

Judgment of the House of God

“The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.”
—I Peter 4:17-19

OUR FIRST PARENTS WERE

subjected to a test of obedience to God’s law. When they failed to obey, they were sentenced to death. Judgment came upon father Adam—in Paul’s words, a judgment to condemnation. (Rom. 5:16,18) That period in Eden from the creation of man until his fall and condemnation we might speak of as Adam’s judgment day. It ended in his loss of the right to live. From that time until the First Advent of Jesus, a group, or class, of God’s servants had the privilege of proving their obedience to God. They were judged upon the basis of their

faith, a faith which was demonstrated by works. Paul informs us that they received the testimony

that they pleased God. (Heb. 11:2) Then there will be the coming thousand-year judgment day for the whole world of mankind. Paul spoke of this period of judgment in his sermon on Mars' hill.—Acts 17:31

In our text, Peter speaks of still another day, or period of judgment. It is, he explains, the judgment of the house of God. The house of God is his family of sons. Jesus is the head of this house of sons (Heb. 3:6), and associated with him are his dedicated followers. Beginning with Jesus, this group become sons, or children, of God through the begetting of the Holy Spirit. Those begotten of the Spirit who prove faithful are ultimately born of the Spirit and become divine sons of God. Jesus was the first of these. When the last member of this house of sons has, through Spirit birth, been exalted to the divine nature and associated with Jesus, this “house of the Lord” will be established. Then the peoples of the earth will, through this channel, receive the long-promised blessings of the Messianic kingdom, their judgment period.—Mic. 4:1-4

The entire period of the Gospel Age, during which this house of God is being selected from the world, is one of testing and trial. A final decision, a judgment, is rendered by God with respect to each one composing this group. If the decision is favorable, they will hear, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”—Matt. 25:21,23

Although Jesus was perfect—“holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26)—

nevertheless, it was necessary that he also be tried as to his worthiness of the highly exalted position which had been promised to him in the arrangements of God. He was tempted, or tested, in all things just as we are, “yet without sin.” (Heb. 4:15) On the Mount of Transfiguration, near the close of his ministry, God said of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”—Matt. 17:5

There is no doubt that God was well pleased with Jesus right to the full end of his earthly course. The important question for us is whether or not he is, and will be, well pleased with us. We are now in the testing time to determine whether or not we will prove faithful to the Lord. These tests are severe. Peter states that even the righteous are scarcely saved. The meaning of the word “scarcely” as used in our text is “with difficulty.” This suggests that proving our worthiness is not an easy matter. Those who are aspiring to live and reign with Christ understand how true this is.

THE TEST OF SUFFERING

No one wants to suffer; we all shrink from it. There are many who are unacquainted with the plan of God who feel that as God’s people they should be protected from suffering. When they are not, they become discouraged, and many lose their faith. This should not be so with us. If we do wrong and recognize the discipline of the Lord, we should have no difficulty in accepting it. Peter, however, shows us a higher form of suffering: “It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.” (I Pet. 3:17) Jesus himself suffered and eventually was put to death.

Jesus went about doing good, yet he suffered for it. Indeed, his entire sacrifice, including its consummation on the cross, was in the nature of doing good unto all. Thus it was that, in harmony with the Father's plan, he provided redemption for the entire sin-cursed and dying world of mankind. So far as his earthly life was concerned, the reward was suffering. It is our privilege to follow in his steps, not expecting the praise of men. This is indeed a severe test. It is one of the tests we must victoriously pass in this our judgment day if we are to live and reign with Christ.

When Paul was in prison in Rome, expecting to be executed, he wrote to Timothy, "It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us." (II Tim. 2:11,12) In the preceding chapter of this epistle, Paul mentions many who had turned against him, perhaps because they did not wish to expose themselves to danger from the Roman authorities. On the other hand, he mentions Onesiphorus. Paul explains, "He oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain: But, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me."—chap. 1:15-17

Paul was one of the Lord's little ones, and a failure to stand with him in his hour of trial was like denying the Lord himself. This was a test that came upon many in those days of the Early Church, and some of them failed. Others passed the test, such as Onesiphorus and Timothy. A similar test is upon us today. True, today none of our number is incarcerated, awaiting execution for the promulgation of the Truth. However, the Gospel of Christ, and

those who proclaim it, are still unpopular. Are we gladly taking our position with those who, because they are letting their light shine, are incurring the ill will and ridicule of the world, or do we prefer the friendship of the world, which is enmity toward God?

NOT STRANGE

Again Peter wrote, "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) Note Peter's reference to "the fiery trial which is to try you." The purpose of the trial is to "try" or test us in this our judgment day.

