

Paul Encourages the Hebrews

*“Consider him that
endured such
contradiction of
sinners against
himself, lest ye be
wearied and faint
in your minds.”
—Hebrews 12:3*

THE EPISTLE TO THE

Hebrews contains much vital information concerning the typical significance of the Tabernacle which God instructed Moses to build in the “wilderness”—particularly as to its services and its priesthood. It also places the promised “New Covenant” in its proper position in the divine arrangement. It is a valuable epistle so far as numerous doctrines of the plan of God are concerned.

In addition to these typical and doctrinal features of the book, also woven in its pages is a message of encouragement to the “Hebrews” to whom it is especially addressed. According to the Apostle Paul, who we believe is the author of this epistle, these Hebrews had not been making progress in the truth as they should. Paul speaks of them as “dull of hearing,” to which he adds, “For 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.”—Heb. 5:11,12

Paul’s method of encouraging these brethren to a more steadfast and progressive appreciation of the truth was first to assure them of its source, showing that it had come to them from the God of Israel, through his beloved Son, whom they had accepted as the Messiah, and to whom they had dedicated their lives. He calls their attention to this divine origin of the Gospel in the first chapter of the epistle.

Its opening verses read, “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire. But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.”—Heb. 1:1-8

In no better way could the apostle emphasize the great weight of authority that supports the Gospel than to remind us of the highly exalted position of God's beloved Son, through whom the Heavenly Father has spoken to us. We know that the holy angels occupy an important place in the service of God, but they have not been exalted to the high position to which Jesus has. Later in this chapter, Paul speaks of the angels as "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation." How much this service of the angels means to every follower of the Master. Yet, the Heavenly Father has never said to any of these, "Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." (vss. 13,14; Ps. 110:1) However, he did say this to his Son, who at his resurrection from the dead was given "all power . . . in heaven and in earth."—Matt. 28:18

THE CHANNEL OF TRUTH

This highly exalted one is the channel of truth for the Lord's people during the present Gospel Age. He has spoken to us through his own personal ministry, and he speaks to us through his inspired apostles and prophets. This is the reason it is so vital to adhere to what we have learned from him. The apostle was leading up to this very point, for he begins the next chapter by saying, "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. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation;

which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him.”—Heb. 2:1-3

Paul realized that the Hebrews to whom he wrote this letter had to some extent already let these things “slip”—that to a degree they had already neglected this wonderful truth which they had received from God’s highly exalted Son. As we have already quoted, they had need to be taught again the “first principles of the oracles of God,” so now he was encouraging them to a renewed effort, lest the great truths of the Gospel be allowed to slip from them entirely.

SUFFERING NOT EASY

It would seem from various statements in the epistle that there was one overriding reason the faith and zeal of the Hebrew brethren were showing signs of decline. As a result of espousing the cause of Christ they had received a great deal of persecution—some of which, perhaps, they did not expect. Paul explained to them that this was in reality quite in harmony with the divine purpose. As followers of Jesus, they were his brethren, called to the same glory to which he had been exalted, but that the pathway to this glory was one of suffering.

On this point he wrote: “For it became him, for whom are all things, . . . in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto

thee. And again, I will put my trust in him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me.”—Heb. 2:10-13

While the Hebrew brethren were now showing signs of laxness, this was not true of them when they first accepted the Gospel message. At that time they even received their trials and persecutions with steadfastness and joy. In chapter 10, Paul reminds them, “Call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.”—vss. 32-34

THE “FORMER DAYS”

From this passage, it is clear that when these Hebrew brethren were first enlightened they endured much affliction, and took joyfully the plundering of their goods. Some of them had been locked in stocks and exposed to public view as they endured the insults of passers-by. Others became companions of those thus used. In other words, they voluntarily let it be known that they were friends and brethren of those who were held in the “gazingstocks,” thus sharing their suffering with them. This revealed a remarkable degree of zeal for the Lord, the truth, and the brethren.

