

Think It Not Strange

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”
—I Peter 4:12,13

SUFFERING OF ANY KIND

is foreign to the natural desires of all God’s intelligent creatures, and the human creation is no exception. One of the blessed assurances given us concerning God’s plan for the human race is that eventually “there shall be no more pain.” This will be at the close of Christ’s Millennial kingdom, when sickness, and even death itself, will have been destroyed, and when all things shall have been made new.—Rev. 21:4,5

We are in a suffering and dying world, and the followers of the Master share in the experiences which are common to all. The divine arrangement for them does not call for a release from suffering simply because they are servants of God, although

they are given assurance of strength to bear their afflictions.

Pain itself is difficult enough to endure, but when there is added to physical suffering an uncertainty as to why it is necessary, or what the cause might be, then it becomes even more difficult to bear. This is frequently the case with the people of God. They are visited by afflictions of one sort or another, and they may wonder what they have done to displease the Lord. They search their hearts and lives for the answer, and while they know that they are imperfect, usually they can find no special reason why they should suffer more than others. So their anxiety, and perhaps even fear, increases the burden of their experience.

When we understand clearly the viewpoint which is presented to us in the Word of God, we will have no cause to wonder and worry about our troubles, whether they be sickness or other afflictions. It is this that the Apostle Peter is explaining to us in our text. "Think it not strange," he says, "concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you."

NOT STRANGERS

The Greek word here translated "strange" is one that suggests the relationship between the host and a guest, those not members of the same family. Paul used a similar word in his reference to the experience of Abraham when visited by three angels. Paul wrote, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."—Heb. 13:2

The angels were strangers to Abraham, but he welcomed them as guests and entertained them. As Peter explains, we are not to think of our trials as being foreign to us. We are to take them in, so to speak, as a part of our family of experiences and learn to live with them. To take this viewpoint of our afflictions will help a great deal in becoming reconciled to them and in learning the necessary lessons which they are designed to teach us.

Confirming this viewpoint of our trials is the Greek word used by Peter, and translated “happened” in the expression “as though some strange thing happened unto you.” Its literal meaning is “to walk together.” The thought is that when trials visit us and “walk together” with us we are not to think of them as strangers, but to accept such experiences as though they were our friends or even members of our family.

Peter explains that the reason we should not think of our trials as being strange, or alien to us, is that in experiencing them we are partakers of Christ’s sufferings. As the Greek text indicates, we are partners in Christ’s sufferings. In other words, in our trials we are sharing the common experiences of all whom the Heavenly Father is preparing to share in the glory of the kingdom and to partake of the glory of the divine nature.

Since trials are thus so closely related to our hope of glory, we should not consider them as “strange,” but should welcome them into our lives. We should get acquainted with them and learn well the lessons which they alone, perhaps, are best able to teach. We will discover that if we become reconciled to our trials and consider them as a necessary

part of our family of experiences, they will be as “angels,” imparting much valuable information which we need in order to make our calling and election sure.

NOT AN EVIDENCE OF GOD’S DISFAVOR

A critical point of truth to remember is that trials to the Christian are not an evidence of God’s disfavor, but the reverse. Paul wrote, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” (II Tim. 3:12) We also read that it is through “much tribulation” that we enter the kingdom. (Acts 14:22) Even if some of our trials may be in the nature of discipline, they are still an evidence of God’s love, “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” (Heb. 12:6) “Every son” whom the Heavenly Father receives and loves is subject to training and discipline. Therefore, when trials are permitted for this purpose, we should think of them as evidences of God’s grace, not as being alien or foreign to our needs as New Creatures in Christ Jesus.

Of the nonbelievers, David wrote, “Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.” (Ps. 73:7) This is not necessarily true of all who are not running for the prize of the High Calling of God in Christ Jesus. All are not feasting on fatness. There are many in the world who have severe trials, through poverty, sickness, or in other ways. However, at times a Christian is tempted to compare his lot with a worldly friend or neighbor who is doing well along material lines and perhaps wonder why, as a child of God, he himself is having such a difficult time.

THE DEVIL SEEKS TO DISCOURAGE

It is along this line that our adversary the Devil often tries to discourage us. He endeavors to catch us off guard and inject the thought into our minds that if we were truly the Lord's he would take better care of us. This reasoning might well appeal to our fleshly minds, and we would begin to wonder why matters should not go as favorably with us as with our neighbors.

If we are tempted along this line, we should recall the words of Peter, "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial" with which we are being tried. True, our neighbors may be carefree and prosperous, and we should be glad if they are. They do not possess, however, the glorious hope of joint-heirship with Christ Jesus that stirs our hearts and enriches our lives. Our neighbors may be getting much out of the present life, but we are made rich by the joys of faith. They are to a great extent without God, having no hope in the world. We have the presence and favor of God and a hope "that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven."—I Pet. 1:4

TRIALS COMMON TO ALL

Paul informs us that Christians do not have any temptations or trials except those common to all. (I Cor. 10:13) This is very true. The entire human race is suffering and dying. Because of this, all experience mental and physical suffering. All, sooner or later, sicken and die. There is a common heritage of trial which is experienced in every family, and by every member of the dying race.

