the ancient inhabitants of Egypt had a deep hidden meaning in all this. Let him believe it who can. I cannot believe it on any man bare assertion. I believe they had no deeper meaning in worshipping cats than our schoolboys have in baiting them. And I apprehend, the common Egyptians were just as wise three thousand years ago as the common ploughmen in England and Wales are at this day. I suppose their natural understanding like their stature, was on a level with ours, and their learning, their acquired knowledge, many degrees inferior to that of persons of the same rank either in France, Holland, or Germany.

8. However, did not the people of former times greatly excel us in virtue? This is the point of greatest importance; -- the rest are but trifles in comparison of it. Now, is it not universally allowed, that every age grows worse and worse? Was it not observed by the old heathen poet, almost two thousand years ago, --

_Aetas parentum pejor avis tulit

Nos nequiores, mox daturos

Progeniem vitiosorem_?

That is, in plain prose, "The age of our parents was more vicious -- than that of our grandfathers; our age is more vicious than that of our fathers; we are worse than our fathers were, and our children will be worse than us."

9. It is certain, this has been the common cry from generation to generation. And if it is not true, whence should it arise? How can we account for it? Perhaps another remark of the same poet may help us to an answer. May it not be extracted from the general character which he gives of old men?

_Difficilis, querulus, laudator temporis acti

Se puero, censor, castigatorque minorum._

[The following is Boscawen's translation of this quotation from Horace: --

"Fastidious, peevish, prone to praise

What pass'd when in their youthful days,

And with severe censorious tongue

Correct the follies of the young." -- Edit.]

Is it not the common practice of old men to praise the past and condemn the present time? And this may probably operate much farther than one would at first imagine. When those that have more experience than us, and therefore we are apt to think more wisdom, are almost continually harping upon this, the degeneracy of the world; those who are accustomed from their infancy to hear how much better the world was formerly than it is now, (and so it really seemed to them when they were young, and just come into the world, and when the cheerfulness of youth gave a pleasing air to all that was round about them,) the idea of the world's being worse and worse would naturally grow up with them. And so it will be, till we, in our turn, grow peevish, fretful, discontented, and full of melancholy complaints, "How wicked the world is grown! How much better it was when we were young, in the golden days that we can remember!"

10. But let us endeavour, without prejudice or prepossession, to take a view of the whole affair. And, upon cool and impartial consideration, it will appear that the former days were not better than these; yea, on the contrary, that these are, in many respects, beyond comparison better than them. It will clearly appear, that as the stature of men was nearly the same from the beginning of the world, so the understanding of men, in similar circumstances, has been much the same, from the time of God's bringing a flood upon the earth unto the present hour. We have no reason to believe that the uncivilized nations of Africa, America, or the South-Sea Islands, had ever a better understanding, or were in a less barbarous state than they are now. Neither, on the other hand, have we any sufficient proof that the natural understandings of men in the most civilized countries, -- Babylon, Persia, Greece, or Italy, -- were stronger or more improved, than those of the Germans, French, or English, now alive. Nay, have we not reason to believe, that, by means of better instruments, we have attained that knowledge of nature which few, if any, of the ancients ever attained? So that, in this respect, the advantage (and not a little one is clearly on our side: And we ought to acknowledge, with deep thankfulness to the Giver of every good gift, that the former days were not to be compared to these wherein we live.

11. But the principal inquiry still remains: Were not "the former days better than these," with regard to virtue? or, to speak more properly, religion? This deserves a full consideration.

By religion I mean the love of God and man filling the heart and governing the life. The sure effect of this is, the uniform practice of justice, mercy, and truth. This is the very essence of it; the height and depth of religion, detached from this or that opinion, and from all particular modes of worship. And I would calmly inquire, "Which of the former times were better than these, with regard to this? to the religion experienced and practised by Archbishop Fenelon, in France; Bishop Ken, in England; and Bishop Bedell, in Ireland?"

12. We need not extend our inquiry beyond the period when life and immortality were brought to light by the gospel. And it is allowed, that the days immediately succeeding the pouring out of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost were better even in this respect, even with regard to religion, than any which have succeeded them.

But setting aside this short age of golden days, I must repeat the question, Which of the former days were better than the present, in every known part of the habitable world?

13. Was the former part of this century better, either in these islands or any part of the continent? I know no reason at all to affirm this. I believe every part of Europe was full as void of religion in the reign of Queen Anne as it is at this day. It is true, luxury increases to a high degree in every part of Europe: And so does the scandal of England, profaneness, in every part of the kingdom. But it is also true, that the most infernal of all vices, cruelty, does as swiftly decrease. And such instances of it as, in times past, continually occurred, are now very seldom heard of. Even in war, that savage barbarity which was everywhere practised has been discontinued for many years.

14. Was the last century more religious than this? In the former part of it there was much of the form of religion; and some undoubtedly experienced the power thereof. But how soon did the fine gold become dim! How soon was it so mingled with worldly design, and with a total contempt both of truth, justice, and mercy, as brought that scandal upon all religion which is hardly removed to this day. Was there more true religion in the preceding century, the age of the Reformation? There was doubtless in many countries a considerable reformation of religious opinions; yea, and modes of worship, which were much changed for the better, both in Germany and several other places. But it is well known that Luther himself complained with his dying breath, "The people that are called by my name (though I wish they were only called by the name of Christ) are reformed as to their opinions and modes of worship; but their tempers and lives are the same they were before." Even then both justice and mercy were so shamelessly trodden under foot that an eminent writer computes the number of those that were slaughtered, during those religious contests, to have been no less than forty millions, within the compass of forty years!

