

Perilous Times

“Then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened.”

—Matthew 24:21,22

THE PRESENT STATE OF

distress in world affairs has convinced many Christians that we are living in the last days as mentioned in the Bible. Consecrated believers eagerly await the reign of righteousness that will end earth’s weary night of sin. (Ps. 30:5) Although many Bible Students anticipated this glorious time of blessing decades ago, the seeming delay has served to be a test of faith. This is in harmony

with the Heavenly Father’s design for us to continue watching, waiting, and praying that daily we may be in accord with his will no matter how long it takes for this order of things to fully end.

In the process of waiting, there are two categories of events that might be useful for our consideration. First, there are those over which we have no control. Second, there are those which impact our spiritual lives directly and, therefore, require an active response on our part in keeping with how we

should order the steps of our Christian walk. In other words, there are current and future events which will impact the world in general, as well as those which will affect our lives quite personally, and to which the Lord will be especially taking note of our individual reactions.

During the first century, Paul wrote about conditions that seem especially pertinent to the day in which we live. “Mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”—II Tim. 3:1-5, *New International Version*

The world is in turmoil, and with each passing year we see changes and new problems, or old ones getting more severe. As watchers we might be inclined to wonder how much worse can things get before divine intervention through God’s kingdom will put a halt to this social order. Here is a partial list of conditions which presently exist either in America, or throughout the world, that fall into this category which we are powerless to change.

Some of these conditions include governmental corruption; moral bankruptcy; global economic turmoil; terrorist activity; trading in drugs; invasion of privacy through technology; availability of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of destruction; violence; wars; murders; suicides; religious and

racial hatred; satanic cults and worship; the Aids disease; a general lack of civility and respect; extreme weather disturbances, including earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes; child abuse; a decline in formal religious worship; pollution of the environment; the spread of new age philosophies; starvation; increasing worldwide population; and continued Middle East instability and conflict, which will only be resolved in God's due time.

There are, of course, many more items that could be added to the above. Although we are anxious for this night of sin and evil to end, we are to bear in mind that we have no control over these matters. Rather, we need to demonstrate faithful endurance in carrying out our vows of consecration, even while living in the midst of such severe trouble. The psalmist provides a helpful admonition to meditate upon in this connection: "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."—Ps. 27:14

In view of the foregoing, let us consider some of the circumstances that particularly affect the body of Christ—the second category of experiences noted previously—and which more directly impact our spiritual lives. Many of these have already commenced, and as we approach the final experiences of the last members of the church, there probably will be an intensification of perils to face and overcome if we are to make our calling and election sure. Five such areas to be addressed include: ecclesia size; family and marriage concerns; sacrifice; relevancy of Bible Student teachings; and spiritual powers of wickedness.

ECCLESIA SIZE

In most locations, ecclesias have become smaller. This is likely to continue because many of the Lord's people are completing their earthly sojourn. In other cases, brethren are aging and unable to meet. Some here and there may hold different views on various Scriptures from what they once believed, and therefore go elsewhere to obtain spiritual fellowship. Finally, fewer individuals are being attracted to the heavenly calling in many parts of the world. Will brethren cease to meet if the ecclesia gets too small? From a practical standpoint, it may no longer be feasible to rent a meeting hall. Thus, the consecrated may be tested as to whether they still hold to the promise that where two or three are gathered together in his name, the Lord will be in the midst to bless them. (Matt. 18:20) This may result in more use of homes for Sunday meetings, which many classes already do. In other cases, brethren of different ecclesias who are in close proximity to each other may initiate some joint fellowship which may ultimately result in coming together as one new class.

There also are online and telephone meetings, which enable brethren to fellowship together even though they may live a great distance from each other, and sometimes even in different countries. As world conditions worsen, however, will brethren become tempted not to meet together because of concerns for physical safety? Even today, many brethren, especially some of the elderly, may feel more comfortable attending a meeting during the daytime rather than going out at night, and if they all are retired, this might work out very nicely for them.

If increased persecution of the Lord's people becomes a greater reality in the future, how will brethren react? Many ecclesias have active witness projects, and their addresses and names can easily be found. Bible Student groups can be found on the Internet, and many of their publications sent throughout the world are accessible to all kinds of people. Broadcasts on radio and television by the Lord's people are commonplace. Consider the difficulties that brethren have from time to time in finding suitable locations for holding conventions, because of doctrine that may be at variance with other established beliefs. If the powers that be wish to locate the brethren, that will not be difficult in this day of widespread surveillance. Suppose the authorities forbade our assemblage together, what would brethren do?

It is not our purpose to say what might be the proper course to take under such circumstances. However, the Early Church also faced issues when the authorities in power attempted to thwart the spread of Christianity. These believers' attitude was that they would obey God rather than man. In view of their attitude, let nothing deter us today from fulfilling our responsibilities to edify and build one another up in the most holy faith, despite the shrinking nature of our ecclesias as the church is diminishing on this side of the veil. "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."—Heb. 10:24,25

FAMILY AND MARRIAGE CONCERNS

The responsibilities involved in raising children in an increasingly godless world will continue to be a matter of deep concern for the consecrated who have chosen to have a family. Challenges for Christian parents in meeting the moral, physical, mental, and emotional needs of their young people will be increasingly more complex.