Individually, nearly all of us experience intermittent periods of carefree and happy existence, and it

is fortunate that this is so. No one knows when a severe trial will strike. When we give ourselves to the Lord to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we are not translated out of this general situation of the world. Instead, the Lord uses these common experiences of man for the testing of our faith and patience, and for our disciplinary training.

The general "ministry of evil" is being utilized by the Lord for the good of all mankind. With the world in general there is as yet no compensating grace of God to offset the trials. The value of these experiences will not be realized by the world until their day of judgment during the thousand years of Christ's future kingdom.

Our trials as members of the fallen race are neither more nor less severe on the average than those of the world, but we have a wonderful burden-bearer who is ever present to console us and give us strength. The Lord said to Moses, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." (Exod. 33:14) This is no less true of the Lord's consecrated people today. In addition, as Paul reminds us, we have a sympathetic High Priest under whom we serve who was "touched with the feeling of our infirmities."—Heb. 4:15

IN ALL POINTS

Paul also explains that Jesus was tempted in all points "like as we are, yet without sin." (vs. 15) Jesus was not himself a sinner nor did he yield to the temptations which were presented to him by Satan and by the sinful world, nevertheless, he was in this world. He was surrounded by suffering, and he experienced the hardships which are common to

man. Therefore, he knows all about our afflictions and is able to succor us in our trials.

FOR THE TRUTH'S SAKE

The sufferings of Christ in which we are invited to share are, in part, the bitter persecutions which came upon him, and which resulted in his death. He was persecuted because of his faithfulness in proclaiming unpopular truths and in exposing popular errors. We are to follow his example in this. While today the persecuting spirit manifests itself along more refined lines such as ostracism and cold indifference, we will surely feel the opposition of those who sit in darkness if we faithfully let our light shine.

Jesus also suffered weariness of the flesh because of his faithfulness to his vows of consecration. We have the same opportunity. How encouraging it is to realize that today there are still many of the Lord's consecrated people who, in addition to spending necessary time and strength meeting the temporal responsibilities of life, are happy to work "overtime" in the service of the Lord.

When the unconsecrated are through with their necessary daily toil they are free to seek enjoyment or relaxation where it suits them best. The greatest pleasure of the consecrated heart is to seek out ways and means of devoting time and strength directly in the service of the Lord. There are many avenues of service, and the consecrated today are finding these and utilizing their strength as faithfully as possible and in the spirit of rejoicing, just as Jesus did. Oftentimes, perhaps, Jesus would have appreciated the privilege of a little more rest. This is also true of the Lord's people today. However, he

was laying down his life and we are laying down our lives with him; so, we rejoice in our weariness because it is a part of his suffering.

Jesus also suffered sympathetically because of being in the world, though he was not “of” the world and its generally fallen spirit. Being himself perfect, the sinful and imperfect things of the world would be even a greater trial to him. The sickness with which he was surrounded bore down heavily upon his sympathetic shoulders. When Jesus stood by the tomb of Lazarus he wept in sympathy for the family and for the whole dying world.

WE SHOULD ALSO MOURN

We also participate in these sufferings of Christ, although our minds are more or less dulled by inherent imperfections. We cannot enter into the sufferings of mankind with the same degree of sympathy and understanding that Jesus did. However, it was our revolt against sin which led us to the Lord. Having consecrated ourselves to his service, and having received of his Holy Spirit, we are to some extent in the same relative position that Jesus occupied. Thus we share in his sufferings along this line.

Jesus spoke of this, when he said, “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.” (Matt. 5:4) This could be true only of the consecrated who mourn sympathetically for the sorrows of others, as Jesus did. Of Jesus, it is written that he was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.”—Isa. 53:3

Jesus was not grief-stricken because of his own illness, or poverty, or for any of the reasons which ordinarily mar human happiness. Rather, he was

mournful because of the sorrow with which he was surrounded. His weeping at the tomb of Lazarus was an evidence of this, and an indication of the burden of love and sympathy which continually bore down upon his heart.

Are we, from this standpoint, suffering with Jesus? Does a part of our daily trial consist of the fact that we are pained by the sorrow of others? If this be true, we have one of the most outstanding witnesses of the Spirit that we are the children of God. Surely, we should not think such trials strange, but should rejoice indeed if we have this evidence of Christlikeness.

