

Sustained by the Hand of God

“Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.”
—Acts 14:17

AFTER THE DEATH OF THE

Apostle Paul, the message proclaiming the heavenly calling to the footstep followers of our Lord Jesus entered a new phase. No longer did the many classes that he had established and the numerous consecrated brethren in Christ have the opportunity of his Christian fellowship, powerful ministry and wise spiritual counsel. The members of the Early Church would go on to endure much in the way of experience in the name of their beloved Savior. This would include physical suffering and abuse at the hand of those who would seek to corrupt the glorious message of Truth.

However, our loving Heavenly Father was not about to abandon his specially called people, or to leave himself without a true witness in the world. We know that God has sustained his dearly loved

and cherished faithful ones in all ages and places, even during the darkest period of the Middle Ages.

It was the blessed apostle who proclaimed, "I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elias? how he maketh intercession to God against Israel, saying, Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life." (Rom. 11:1-3) We are thus assured by the great apostle who then pointed out that God's hand was all powerful and sustaining. He continued, "What saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace." (vss. 4,5) Many precious stones have been gathered out during the long centuries of the present Gospel Age call to "The Christ." They will reflect the marvelous grace and glory of the loving Heavenly Father under the administration of Christ's future kingdom of righteousness.

THE GOSPEL AGE CHURCH

For nearly two thousand years, the heavenly call has gone out to true and honest-hearted followers of our dear Lord Jesus. During all of this time, there has been a common faith and purpose among the consecrated believers in Christ. In his short epistle Jude addressed this very point, when he wrote, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful

for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” (Jude 3) The called ones in Christ have willingly accepted the invitation to present their lives in complete consecration to the Heavenly Father. He has sustained them by the power and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit of Truth and his loving hand throughout this very long and difficult period of time.

Thus have the faithful upheld the Truth at great cost, and with much long-suffering and patient endurance. They have been upheld by the wonderful promises of God. “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” (Rom. 15:4) “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.”—Rev. 14:12

FALSE CHRISTS WOULD ARISE

When Jesus’ earthly ministry was drawing to a close, he spoke about false Christs that would arise to deceive the consecrated people of God. He was well aware of the fierce trials that yet awaited his little flock of believers. “Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” (Matt. 24:23,24) Jesus knew the power of Satan and the degree of evil that he was capable of inflicting upon his faithful followers.

In his second epistle to the church at Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul also cautioned the brethren to

not be deceived by those who did not have the proper spirit of the Truth, and would in turn spread false teachings by either word or action.” (II Thess. 2:2) He then proclaimed, “Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.”—vss. 3,4, *New American Standard Bible*

Paul was warning the brethren that the spirit of apostasy was already manifest and in their midst. “The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.”—vss. 7-10, *NASB*

The Gospel Age was in its early stages, and the apostle warned of an apostate system that would deceive many and cause a great falling away from the true faith. However, he explained that it was necessary that this should take place to test the followers of Christ before the promised day of the Lord should come at the end of the age. Errors would creep in, and selfishness and pride would replace the wonderful spirit of the Lord. The message of Truth and the invitation to share in Christ’s

future kingdom was set aside as the worldly spirit intensified.

THE REVELATION

The Book of Revelation is our Lord's last message to the members of the church—to those who would respond to the heavenly calling during this present Gospel Age. The Apostle John was given a series of visions that contained elaborate symbols which revealed our Lord's wonderful care and guidance for his consecrated people. In chapters two and three, the Revelator was given an overview of the churches' experiences, trials, and spiritual growth which at that time lay nearly two thousand years into the future. The mighty hand of the Heavenly Father would sustain his people with the Holy Spirit of Truth, and lead them to victory in spite of the continued opposition of Satan. "I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night."—Rev. 12:10