How will children be guided with regard to the media's influence presented in newspapers, magazines, ads, movies, television, music, videos, the Internet, and other electronic media? How will time be apportioned for school responsibilities, sports, extracurricular activities, clubs, and most importantly, religious training? How will moral standards of conduct be addressed with regard to choice of friendships, wearing apparel, keeping up with one's peers, and responsible use of leisure time? Parents are children's first and most important teachers, and while it is an important responsibility of parents to impart Christian values and righteous conduct to their offspring, there is great truth in the axiom, "Actions speak louder than words."

As a rule, children reflect the life and principles which they see manifested in their parents. They are also anxious to please. Even as they grow into young adulthood and feel the influence of peer pressure, if parents are consistent, loving, and patient, yet firm, children generally will not stray far from their godly upbringing. It has been repeatedly suggested that one of the reasons children, in many cases, appear to be so irreverent and disobedient, is because the behavior of adult models in their own family is being imitated. Let it not be so

among the Lord's people. May we all remember the great importance of using the Scriptures as a guide for parental conduct as a means of modeling reverence, so that children may emulate righteous behavior.—Zeph. 2:3

At the other end of the spectrum, concern for aging parents is not limited to those in the world, but often there is a need for caregiving for the elderly or infirmed among the Lord's people. Whatever the living arrangements, adult offspring frequently must be involved in providing emotional and/or physical support to a mother, father, or other family member. If they are consecrated believers, their spiritual needs also must be supplied. Given the increasing complexity of today's world, whether brethren have dependent children or aged parents, meeting such needs is quite time consuming and often emotionally draining. A great challenge in this regard is finding the proper balance between helping to meet the needs of others while at the same time not neglecting one's own personal spiritual obligations to the Lord in fulfillment of our consecration vows.

Concerning marriage, the decision to marry or not marry is a personal one. Notwithstanding the satisfaction and mutual joy which occurs when serving the Lord with a mate, some of the Lord's dear ones may come to the conclusion that for them, it would be to their best advantage in serving the Lord to maintain themselves in the single state. (I Cor. 7:24-38) Each individual believer, however, should seek to determine the Lord's will with regard to the advisability of entering into marriage. The matter should be committed to the

Heavenly Father in prayer, and should also include meditating upon the scriptural testimony concerning marriage, observing and seeking counsel from brethren who have chosen to marry, and then carefully considering God's overruling providence. After doing these things, if one's consecrated judgment seems to indicate it would be a blessing and a spiritual enhancement to continue serving the Lord within the bonds of matrimony, additional factors, including spiritual compatibility, should be considered in selecting a mate with whom to spend the remainder of one's consecrated life.

New Creatures are to be separate from the aims, ambitions, and spirit of the world, as well as the erroneous doctrines and practices generally associated with those who are merely "nominal" believers. This point is amplified by the words of Paul: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord." (II Cor. 6:17) The Old Testament also explicitly reveals God's will on the subject of marriage concerning natural Israel. (Deut. 7:3,4) Such instructions from the Scriptures, and the underlying principles they contain, should surely be of great importance for consideration by Christian believers.

SACRIFICE

In a society such as ours where we are inundated with advertising about various creature comforts, the word "sacrifice" may not have much real meaning. However, as followers of Christ and engaging in self-denial, we should be very wary about the accumulation of personal possessions or cultivating earthly interests at the expense of the New Creature.

Many of the Lord's people have family obligations. These cannot be sacrificed legitimately, according to the clear statements of Scripture. With regard to our own personal time and needs, however, if done in a proper spirit, the Lord would be pleased to accept such sacrifices as a demonstration of our love for him. (Rom. 13:14) Additionally, we are admonished to "seek . . . first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness," and that the Lord will provide things needful for us according to his will. (Matt. 6:33) In these matters, we must be very careful not to develop a spirit of covetousness or idolatry.

High on the list of potential idols in our lives could be a desire for wealth, or the things which money can buy. The Master speaks about the "deceitfulness of riches" (Matt.13:22), and we are told elsewhere in the Scriptures that the love of money is the root of all evil. (I Tim. 6:10) Nevertheless, the temptation to acquire wealth is subtle, and needs to be thwarted if we are truly committed to the Lord. This is not to say that the mere possession of means would cause consecrated believers to stumble, especially if it is dedicated to God's service. However, if we are motivated with a desire to increase our goods for the sake of self-gratification, then surely such should be a red flag, signaling danger.

Some questions might be posed concerning certain issues which may affect the consecrated in America who have not yet reached retirement age. Will there be Social Security in place if I live to retirement age? Should I invest heavily in the stock market to provide for my future, since pension plans are being scaled back? How much do I need to put away to reasonably insure that I have health

benefits to help cover illnesses? Does it mean I am lacking in faith if I concern myself about these matters? The Lord's people may well be impacted by many of these issues to an even greater degree in the future. In hearing about brethren in other parts of the world where, of necessity, sacrifice seems to be a way of life, what an example these dear ones have furnished as an aid to strengthening our own resolve to be faithful—here in a land of comparative plenty—as we look to a possible future of increased hardship and financial uncertainty.