Peter indicates that a successful passing of this trial should be manifested in our rejoicing. We do not rejoice in the trial itself, but our rejoicing is in the fact that we see in this experience evidence that we are associated with Christ in his suffering. To those who understand the plan of God this means that if they continue faithful under trial, faithful even unto death, they will have the privilege of living and reigning with Christ. Truly, this is something in which to rejoice.

If we think it "strange" that a loving God should permit us to suffer, it would reveal a lack of appreciation for his loving providence in our lives, providence which has drawn us to him and given us the desire to devote our lives to him. The remedy for this is study and prayer, to become better acquainted with the divine purpose for the present age. When we do this, we will realize afresh that we have been

called to suffer and to die with the Master. Grasping this point clearly, we will no longer think it strange that we are not shielded from trials.

FAITH ON TRIAL

From I Peter 1:7, we learn that our faith is on trial, and we know that without a steadfast faith we cannot please God. Peter uses a vivid illustration, likening the trial of our faith to the testing of gold in a fire. If our faith passes this fiery test, Peter indicates that we will “be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.” In other words, we will receive the approval of our Lord and be found worthy to be exalted to “glory and honour and immortality.”—Rom. 2:7

The trial of our faith is a test, not only of our intellectual knowledge of divine truth, but also of our heart reliance upon God. In both respects, the true child of God will find himself severely tested. Let us see to it that every item of our faith is supported by a “Thus saith the Lord.” Tradition and speculation do not constitute a firm foundation for our faith. Let us study the precious doctrines of the Truth and obtain a clear understanding of every element of the divine plan. Only thus will we become rooted and grounded in the faith.

We should also continue to develop a heart reliance on the “great and precious promises” of the divine Word. A faith that has stood the tests of fiery ordeal and has come off victorious is very precious in the sight of the Heavenly Father. When we pass through a fiery trial and still retain not only our faith in the doctrines, but also our confidence in God and reliance upon his promises, then our characters

have grown more Christlike. Hence, we are more pleasing to God.

This is one of the objectives of our testing. God has foreordained that everyone who lives and reigns with Christ must be conformed to the image of his Son. Like Jesus, they must be willing and glad to lay down their lives in divine service. Like him, they must be filled with the spirit of love and manifest that love in patiently doing good to others, daily adding to their characters the fruits and graces of the Spirit.

We are not necessarily continuously exposed to fiery trials. There are days of calmness in which we can also grow strong in the Lord. A variety of experiences is needed to fit and prepare us for joint-heirship in the kingdom. The test is to recognize and to rejoice in all the experiences which the Lord permits to come into our consecrated lives as those which are the best for us as New Creatures, and to be thankful for them. Let us then rejoice in the calmer, more peaceful days, and during these periods endeavor to fortify ourselves for the trial times which sooner or later we will experience if the Lord is truly dealing with us.

When the trials come, when we find ourselves again in the furnace being tried as gold is tried in the fire, we will need to be courageous and patient. It will be then that we will need especially to call to mind the promises, and to lay hold upon them with full faith that they belong to us. We will then be able to maintain our heart reliance on the Lord and in his ability to care for us, not casting away our confidence, knowing that it "hath great recompence of reward."—Heb. 10:35

FAITH PRIMARILY TESTED, NOT WORKS

What God is seeking in us is the development and perfection of our faith. He knows, even as we do, that according to the flesh we are frail and imperfect. The flesh will often cry out against the heat of the fiery trials. An unfaltering faith and full heart reliance upon the Lord and his wisdom, justice, love, and power are the important qualities that our Heavenly Father is seeking. Do we trust him fully, and will we continue to so trust him, regardless of the experiences through which he permits us to pass? Job said of God, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." (Job 13:15) That should be our attitude, and must continue to be our attitude.

God primarily tests our faith rather than our works because, as members of the fallen race, it would be impossible for us to consistently perform works pleasing to him. He knows, of course, that if our faith in him and in his ways is strong, we will endeavor the best we can to bring our works into line with his standards of righteousness. For those who are sincere in their effort to do this, he has provided the robe of Christ's righteousness to cover their fleshly imperfections.

We can, however, exercise a triumphant faith. This does not mean necessarily a perfect faith, but rather a faith that will continue to trust God even though we may not always understand the meaning of his providences. Our faith may well be stronger at one time than another, but the victorious follower of the Master, who passes the test of this trial time, will never turn his back on the Lord. He will always trust the God of his

salvation and continue to believe that his ways are best.

Our faith will be in proportion to our knowledge of the divine character. The one who knows God best will trust him most. We learn to know God through his loving plan which is set forth in his Word. If we did not know why God has permitted the long reign of sin and death to blight the happiness of his human creatures we would find it difficult to have faith in him. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God as one who delights in exercising loving-kindness in the earth. If we did not know the great divine plan of the ages, we would be unable to see much evidence of God's loving-kindness.—Jer. 9:24

SATAN'S DEVICES

Just as the Lord permitted Satan to test the faith and obedience of our first parents, so he allows Satan to test his "house" during the present Gospel Age. Satan has succeeded in deceiving the whole world of mankind, with the result that now, in the end of the age, when the kingdom of Christ is soon to be established, there is little faith left in the earth. (Luke 18:8) Almost the entire world has turned away from God, especially the true God of love who is revealed to us in the Bible.