The Scriptures pointed forward not only to certain historical events that were about to take place, but they also served in a prophetic sense to foreshadow the spiritual growth and development of the church of Christ during their walk in newness of life. As these visions were about to be revealed to John, he was told, "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the

angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”—
Rev. 1:19,20

JESUS' MESSAGES TO HIS PEOPLE

During John's day, there were seven churches that existed in the seven cities that were named. However, it seems clear that they served to portray a grander meaning, and were intended to represent important aspects of the church's spiritual growth during its long and difficult history over the two thousand years since his day. In a larger sense, these experiences indicate valuable lessons for all the church class throughout this present Gospel Age. The admonition of our Lord Jesus was, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." (Rev. 2:10) Although these inspiring words were directed to the church at Smyrna, they represent the hope of each one of the entire consecrated body of Christ throughout this Gospel Age. The number 'seven' also stands to mark these churches' spiritual development in a very special way. In the Book of Revelation, the number 'seven' appears many times, including seven seals, seven trumpets, seven plagues, and other references to the number seven, and it is also found in many other places in God's Word.

FIRST MESSAGE

The first message in this group of seven was addressed to the Early Church at Ephesus. (Rev. 2:1-7) It was sent by our Lord Jesus who holds the "seven stars in his right hand," and who walks "in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks."

(vs. 1) The word Ephesus means ‘first’ or ‘desirable’ and describes the spiritual condition of the church during the Apostle Paul’s day. He was a wonderful servant in promoting the Truth to the Early Church, and he had received visions from God. In this message to Ephesus, the brethren living at that time were commended for their labors of love, patient endurance, and for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans—those who were growing weary of God’s arrangements for conducting the affairs of his people, and favored having a clergy class to rule over them. Those at Ephesus were also chastised for leaving their “first love” for the Lord, and were encouraged to repent from their error lest the light of their candlestick be removed from them.—vss. 4,5

A most blessed promise was given to the faithful members of the church at Ephesus. “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”—vs. 7

SECOND MESSAGE

Our Lord Jesus was “the first and the last,” and the one who was “dead” but now “is alive” (vs. 8), and he addressed this second message to the church at Smyrna. (Rev. 2:8-11) The word Smyrna means ‘bitter’ and points to the bitter persecutions suffered by those who loved the Truth and were responding to the glorious heavenly calling that went forth during that early period in the church’s history. The Apostle John was a special servant to the Lord’s people during that period.

The Scriptures speak well of the brethren who were living at that time. In respect to them, we read, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” (vs. 9) The brethren were suffering much for the Truth, yet they proved faithful to the High Calling they had received in Christ Jesus. These events took place during the cruel reign of Emperor Diocletian. The account also tells us that these faithful followers of Jesus were accused by false brethren who are described as being from the synagogue of Satan because of their defiling spirit.

Again, the brethren were given a blessed promise that if they were faithful to their High Calling they would receive a great reward. “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.”—vs. 11

THIRD MESSAGE

When the Lord addressed the third church at Pergamos (Rev. 2:12-17), he informed them that he possessed a “sharp sword with two edges.” (vs. 12) The name Pergamos suggests ‘earthly elevation.’ It applies to that period in the church’s earlier history that saw a spiritual decline and growing relationship between members of the church and the powers of the state. They were losing the spirit of their first love for the Truth. From the scriptural account, we read, “I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and *(Continued on page 35)*

(Continued from page 31) hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.” (vs. 13) A few faithful brethren were opposing the rise of apostasy, and had thus earned the title, ‘my faithful martyr.’

We learn that some were beginning to fall under the influence of the doctrine of Balaam, and this was leading to spiritual immorality and the committing of fornication, which was totally unacceptable to the Heavenly Father. They also were chastised for turning to the teachings of the Nicolaitans, which had been an earlier warning to the brethren at Ephesus. It was leading them to the development of a clergy class and its lordship over the Lord’s people.

The faithful at Pergamos also received a special promise. “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that received it.”—vs. 17

FOURTH MESSAGE

The fourth message was sent by the Son of God, who has eyes like a “flame of fire,” and feet “like fine brass” (vs. 18), to the church at Thyatira. (Rev. 2:18-29) The word means ‘sweet perfume of sacrifice’ and describes the spiritual condition of the few humble members of the church who were living during the darkest period of the Middle Ages. It was a time that may be compared to the multiple evils of Jezebel, a self-proclaimed prophetess who

sought to seduce the servants of God to commit fornication.