RELEVANCY OF BIBLE STUDENT TEACHINGS

A century ago, Bible Students lived in a state of expectancy that the fulfillment of the prayer, "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven," was imminent. Despite the disappointment of having the expected kingdom's establishment delayed, a majority of the Lord's people have continued to hold fast to the prophetic understanding that we are living in the day of our Lord's Second Presence, and still strive to be faithful unto death. Such continue to appreciate the relevancy of the Scriptures which give us, as watchers, an indication as to where we are on the stream of time. "Beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent

heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness.”—II Pet. 3:8-11

Another prophetic marker in the Old Testament also reminds us of the very times in which we live. By reflecting upon its import, we may be strengthened in our resolve to press on with diligence in our service to God, rather than to become discouraged if some earlier expectations may not have materialized at the time we might have assumed. “I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower, and look forth to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint. And the Lord answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.’”—Hab. 2:1-3, *Revised Standard Version*

Additionally, other fulfilled prophecies, such as the return of Israel to her homeland, are supportive of the fact that we are living in the day of the Lord. The fact that everything has not proceeded in line with some of our expectations was foretold in the Scriptures, the foregoing being one example. From God’s standpoint, however, all things are progressing exactly as he has planned. Perhaps the real challenge in the future for those who continue to believe the message associated with Bible Student teachings is to press on and live their consecration with a state of expectancy, a sense of urgency, and not to be weary in well doing; but “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. 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. 10:32-36

SPIRITUAL POWERS OF WICKEDNESS

Another concern in these perilous times is the tremendous amount of literature concerning Biblical interpretation that is available from many sources. As more and more materials are published by those in various religious denominations, we should make very judicious use of these. This is especially true since many of their views would be inconsistent with Biblical teaching regarding such matters as: Christ died for all mankind; there is no trinity of co-equal gods; the dead know nothing; and man does not have an immortal soul. “Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord’s table, and of the table of devils.” (I Cor. 10:21) Surely, no matter how much further the footstep followers of Christ must journey into the future, imbibing the pure food from the Lord’s table, coupled with a determined prayerful attitude, will be essential ingredients towards overcoming the wiles of the Adversary and his minions.

It also appears that Satan and his hosts are especially active in attempting to deceive the Lord's people through artifices along various lines, including faith healing, spiritism, or even by participating in a "social gospel" of engaging in causes to help the downtrodden, or those with chronic illnesses. Included in this might also be efforts to make this world a better place by volunteering to assist those with special needs, and surely there are many individuals who could temporarily benefit if we would devote large portions of our discretionary time to any number of noble causes. Yet, we must remember that the ultimate—and only—solution for all humanity's problems will be the kingdom of God. It should be noted that it is a scriptural principle for Christians to do good to all as we have opportunity, but primarily our focus should be on the "household of faith" and their spiritual interests.—Gal. 6:10

One of the possible means by which the Adversary and his cohorts might seek to ensnare the consecrated relates to the issue of health. All mankind can attest that physical and mental deterioration are very much a part of life, and the desire for optimal well-being is a very natural desire. We seek medical advice and treatment for a variety of ailments, but because of the death sentence passed upon Adam, all his progeny eventually die. Paul spoke about his "thorn in the flesh" (II Cor. 12:7-9), only to learn that it was not God's will for him to be relieved from it, but instead, sufficient grace would be provided that would enable him to bear this adversity.

When we suffer some type of pain or illness, and cannot obtain relief from traditional medical

practitioners, we may be encouraged to try some alternative form of treatment. Although many of these may be deemed acceptable to the Lord's people, others seem to violate the spirit of a sound mind, in that they rely on practices that contradict our understanding of the Scriptures. One such example is Reiki. Practitioners of this mode of therapy indicate it will enhance relaxation, reduce stress, and promote healing. It is administered by "laying on hands," and asserts that an unseen "life force energy" flows through us, which is what gives us life and relative health. Furthermore, if the "life force energy" is low, so it is claimed, then we are more likely to get sick whereas, if it is high, we will likely be more healthy. If such a temptation should come to any of us to try this, or some other similar approach to improve our health, in contradiction of scriptural principles, we would be well-advised to follow the wisdom contained in the Bible. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."—James 4:7

In our consideration of the perilous times in which we live, we should be ever mindful that God's kingdom will create a new world order. If faithful, we will have the privilege of helping to share in the blessings that will accrue to the human family at that time. It is apparent also that Satan is eager for his present reign as the "god of this world" to continue and, therefore, will seek to use his influence to prevent us from making our calling and election sure.

May we continue to employ those principles of godliness, prayer, study, fellowship, obedience to the Word of God, and the cultivation of the graces

of the Spirit, so as to be faithful footstep followers of the Master. “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”—II Pet 1:10,11 ■

*“Keep the form of those true words
which you had from me, in faith and love
which is in Christ Jesus.*

*That good thing which was given to you
keep safe, through the Holy Spirit
which is in us.”*

*—II Timothy 1:13,14
Bible in Basic English*