

Lessons from the Epistle to the Hebrews

***“Let us run with
patience the race
that is set before
us, Looking unto
Jesus the author
and finisher of
our faith.”***

—Hebrews 12:1,2

THERE IS MUCH IN THE

Epistle to the Hebrews which indicates that the ones to whom it was written were showing tendencies toward lack of faith in God and his son Christ Jesus, and a cooling of their zeal for the doing

of the Heavenly Father's will. In the opening of the second chapter, the Apostle Paul writes, “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.” In chapter 3:12, he says, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”

The fourth chapter commences with these words: “Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.” In chapter 5:12 is revealed the

lack of progress these Hebrew Christians had made. The apostle says, "When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat."

In the sixth chapter of Hebrews, Paul emphasizes the need for being rooted and grounded in the Truth, and for one to have his anchor of faith firmly fastened within the veil, "Whither the forerunner is for us entered." (vs. 20) In chapter 10:23, he admonishes, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised)." From these and other statements in the epistle, it seems clear that it was written to encourage this particular group to a greater steadfastness in the Truth, and a more enduring zeal in their endeavor to follow in the footsteps of the Master.

THE CAUSE OF CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

A careful analysis indicates that one cause for the cooling zeal of these Hebrew brethren was the ignominy and suffering that continued upon them as a result of their being followers of Jesus. They had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. To any believing Jew, the Messiah was one who was destined to fulfill all the wondrous kingdom promises of the Old Testament. They probably were not surprised that a cause so young would meet with some measure of opposition, so in the beginning they "took joyfully the spoiling of [their] goods." They had willingly been locked in the stocks, and rejoiced in the privilege of being the companions of those who were so used.—chap. 10:32-35

However, as time went on they probably began to wonder why the Messianic cause continued to be subject to so much opposition and persecution. Perhaps they had not understood clearly those doctrinal truths pertaining to the “sufferings of Christ”—that only after this suffering was complete could the glory be attained. Perhaps they thought that the suffering of Christ was to have ended at Calvary, and now that his followers also were suffering might indicate that there was some question as to whether Jesus was truly the Messiah. Whatever their reasoning may have been, the apostle makes it plain in the second chapter that it pleased God “in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”—Heb. 2:10

Here was information showing that while many sons were to have positions of glory in the Messianic kingdom, yet they all, like their Captain, must attain to that position by way of suffering. This would help them to understand why some of them had been made a gazing-stock and why they had had their goods spoiled as a result of their association with the Messianic cause. If they had been wondering why their suffering was necessary, here was an explanation.

Later, in the 12th chapter, a further reason is given for Christian suffering. Here it is shown to be a part of the necessary discipline by which we are trained as sons of God for the high position to which we have been called. Those whom the Lord truly loves as his children, the apostle explains, should expect to be chastened. Indeed, if they lack such experiences they have reason to doubt their sonship standing before God.—vss. 6-8

THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE

We sometimes speak of a faith that will enable us to “walk in the dark with God,” which is very good. However, in order to have such a faith, it is necessary for us to know that God is with us in the dark, and that he is holding our hands in his. To be walking in the dark without the certain knowledge that God is with us is another matter. If the Hebrew brethren were looking for the glory of the kingdom, but did not understand why they were called upon to endure so much suffering, they were walking in the dark without knowing whether God was with them. Without this necessary knowledge, they might think their suffering meant that they had espoused a counterfeit Messianic cause.

This would seem to explain why the apostle dwelt at length on the point of sacrifice and suffering, as it had been illustrated in the Tabernacle services. Paul pointed out to these Hebrew brethren that it was their privilege, and quite in harmony with the divine arrangement, to go to Jesus “without the camp” and share in his reproach and suffering. (chap. 13:10-13) If they could understand that their suffering was truly a part of the Messianic purpose in which it was their privilege to share, this would surely fortify them for whatever experiences they might be called upon to bear.

It is in harmony with this thought that the apostle writes, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (chap. 11:1) The word “substance” is translated from a Greek word meaning “support” or “foundation.” Having support or a foundation for things hoped for would also imply having “evidence” of things unseen. The

Hebrew brethren had come to understand part of this “substance.” They had accepted Jesus as their Messiah, and hoped to share in the Messianic glory. Now they needed to realize that their suffering with Christ was another important part of the foundation of their hope. A proper understanding of this would constitute one of the strong evidences of the unseen glory for which they were striving. “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him,” Paul states in another of his epistles.—II Tim. 2:12

THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Throughout the 11th chapter of Hebrews the apostle tells about the faith-life of the Ancient Worthies. They, too, were associated with the Messianic cause. Their faith in that cause, and their loyalty to it, also resulted in suffering and death. They did not partake of the suffering of Christ in the same sense as do his footstep followers of this Gospel Age. Their sacrifice was not represented by the brazen altar in the court of the Tabernacle. Nevertheless, it was fully in keeping with, and just as zealously rendered, as the “better sacrifices” of this age.