However, this was in the beginning. At that time they took joyfully these experiences, knowing that

they had “in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” So Paul urged, “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.” (Heb. 10:35,36) The use of the word “therefore” in this passage suggests that the Hebrews were indeed showing an inclination, through laxity, to discard their confidence. Hence, Paul encouraged them to hold on to their faith for, as he had said earlier in the chapter, “He is faithful that promised.”—vs. 23

“A LITTLE WHILE”

Like all the brethren in the Early Church, this Hebrew group looked for the return of their Messiah to set up his kingdom. The general impression then was that this great event in God’s plan would take place soon. Perhaps, however, more time had already gone by than they had expected, and they were becoming discouraged on this account. So Paul continued, “Yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” (vs. 37) Here the apostle was referring to essentially an entire age in the plan of God as “a little while,” and was encouraging the Hebrews to maintain their faith, hope, and zeal, and to continue their submissive endurance of suffering. After all, the waiting time was only as long as their individual lives.

Do we not have a somewhat similar test of faith at the present time? We believe that “he” who was to come has indeed come in his Second Presence, yet we are still laboring on this side of the veil. In

the Lord's providence, however, it is our privilege to be associated with the harvest work which has been taking place in the years since the Master's return. Yet, this work has extended over a much longer period than many of us had supposed that it would. Therefore, we too need to watch lest we cast away our confidence. We also have need of patience, that after having done the will of God in devoting ourselves to him and to the Messianic cause, "we might receive the promise."

GOD NOT UNRIGHTEOUS

The early zeal of the Hebrews is also shown in chapter six of this epistle. Paul spoke of this, saying, "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end."—vss. 10,11

A mere "first love" enthusiasm for the Lord, the truth, and the brethren is not enough. (Rev. 2:4) Paul set the right pattern for the Hebrews and for us when he wrote that they should show that same initial diligence "to the full assurance of hope unto the end." This is the real test of Christian faithfulness. It is not so much what we have done to serve the Lord in the past, but it is important that today, and in all the days to come, we continue zealously and faithfully in his service. Only those who do this can hope to receive the glorious reward which the Lord has promised, which is to be associated with Jesus in his glorious kingdom to bless all the families of the earth.

“STRONG CONSOLATION”

In a further effort to build up the faith and zeal of the Hebrew brethren, Paul cites God’s dealings with faithful Abraham. (Heb. 6:12-17) He refers to God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth through the seed of Abraham, and reminds us that when he proved faithful by showing his willingness to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering, God confirmed his promise to him by an oath. Thus, “by two immutable things,”—his promise and his oath—“in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.”—vss. 18-20

This was strong consolation indeed for those Hebrew brethren. It reminded them of Abraham’s faithfulness under severe trial, and of the trustworthiness of God who had made the promise to him. This was one of the Messianic promises of the Old Testament, and the Hebrews had accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Now they were reminded that suffering was involved in the inheritance of this wonderful promise, and that if they were to be among the “many sons” brought to glory with Jesus, they also would need to patiently endure. This would be possible by having their spirits strengthened by the “strong consolation” provided by God through his faithfulness to Abraham.

This same great truth, centered in the oath-bound promise to Abraham, should be a great

consolation to us while we wait for our deliverance, if faithful unto death, into the heavenly kingdom. We think it is significant that Paul should use this great fundamental truth of the Gospel in his efforts to encourage the Hebrews and us. Speculative interpretations of non-essential details of Scripture will not do this. Only the fundamentals of the Creator's divine plan and purpose can furnish the courage we need in order to face the trials entailed in suffering with Christ on this side of the veil.

The Christian should learn early in his walk in the narrow way that serving the Lord with the expectation of sharing in Christ's glory requires faithfulness to the end of life. Paul reminded the Hebrews of this, writing, "We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end." (Heb. 3:14) The "beginning" of the Christian's confidence must be held "unto the end" of our earthly sojourn. Anything we may have done in the past loses its importance if our faithfulness now does not measure up to what it formerly was. This is Paul's great lesson to the Hebrew brethren and to us. Only cheerful endurance to the end will lead to a "crown of life" and "glory . . . honour and immortality."—Rev. 2:10; Rom. 2:7

FAITHFUL HEROES OF THE PAST

To further encourage the Hebrew brethren, Paul reminded them of the faithfulness of those who in past ages had endured many sorts of trials, yet did not permit these to swerve them from their dedication in the service of their God—the God

of Israel. These examples of faith are brought to our attention in the eleventh chapter.