LOVE FOR THE BRETHREN

It was because Jesus loved the world that he suffered with the people. This will be the basis of our sympathy toward the poor groaning creation. This feeling will be even more keenly felt toward our brethren in Christ. Concerning this, Paul wrote, "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind."—Phil. 2:1,2

Just as Jesus passed through experiences similar to those which try us, and is now able to understand and succor us, this should also be true among ourselves. We are all running in the same narrow way of sacrifice. We are all living in the same unfriendly world. We are all subject to the same trials and temptations. Should not our hearts go out to one another in sympathetic understanding and in the spirit of true comfort and helpfulness?

This is the attitude of the truly consecrated. If we do not find such a spirit surging up in our own hearts we may know that we are lacking in true Christian growth. Concerning the brethren in Galatia, Paul wrote, "Ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me." (Gal. 4:15) Paul's eyesight was seriously impaired, and was a great trial to him. Evidently the Galatian brethren realized this, and in their spirit of sympathy made Paul feel that, if it had been possible, they would have given him their eyes.

A SOURCE OF STRENGTH

To realize that our brethren in Christ regard us with genuine sympathy and in the spirit of helpfulness, strengthens us to face the difficulties of the narrow way. John said that we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. This surely involves the outpouring of our love and our sympathy in words and acts of kindness to one another in times of need.—I John 3:16

The very fact that we are laying down our lives as Jesus did should remind us not to think it strange when we are surrounded with hardships and trials. Such experiences provide the flames necessary to consume our sacrifice. The Scriptures admonish that whether we eat, or drink, or whatever we do, all is to be done as unto the Lord. (I Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17) We can also consider all our hardships as indirectly related to our partnership in Christ's suffering. To view our common tasks and our trivial cares from this standpoint will transform them into hallowed experiences. In these we will see the hand of the Lord directing our

destiny and causing all things to work together for our good.

MADE PERFECT

We are told that Jesus was made perfect by the things which he suffered. He was trained for the position which he now occupies as our sympathetic High Priest and as the head of the royal priesthood which later will succor the whole world of mankind. He was tested in all points as a New Creature in the same manner in which we are tested as New Creatures.

During this present Gospel Age, the church is being made perfect, or trained, to be associated with Jesus in dealing with the sin-cursed world. Because we are by nature sinners, it means that "The Christ" will be able to deal sympathetically with the people during the future mediatorial reign.

Since Jesus died in order to provide life, it might be expected that those who accept the provision of his blood would immediately be released from suffering and death. This is not the case. Instead, they are invited to suffer and die with Jesus, sacrificially. So when we suffer, think it not strange. The Lord could deliver us from suffering, but from this experience he wants us to learn the great need of all the human race who are undergoing similar pain. It is our training and the way we are being "made perfect" as a part of the world's sympathetic priesthood.

MANY HARDSHIPS

The hardships of the world are many and varied. Being in the world, we share in all of these. Again, think it not strange, for in the great economy of

God, he is using these distresses to enrich our spiritual life and to prepare us for glory. To the unconsecrated a bitter experience may be tragic. To us it can be an instrument in the Lord's hand to teach us sympathy for the millions who are similarly suffering. Thus it will make us better prepared for our future work as part of the Mediator of the New Covenant.

Those who understand the divine plan of salvation know why God permitted evil. They know that it was because he wanted his human creation to learn valuable lessons from the experience. Do we always stop to think, when we are passing through severe trials which come as a result of the permission of evil, that in our case the Lord is using these experiences in a special way? Do we remember that by them he is training us to be the teachers of the world of mankind, to help them understand the full meaning of the reign of sin and death?

This is the divine purpose of our calling and of permitting us to suffer even as the world suffers. Think it not strange, therefore, that we should find ourselves in a furnace of affliction. Rejoice, rather, that we are a partner in the sufferings of Christ and that our trials are being used for the same purpose as were his.

To keep this thought in mind will help us greatly to bear our trials, but merely to bear them is not enough. The Lord wants us to bear them patiently and, in spite of them, to be rejoicing Christians. This also is possible through faith—faith in the promises of God to strengthen us in our weakness and to guide our otherwise uncertain steps.

HE ALSO SUFFERS

Concerning his typical people, the Lord said that when they were afflicted he also suffered. (Isa. 63:9) Surely this is no less true with us. If our faith can grasp this fact it will help to make every ache and pain—of mind, or heart, or body—a sacred experience of priceless value in preparing us for that high position for which we have been apprehended by God. This will be true regardless of the specific cause of our distresses, for they are all being utilized by the Lord in connection with the trial of our faith.

Think it not strange, then, concerning your fiery trials. Remember that your Heavenly Father knows all about them and, if you will tune your ear to his Word, you will hear him say, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” (II Cor. 12:9) Also, “Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.” (Josh. 1:9) Because the Lord fulfils these and his many other promises in our day-by-day experiences, we can rejoice in him and in the power of his might. Our joy in the Lord will abound and “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” will be our daily and blessed portion.—Phil. 4:7

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”—I Pet. 4:12,13 ■