Satan is ever on the alert to turn us away from God by deception, discouragement, and by whatever other means his cunning mind can devise. Those who maintain their faith in God and in the great realities of the divine plan are subjected to tests along other lines. He makes non-fundamental viewpoints seem important, and, when the Lord's

people cannot agree upon these matters, Satan seeks to drive a wedge between them. He suggests to some that they are standing for principles, when as a matter of fact they may be standing merely for a preferred interpretation of non-fundamental details, or perhaps for traditions.

Satan also endeavors to weaken the faith of the Lord's people by causing slanderous attacks to be made against some of the brethren. Sadly, he may even use fellow-members of the prospective body of Christ to spread false rumors against others. This is a disrupting influence in the house of God and is a test upon all who may be involved in it. Under these circumstances, let us remember that it is God who has called his people and provided for their justification through Christ. As long as he is dealing with them, we should love and cherish them as our people. Let us never join hands with Satan as accusers of our brethren whom God has chosen.

PRIDE BEFORE DESTRUCTION

Paul wrote, "I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." (Rom. 12:3) It was Lucifer's pride and ambition that caused him to fall and become Satan, the great adversary of God. There are few of the Lord's people who are not in one way or another subjected to this test. Paul presents this danger as thinking of oneself more highly than one ought to think.

The remedy for this is to "think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of

faith.” Our faith in God and in his plan will cause us to realize that he has not called us unto this holy calling because we were better or more brilliant than others. Therefore, we have no real cause for pride, or for a high estimation of ourselves or our abilities.

Pride is not an easy thing to detect in ourselves. We discover it by noting carefully our attitudes and viewpoints, particularly as they relate to our fellow members in the body of Christ. If we find ourselves habitually criticizing others—if we feel that we could do most things better than other brethren can do them—then we are very likely afflicted with the disease of pride. Likewise, if we surmise that our viewpoints on certain non-fundamental subjects of the Truth are more correct than the viewpoints of others, and if we become irritated when others disagree with us, this also may be a symptom of pride.

A “Thus saith the Lord” should be the end of all controversy, and the source for all our viewpoints of divine truth. If we are proud of heart we may well insist upon those things that the Scriptures either do not support or, in some cases, do not address plainly. When Lucifer became proud he lost his respect for the Lord’s viewpoint, and persisted in following his own desires and inclinations. If we are watchful of our own hearts we will not permit pride to gain such a firm hold as this upon us. Rather, we will purge our hearts from this evil, right from its small beginnings.

One of the tests upon us in this, our day of judgment, is that we be on the alert for the slightest manifestation in our hearts of this great enemy,

pride. Let us remember that “pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.” (Prov. 16:18) Surely we do not want to fall away from the Lord’s favor.

OVERCOMING THE WORLD

Another test upon us is that we overcome the world and its spirit. Jesus said, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) The Lord surely wants us to overcome the world. Selfishness is one of the characteristics of the world, and selfishness manifests itself in many unsightly forms. Let us endeavor diligently to rid our minds and hearts of every selfish ambition, and to be filled instead with the spirit of love, which is the spirit of the Lord. Thus we will be better prepared to pass the test in this time when judgment is upon the house of God.

From whatever standpoint we view this aspect of the present work of the Lord with his people, we realize that we will need to muster all the determination we can. Paul wrote, “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong. Let all your things be done with charity [love].” (I Cor. 16:13,14) If we do this faithfully unto the end of the way, we will pass the test. Thus, by the Lord’s grace, we will qualify for that “great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him.”—Heb. 2:3

THE UNGODLY

The judgment which begins with the house of God is his judgment of the church. As we have noted, Peter indicates the severity of this judgment, that the righteous “scarcely” are saved. Then he asks

the question, "Where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" Peter does not answer this question. However, other texts of scripture do answer it (see earlier reference to Acts 17:31), and the answer is that the whole unconverted world of mankind will appear for trial and judgment in the world's future judgment day of a thousand years.

At that time, those of the house of God who successfully passed the testings of the present judgment period will be associated with Jesus in the work of judging the world of mankind. This great work will be part of their association with him as kings to rule over and bless the people. This is one of the blessed rewards which will come to all the faithful of the present age. May this, and the other joys which are set before us, enable us to be judged faithful as we are now passing through the fiery trials which the Lord in his wisdom sees to be needful for us. When we have fully proven our faith, we will hear his blessed "Well done: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." ■