Although tested severely, the spiritual life of the truly consecrated child of God was accepted by the Lord as a sweet perfume of sacrifice, even at the time when the apostate system reigned with complete power and authority with the state. Jesus told them, "I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first."—Rev. 2:19

Blessed promises were held out to those faithful members of the little flock who rejoiced in their heavenly calling. "He that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star."—vss. 26-28

FIFTH MESSAGE

The message to the church at Sardis was sent by the one who had the "seven Spirits of God and the seven stars," to those who had a name that had life yet appeared to be dead. (Rev. 3:1-6) The word Sardis means 'to strengthen that which remains' and points to the very darkest hour of the Dark Ages. It was a time when the voice of Truth was nearly snuffed out. The few remaining faithful ones were aroused to the changing scene of the time, and the work of the reformers who were challenging the apostate system.

"Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief,

and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”—vss. 3,4

Because of their faithfulness to the Truth they were given wonderful promises for their steadfast courage. “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.”—vs. 5

SIXTH MESSAGE

Jesus sent the sixth message to the church at Philadelphia. (Rev. 3:7-13) He was holy and true, and had the “key of David.” He could open and no man could shut, and he could shut and no man open. (vs. 7) The meaning of the word Philadelphia is ‘brotherly love’ and points to a new era of reformation and liberty that was transpiring. It was also reflected in the spiritual life and growth of the followers of our Lord Jesus. Centuries of bondage, confusion, and decay were being challenged, and a new time of revival and restoration was being made available in the study of the Scriptures.

The expression “I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it” suggests new liberties for thought, and an opportunity to bear witness to the Truth that had previously been denied. (vs. 8) Jesus said, “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.”—vs. 10

The rewards for faithfulness are promised from the storehouse of God's promises. "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name."—vs. 12

SEVENTH MESSAGE

The seventh and last message to the people of God was sent by Jesus who was the "Amen," and who was the "faithful and true witness" of God. He was the "beginning of the creation of God." (vs. 14) He sent it to Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22), which means 'justice for the people.' It marks the Second Presence of our Lord's promised return, and the watchers who were on hand were led by the ministry of Pastor Charles T. Russell. For over a century, the harvest message of Truth has been spread worldwide to countless numbers of the Lord's people during the closing years of this present Gospel Age and its harvest.

The church at Laodicea was chastised for being lukewarm. They were "neither cold nor hot," and believed themselves to be "rich." Neither did they recognize their state of spiritual weaknesses and would be spued out of the Lord's mouth as a consequence. (vss. 15-17) Thus they were admonished to seek after heavenly riches and to anoint their eyes with the wonderful "eyesalve" of God's Word and its unfolding riches. (vs. 18) In connection with our Lord's return they were told, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and

open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”—vs. 20

In each of the seven messages from the Lord to his followers, they were promised a rich reward for their faithfulness. To the church at Laodicea, we read, “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.”—vs. 21

MEAT IN DUE SEASON

The Lord’s ‘knock’ as a part of his message to the Laodicean church is a clear evidence of his presence at the end of this Gospel Age. It aroused his followers to a fresh, new study of the Scriptures, and especially those prophecies pointing to the promised return of our Lord, and the closing features of the Gospel Age call to the church.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus had taught, “Ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.”—Luke 12:36,37

Those of his followers who were watching the prophetic events of the foretold ending of the age, were privileged to be served by our Lord at his table with a bountiful spiritual feast of refreshing Truth. “Every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses

exercised to discern both good and evil.”—Heb. 5:13,14

Those who hunger and thirst after Truth and righteousness will partake of the spiritual food that has been provided. May we all be strengthened and thus renew our vows of consecration, and strive more diligently to make our calling and election sure. Let us praise him for all the way that he has sustained us by his powerful and caring hand. ■