It took a life of faith on the part of the Ancient Worthies in order for them to continue to be pleasing to God. By their faith they “obtained a good report,” the apostle says. (vs. 2) He then tells us about various such worthy ones, and of what their faith enabled them to do and endure. By faith Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. By faith Noah built an ark. By faith Abraham, in obeying God, left the city of Ur and journeyed to the land of promise, not knowing whither he was

going. Faith enabled this class to suffer and to die. It enabled Moses to decide that the “reproach of Christ” was more to be esteemed than the “treasures in Egypt.”—vss. 24-27

Through faith they “subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”—vss. 33-38

What a “cloud of witnesses” is here produced as evidence before the Hebrew brethren. All of these, as servants in the Messianic cause, had gladly suffered and died in that hope. Truly, the house of sons, now being prepared for still greater glory, could not expect to attain the high position offered to them without suffering. Indeed, the “Captain” of their salvation also suffered and died, and in his life and death the follower of Christ is furnished with the best of all examples of faith and obedience. How logical that the apostle in this wondrous admonition to faith and zeal, should step from the martyrs of the Old Testament, to the Chief Martyr of the New Testament—Jesus.

“LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT”

After mentioning the Old Testament “cloud of witnesses,” and as he introduces Jesus as the greatest of all examples of faithfulness, Paul shows that the life of a Christian is, in some respects, like that of one who trains for and runs in a race. “Let us run with patience the race that is set before us,” he admonishes. He also gives us some helpful suggestions as to how this can be done successfully: “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us.” Laying aside these hindrances, we are to look “unto Jesus”—that is, be guided by his example and inspired by his faith and devotion.—Heb. 12:1,2

We are to “lay aside every weight.” Part of the training of ancient marathon runners was that of purposely weighing down their feet over a period of time prior to the race for the purpose of developing the muscles of their legs. Also, when these weights were removed their feet would seem unusually light by comparison, enabling them to run faster as well as longer distances. Perhaps the apostle had this in mind when admonishing the brethren to lay aside their weights.

Followers of the Master do not, of course, purposely weigh themselves down in training for the Christian racecourse. We are burdened with many weights without the necessity of specially adding them. It is true, however, that only as we lay aside these weights can we run successfully in the narrow way. In order to lay the weights aside we must first recognize them. All of us were by nature weighted down with sin and imperfection. The Hebrew brethren first to be addressed in this epistle had

this weight specially emphasized by the Mosaic Law. All their lives they had been struggling toward righteousness, weighed down so heavily with this burden that no real progress could be made.

With or without the Law, however, Adamic imperfection is a weight to those who are seeking to know and do the will of God. When we enter the Christian racecourse and lay aside this weight in accepting by faith the imputed merit of Christ, a tremendous burden is lifted. The poet's words, "Ceaseless struggling after life, weary with the endless strife," well express the experience of all who seek after righteousness apart from Christ.

We lay this weight aside by full consecration to do God's will, based on faith in the precious blood of Jesus. Doing so justifies us and gives us peace with God. (Rom. 5:1) What a burden is thus lifted, and how free and openhearted it leaves us as we look "unto Jesus," seeking to "run with patience" the race that is set before us. We are not to burden ourselves again with this weight after we lay it aside. This is what we would be doing if we attempt to justify ourselves before God through the merit of our own works, or if we permit our unwilling imperfections to discourage us from pressing forward in the race.

How foolish it would have been for ancient runners, once they had lightened their feet for the race by removing the weights, to start putting them on once again after the race had started. Yet, this is what followers of the Master are sometimes tempted to do. The weight, or hindrance, of Adamic imperfection is removed by the blood of Christ—if we have faith to believe it fully.

We should avoid taking on other weights also. If we permit ourselves to be overcharged with the cares of this life, these cares become a weight which impedes our progress. (Luke 21:34) There are certain responsibilities of life which the Scriptures impose upon us, and these we must carry out. They cannot be construed as weights, because, being proper, the Lord helps us to bear them. We are scripturally exhorted to provide for our own. To do this faithfully is to perform a part of the Lord's will for us. It is a part of the "all" things which are to be done to the glory of God. (I Cor. 10:31) To be "overcharged," however, and to be carried away with the lure of earthly goods, comforts, and joys in this life, is likely to add weights which are sure to hold us back from final victory in the narrow way.

Therefore, it is a necessity that we lay aside whatever weights we may have before starting the race, and we must keep laying them aside as often as we find ourselves becoming burdened by them. The love of money, the love of ease, the desire to make a fair showing in the flesh—any or all of these might easily become weights. If we keep our affections set upon things above, determined that we will be interested in and do only "this one thing," then we will remain free from the weights which might otherwise rob us of a victorious conclusion of the race.

THE BESETTING SIN

We are also to lay aside "the sin which doth so easily beset us." Every follower of Christ undoubtedly has one or more weaknesses or imperfections which serve to handicap him in his effort to do

the Master's will, but this does not seem to be what is referred to here. If we can judge from the general subject matter of the epistle, the besetting sin to which the apostle refers is evidently that of the lack of faith, and consequent lack of zeal.

