

# PROGRESS

There may be no idea which has captured the modern human imagination as much as the idea of “progress.”

“Progress” is defined in the dictionary as “the steady improvement of a society or civilization.”

The notion that man can take action to continually improve himself and his society has a deep and abiding appeal and it permeates our way of thinking about the world and about ourselves.

There is of course no lack of evidence that throughout history mankind has made many kinds of progress.

Scientific discoveries and technological innovation in transportation, communication, agriculture and medicine have vastly improved the quality of life for millions of people.

There has also been social progress, as man has developed and implemented more enlightened forms of self-governance based upon principles of law and justice and liberty.

There has been economic progress as man has discovered ways for fewer people to produce larger amounts of wealth.

All this progress has convinced many people that most of mankind's problems can be solved through science and technology.

Building the ideal society—is not a matter of “if we can do it,” but a matter of “when will we do it.”

To this way of thinking, utopia—or something close to it—will be the inevitable result of progress.

Now it is generally assumed that what makes progress possible is *the accumulation of knowledge*.

It is *knowledge* that enables man to steadily improve himself and his society.

Therefore, for the progressive the acquisition of knowledge becomes a primary goal of society, because knowledge makes progress possible.

There are different kinds of knowledge, of course—academic knowledge, technical knowledge, business acumen, street smarts—but all of them are considered desirable to possess.

Put simply, it is better to be “in the know,” as we say, than “out of it,” as we also say.

The alternative to being knowledgeable is to be ignorant, and nobody considers it a virtue to be ignorant.

Knowledge is good to have and bad to be without.

But the fact is, not ALL knowledge is good, is it?

There is one kind of knowledge which it would have been much better for us to have never acquired, and that is the knowledge of evil.

“On the day you eat of it you will die,” the Lord said to Adam, but he did and they did.

Against God’s specific instructions, man chose to acquire the knowledge of evil, and now we have it and there is no getting rid of it.

And this knowledge of evil is not abstract—any more than evil itself is abstract.

It is not a dormant fact, like some piece of information about geography or physics.

The knowledge of evil is a living, active virus that infects much of what we think and say and do.

The knowledge of evil is spiritual cancer that abides in the human soul.

And just like the abundant evidence that exists for the benefits that progress in science and technology have brought to mankind, there is abundant evidence for

the curses that the progress of evil has brought upon mankind.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century, for example, saw more war, torture, rape and genocide—not to mention terrorism—than all previous centuries combined.

This is progress all right—but of a very different kind!

*It is the progress of a terminal disease.*

The symptoms of this disease are obvious: even as we use scientific knowledge and technological innovations to do good, we use the same knowledge to do evil.

Modern medical science has enabled us to prevent and cure many diseases, but it has also enabled us to isolate anthrax and infect entire populations.

Einstein, Fermi and Oppenheimer showed us how to split the atom and that knowledge gave us nuclear energy and nuclear medicine.

It also gave us Hiroshima, Nigasaki, Three Mile Island and Cheronobyl.

Al Gore gave us the internet, which revolutionized communication and information retrieval.

It also made it possible for our children to access pornography in their own homes.

For every benefit that new knowledge has conferred upon mankind, there has been a corresponding curse.

The fact is, knowledge is amoral: in and of itself it is neither good nor evil, but can be put to evil purpose as well as good.

So we have a conundrum: there are two trends in human history which are directly opposed to each other.

As we progress towards utopia, we progress towards self-annihilation.

As things get better, they get worse.

As material abundance increases, unmitigated disaster looms.

And never has disaster seemed more imminent!

We live in a world where science and technology have made it possible for tiny numbers of determined people to unleash terrible destruction upon their fellow man.

It has been suggested—and, I think, correctly so—that 9/11 may well be only the beginning of unimaginable acts of terrorism in our own country. We have highly motivated, highly intelligent enemies who have both the financial resources and technological means of causing calamities of undreamed of proportions within our borders.

Does anyone seriously doubt that this could happen?

The crippling of our electrical grid?

A nuclear holocaust in Cleveland?

It's by no means out of the question.

As man's power to do good has multiplied exponentially, so has his power to do evil.

Listen to the words of our Lord regarding the signs of the endtimes: "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places...great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now...false Christs and false prophets will appear...."

Throughout *New Testament* history, mankind has lived in the endtimes and the present moment is no exception.

But the Good News I have for you this morning is that God has given us another kind of knowledge, a blessed knowledge which allows us to make real progress toward a blessed goal, even as the world falls apart around our ears.

He has enabled us not only to acquire worldly knowledge through our power of reason and memory, He has enabled us to know HIM, through the gift of faith in His Son.

And THIS, according to the Word of God, is the best and truest kind of knowledge we can ever possess.

“If you continue in My Word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” said our Savior.

And knowing Jesus is a very different kind of knowledge than that which the world gives,

The world affords us knowledge of the world.

Knowing Jesus gives us eternal life.

Which seems more important to you?

When we base our hopes and our confidence on the Word of God—both the inscripturated Word and the Incarnate Word—we come to understand that the progressive deterioration of this world and its final

destruction are all part of God's plan and are all described in his word.

Paul wrote that all creation was in "bondage to decay" fifteen hundred years before Sir Isaac Newton said the same thing in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics..

*The Book of Daniel*, from which today's *Old Testament* lesson is taken, contains four separate prophecies of the progressive deterioration of civilization.

The Word makes it clear that the splendor and glory of this world are passing away and will continue to do so.

How should we react to this?

Listen again to the words God spoke to Daniel at the end of the *Book of Daniel*.

*At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then, But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*

Great distress will come upon the world, but there will be deliverance for God's people—all of those who believe in Jesus and whose names are "written in the book of life,"

The dead will be resurrected—some to everlasting life and others to eternal destruction.

And "those who lead many to righteousness"—who share their knowledge of Jesus Christ—will shine forever as beacons of light as testimonies to the wisdom of God which outshines the wisdom of man.

All the themes of the Gospel were revealed to Daniel over five hundred years before the One who brought the Gospel was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

And as for us—we who live amidst all these signs of the endtimes.

The buds have appeared on the branches of the fig tree and the flowers and the fruit cannot be far behind.

For God—and for us—the time is now.

God's final words to Daniel will serve for us as well: *"But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge....As for you, go your way till the end."*

In the Name of the Way, the Truth and the Life,  
Amen.