Let us note what Paul says concerning one of those faithful servants of old: "By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment. By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible."—Heb. 11:23-27

In verse 1 of this chapter, Paul defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Moses had this sort of faith, and it gave "substance," or reality, to the things which God had promised. He had "evidence" also of those blessings which God had assured, even though to the natural eye they were often "not seen." Seemingly, this was one of the problems of the Hebrew brethren. Their faith had weakened and they could no longer "see" the great features of God's plan in their clear perspective. Their afflictions and persecutions had cast a veil over God's promises, and without sufficient faith to be able to see through this veil, their progress in the narrow way had been impeded, even set back.

Paul speaks also of those faithful ones of the past who "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. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”—Heb. 11:36-40

Notice that these faithful ones of the past did not in their day receive the promise—that is, the fulfillment of that which God had promised. Yet they endured faithfully unto the end of their life. Indeed, God blessed them with strength to endure, and thus encouraged them in their pathway of faithfulness. However, as to the future rewards in the resurrection, these remained invisible to them, and they could rejoice in God’s future promises only by the eye of faith.

Have not all the Lord’s people been subjected to this situation? Even now, in the harvest of the Gospel Age, and in the time of Christ’s Second Presence, our faith in God’s promises is what lifts us up. Christ’s presence is an invisible one, and while we observe the old world tottering to its fall to make way for the “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness,” we see it all upon the basis of faith in the promises of God’s Word. (II Pet. 3:13) If our faith is weak, our zeal will lag, and instead of being rejoicing Christians we may well experience a measure of disappointment that our waiting seems to have been stretched out over

so long a period of time. Surely it is true of all the Lord's people that we have need of patience!

LOOKING UNTO JESUS

Beginning the twelfth chapter of Paul's epistle to the Hebrews, he writes, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."—vss. 1,2

In the previous chapter, Paul had surrounded the Hebrew brethren with "a cloud of witnesses" in order to encourage them to a more steadfast faith and zeal. Now, in view of these encouraging examples from the past he urges them to "lay aside" the weights of worldly care. He exhorts them to cast behind the sin of unbelief and lack of faith, which did so easily beset them. Indeed, Paul is encouraging all of the Lord's dear people along these lines, that all might "run with patience the race" set before them.

The apostle then presents the greatest of all "witnesses"—our Lord Jesus—"the author and finisher of our faith." He says that the joy which was set before the Master encouraged him to such an extent that he could endure the cross, and despise the shame. This joy was set before Jesus by the promises of the Heavenly Father. One of these is recorded in Psalm 16: "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [the grave]; neither wilt thou suffer thine

Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.” (vss. 10,11) According to Paul’s testimony, Jesus had now entered into the “presence” of his Heavenly Father, and was at the “right hand of the throne of God.”

Paul admonished the Hebrew brethren to consider Jesus, who “endured such contradiction of sinners against himself,” lest they become weary and faint in their minds. (Heb. 12:3) The “contradiction” of sinners against Jesus cost him much suffering, and finally resulted in death. How could the Hebrew brethren expect anything different, especially since Paul had explained to them that “many sons,” including them, were being brought to glory by the same pathway of suffering in which Jesus walked? How appropriate it was that they—and we likewise—consider him.

Then the apostle adds, “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.” (vs. 4) Here blood is used as a symbol of life poured out. The Hebrew brethren, in former days, had taken joyfully the spoiling of their goods, being made a gazingstock, and suffering in other ways. They had also been faithful in the Lord’s service, but they had not yet completed their sacrifice as Jesus had—they had not yet “resisted unto blood.”

A KINGDOM PICTURE

Paul’s encouragement to the Hebrews reaches a climax later in the twelfth chapter. Beginning with verse 22, he presents a symbolic picture of the kingdom in which the Hebrew brethren hoped to

have a share. Here he was setting joys before them, even as Jesus had joys set before him to help him bear the cross. We quote this symbolic description of the kingdom without comment: “Ye are come [by faith] unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.”—Heb. 12:22-24

After the many admonitions to faithfulness, and the warnings, some of which we have quoted, Paul returns to his premise which he established at the beginning of the epistle—that we should be faithful to the Truth because of the great weight of its authority as vested in Jesus. He says, “See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven.” (vs. 25) Finally, Paul provides one more faith-inspiring promise, saying, “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence.”—vs. 28 ■