15. We may step back above a thousand years from this, without finding any better time. No historian gives us the least intimation of any such, till we come to the age of Constantine the Great. Of this period several writers have given us most magnificent accounts. Yea, one eminent author, no less a man than Dr. Newton, the late Bishop of Bristol, has been at no small pains to show, that the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, and the emoluments which he bestowed upon the Church with an unsparing hand, were the event which is signified in the Revelation by "the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven!"

16. But I cannot, in anywise subscribe to the Bishop's opinion in this matter. So far from it, that I have been long convinced, from the whole tenor of ancient history, that this very event, Constantine's calling himself a Christian, and pouring in that flood of wealth and honour [power] on the Christian Church, the Clergy in particular, was productive of more evil to the Church than all the ten persecutions put together. From the time that power, riches, and honour of all kinds were heaped upon the Christians, vice of all kinds came in like a flood, both on the Clergy and laity. From the time that the Church and State, the kingdoms of Christ and of the world, were so strangely and unnaturally blended together, Christianity and Heathenism were so thoroughly incorporated with each other, that they will hardly ever be divided till Christ comes to reign upon earth. So that, instead of fancying that the glory of the new Jerusalem covered the earth at that period, we have terrible proof that it was then, and has ever since been, covered with the smoke of the

bottomless pit.

17. "However, were not the days antecedent to this, -- those of the third century, -- better beyond all comparison than any that followed them?" This has been almost universally believed. Few doubt but in the age before Constantine the Christian church was in its glory, worshipping God in the beauty of holiness. But was it so indeed? What says St. Cyprian, who lived in the midst of that century; a witness above all exception, and one that sealed the truth with his blood? What account does he give of what he saw with his own eyes, and heard with his own ears? Such a one as would almost make one imagine he was painting to the life, not the ancient church of Carthage, but the modern Church of Rome. According to his account, such abominations even then prevailed over all orders of men, that it was not strange God poured out his fury upon them in blood, by the grievous persecutions which followed.

18. Yea, and before this, even in the first century, even in the apostolic age, what account does St. John give of several of the churches which he himself had planted in Asia? How little were those congregations better than many in Europe at this day? Nay, forty or fifty years before that, within thirty years of the descent of the Holy Ghost, were there not such abominations in the church of Corinth as were "not even named among the Heathens?" So early did "the mystery of iniquity" begin to work in the Christian church! So little reason have we to appeal to "the former days," as though they were "better than these!"

19. To affirm this, therefore, as commonly as it is done, is not only contrary to truth, but is an instance of black ingratitude to God, and a grievous affront to his blessed Spirit. For whoever makes a fair and candid inquiry, will easily perceive that true religion has in no wise decreased, but greatly increased, in the present century. To instance in one capital branch of religion, the love of our neighbour. Is not persecution well nigh vanished from the face of the earth? In what age did Christians of various denominations show such forbearance toward each other? When before was such lenity shown by governors toward their respective subjects? not only in Great Britain and Ireland, but in France and Germany; yea, every part of Europe? Nothing like this has been seen since the time of Constantine; no, not since the time of the Apostles.

20. If it be said, "Why, this is the fruit of the general infidelity, the Deism which has overspread all Europe," I answer, Whatever be the cause, we have reason greatly to rejoice in the effect: And if the all-wise God has brought so great and universal a good out of this dreadful evil, so much the more should we magnify his astonishing power, wisdom, and goodness herein. Indeed, so far as we can judge, this was the most direct way whereby nominal Christians could be prepared, first, for tolerating, and afterwards, for receiving, real+ Christianity. While the governors were themselves unacquainted with it, nothing but this could induce them to suffer it. O the depth both of the wisdom and knowledge of God; causing a total disregard for all religion, to pave the way for the revival of the only religion which was worthy of God! I am not assured whether this be the case or no in France and Germany; but it is so beyond all contradiction in North-America: The total indifference of the government there, whether there be any religion or none, leaves room for the propagation of true, scriptural religion, without the least let or hindrance.

21. But above all this, while luxury and profaneness have been increasing on the one hand, on the other benevolence and compassion toward all the forms of human woe have increased in a manner not known before, from the earliest ages of the world. In proof of this we see more hospitals, infirmaries, and other places of public charity have been erected, at least in and near London, within this century, than in five hundred years before. And suppose this has been owing in part to vanity, desire of praise; yet have we cause to bless God, that so much good has sprung even from this imperfect motive.

22. I cannot forbear mentioning one instance more of the goodness of God to us in the present age. He has lifted up his standard in our islands, both against luxury, profaneness, and vice of every kind. He caused, near fifty years ago, as it were, a grain of mustard-seed to be sown near London; and it has now grown and put forth great branches, reaching from sea to sea. Two or three poor people met together, in order to help each other to be real Christians. They increased to hundreds, to thousands, to myriads, still pursuing their one point, real religion; the love of God and man ruling all their tempers, and words, and actions. Now I will be bold to say, such an event as this, considered in all its circumstances, has not been seen upon earth before, since the time that St. John went to Abraham's bosom.

23. Shall we now say, "The former days were better than these?" God forbid we should be so unwise and so unthankful! Nay, rather let us praise him all the day long; for he hath dealt bountifully with us. No "former time," since the Apostles left the earth, has been better than the present. None has been comparable to it in several respects. We are not born out of due time, but in the day of his power, -- a day of glorious salvation, wherein he is hastening to renew the whole race of mankind in righteousness and true holiness. How bright hath the Sun of Righteousness already shone on various parts of the earth! And how many gracious showers has he already poured down upon his inheritance! How many precious souls has he already gathered into his garner, as ripe shocks of corn! May we be always ready to follow them; crying in our hearts, "Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!"

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