"Whatsoever is not of faith is sin," the apostle tells us. (Rom. 14:23) One of the chief sins of natural Israel was their lack of faith in God and in the promise of his overruling providences on their behalf. In chapters three and four of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Paul reminds us of this, and exhorts that we strive to enter, by faith, into the rest which God has provided for us through Christ. "Without faith it is impossible to please [God]," the apostle says, showing further that those who draw back through lack of faith cannot have divine approval. (Heb. 11:6) This sin of a weak faith is the besetting one, and one which every disciple of the Lord should endeavor earnestly to set aside by grasping more firmly and more resolutely all the exceeding great and precious promises by which he is assured of victory.—II Pet. 1:4

"RUN WITH PATIENCE"

"And let us run with patience," the apostle adds. Cheerful endurance is the thought here in the Greek word translated "patience." The trials of the way make it necessary to endure, but the endurance should be cheerful. Going to Jesus "without the camp, bearing his reproach," is not a cheerful thing in itself—it is something rather to be "endured." However, if we have the proper knowledge of what is involved, and strong faith in the promises of God as they pertain to both the

present and the future, we should be able to endure cheerfully.

It will help us to endure cheerfully if we look “unto Jesus; . . . who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” (Heb. 12:2) God’s design for all of his intelligent creatures is that they may be happy. When the divine plan of redemption and restitution is complete, all sorrow, sighing, suffering, and trials, will have fled away. This does not mean, however, that the immediate objective of the Christian’s life is to be free from suffering. Indeed, we can by faith enter into the “joy of the Lord,” but this joy is not based upon present ease and freedom from suffering.

The joy that meant the most to Jesus, and which enabled him to endure the cross, was the “joy that was set before him” by the promises of God. This same joy must be ours if we are to endure faithfully while we go to him without the camp bearing his reproach. It is the joy of anticipation—the joy of faith. It can be thought of as a down payment of that “fulness of joy” which will be ours when, through faithful and cheerful endurance of present trials, we attain a place at God’s right hand where there are “pleasures forevermore.”—Ps. 16:11

“CONSIDER HIM”

“Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself,” the apostle adds. (Heb. 12:3) The Ancient Worthies endured many hardships. The Hebrew brethren had their goods spoiled and had been locked in the stocks. Neither of these groups, by comparison, however, had endured as much as Jesus. Moreover, they were all imperfect,

and to some extent their suffering may have been due to their imperfection, but not so with Jesus. He was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners. Yet he suffered—not for himself—but on behalf of others, that even those who caused him to suffer might be blessed.

It is hard for anyone to endure contradiction, but the perfect man Jesus had the main facts of his life contradicted and was put to death because of it. Jesus was the Son of God, and the King of kings, yet he was subjected to a campaign of contradiction from the very beginning of his ministry, culminating only when he finished laying down his life and died upon the cross. Hanging there as the world's Redeemer, the challenge was hurled at him to come down and thus prove that he was the Son of God. In derision the inscription was placed above his head: "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Matt. 27:37) "He saved others; let him save himself," the crowd shouted. (Luke 23:35) They did not realize that by enduring this contradiction and refusing to save himself, he was providing salvation for all mankind—even those who hated him.

Surely here is something to consider as we endeavor to walk in the Master's footsteps. We are called to a heavenly calling, to reign with Christ in his glorious kingdom, but to attain this we must "suffer with him," and endure with him. (II Tim. 2:12) We, too, must endure "contradiction." When we are contradicted pertaining to things wherein we are right, and take it patiently, we are enduring in some small degree that which Jesus endured. We are also to endure cheerfully, and even to seek opportunities to bless those who contradict us. We

are never to endure with grumbling, nor seek occasion to “get even” with our accusers.

RESISTING UNTO BLOOD

Then follows the apostle’s climax: “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.” (Heb. 12:4) This is another way of saying, “You have not yet died for the Messianic cause.” The Hebrew brethren had been faithful to a degree. However, they had not as yet “resisted unto blood”—they had not followed the Master all the way into death. Until they had done this, the joys which had been set before them could not become realities, so they were to continue “looking unto Jesus,” and to be inspired by the promises that motivated him, until they had reached the full end of the way.

Like the Hebrew brethren, we too, as followers of the Master, must “hold fast the profession” of our faith, watch that we do not “let . . . slip” what we have learned, and not “draw back.” We must “endure chastening” as sons, and safeguard ourselves against failure by having faith’s anchor fastened securely “within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus.” (chap. 6:19,20) Only thus may we hope to victoriously reach the end of the race-course marked out for us by Jesus, who ran before to show the way. Not until we have “resisted unto blood” will we have reached the end of that way. Only those who are “faithful unto death” may hope to receive “the crown of life.” (Rev. 2:10) We cannot win the prize by running only half or three-quarters of the way. We must continue to run all the way—stopping short of nothing, but determined to continue faithfully to the end of our journey. ■