

Cleansing— Inward and Outward

“Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”
—II Corinthians 7:1

OUR OPENING TEXT IS part of Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth. During the present age, there is a test of faith for this special class whom the Lord is selecting and whom he designates as his “church.” (Eph. 5:23-32) God purposes to deal with the remainder of mankind in the age to come, when all his requirements will be made plain to everyone, and all people will have the opportunity to walk in the “way of holiness.”—Isa. 11:9; 35:8,9; Jer. 31:34

As Christians, presently walking in the “narrow way” of sacrifice and service, it is not enough that we merely have faith in Christ’s death as the redemptive price for the sins of the world. (Matt. 7:14; John 1:29) In addition, numerous scriptures

indicate that a love for “righteousness” is made a part of our testing.—Matt. 5:6,10,20; 6:33; Rom. 6:13-19; Phil. 1:11

LOVE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The heart that loves righteousness discerns the weaknesses and downward tendencies of its own flesh. Those having such a heart recognize their need for Jesus as their Redeemer. They flee to him, not only to be covered with his merit as respects the sins of the past, but also to have the imputed covering of his righteousness for the unwilling blemishes and imperfections of the present and future—imperfections which are contrary to one’s will and the result of inherited weakness.—I John 1:7-10

Those not in harmony with the sin of the world, nor with their own weaknesses, are those to whom our Lord referred when he said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,”—that is, who recognize their bondage under the yoke of sin —“and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me.” (Matt. 11:28,29) These learners, pupils in the school of Christ, are the class to whom the words of our opening verse are addressed.

The standard for acceptance by God is faith and obedience of heart. Those whose hearts, minds, and wills turn away from sin and by faith accept the divine arrangement, the Lord is pleased to receive according to their righteous intentions, and not according to their flesh and its unintentional blemishes. Their unwilling defects according to the flesh are veiled from his sight by Christ’s “robe of righteousness,” covering them, while their new mind,

despising sin, seeks to war a good warfare against it in their flesh. (Isa. 61:10; Rom. 7:18-25) Such is the class addressed by the apostle in our text, saying, "Dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit."

As a mouthpiece of the Lord, the apostle addresses all believers who have fled away from sin and who are striving to be pleasing and acceptable to God, as "dearly beloved." Paul, a noble-minded man himself, appreciated the fact that many of these beloved brethren had weaknesses and imperfections in their flesh. He did not love them on account of these blemishes, but in spite of them. He recognized that at heart they were loyal to the principles of righteousness and striving to overcome sin and its inclinations in their own mortal flesh.

NECESSITY FOR CLEANSING

Why does the apostle suggest that all the prospective members of the church should do a cleansing work in their hearts and flesh, when God has wholly covered these blemishes from his sight? (Rom. 3:20-26) Actually, there are many good reasons.

Those who, at heart, are loyal to the Lord and his righteousness are distressed by the blemishes, sins, and weaknesses they find in their flesh, even though they are aware that God has graciously covered all these and is not imputing guilt to them. (Rom. 4:3-10,13-25) Because they are opposed to sin, the desire of this class is to build and establish their character by faithfulness to principles of righteousness. They wish that their minds may be ruled more and more by faithfulness to the Lord and that, so far as possible, their new mind shall

control their fallen, imperfect flesh and bring it into subjection, in accord with the divine law of love.—I Cor. 9:27

Whoever, after having experienced the Lord's blessing of forgiveness, has no desire to war a warfare against sin, and to bring under the control of their new mind the powers and talents of their mortal body, has not the true spirit of sonship. Such would be giving evidence that they do not genuinely love righteousness and do not truly hate iniquity. Hence, they would be testifying that they are not of the class whom God desires as members of his divine family.

Thus, we see good reasons why all begotten by the same Spirit of holiness should give heed to the apostle's words and make the cleansing of the flesh and spirit the principal work of the remainder of life. If we do not do this, then we will contradict our claims of having love for righteousness and hatred of iniquity.—Heb. 1:9

By such a fight against the weaknesses of our flesh and spirit, the Lord arranges that we are enabled to establish a crystallized character. The Apostle states, "Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light." (Col. 1:12, *New King James Version*) If faithful in this fight until death, such will then be qualified for future service in the Messianic kingdom. They will have demonstrated that, at heart, they have the character-likeness of their Lord and Redeemer. Only those who develop into copies of God's dear Son will constitute this special class, through whom the world will shortly receive its blessings.

CLEANSING OURSELVES

The words, "Let us cleanse ourselves," do not have reference to our getting rid of Adamic condemnation. Such cleansing from original sin is impossible on our part, as the Apostle elsewhere explains. (Rom. 5:15-18) After having been reckonedly cleansed by the Lord and brought under the influence of his Holy Spirit and the enlightenment of his Word, we are to "cleanse ourselves" in the sense that we are then invited to show our zeal for righteousness. While Adamic condemnation is counted as having passed from us, we still have the opportunity of showing the Lord what our spirit and intention is by striving against sin in our thoughts, words and actions.

At first, many of us likely did not discern how deeply defiled we are and how nearly all the suggestions of our mind are based upon selfishness, to one degree or another. Perhaps we did not even recognize selfishness as being a sin. However, as the eyes of our understanding opened more widely, we gained a better view of the Lord and his righteousness, as well as of our own fallen condition and our need of his covering robe. As a result, we become more painfully aware of how deep the stain of sin in us is.

Many of the Lord's people, after years of labor in seeking to cleanse themselves from the defilements of sin, see their own blemishes even more keenly than they discerned them at first, though they have likely gotten rid of much in the way of sinful tendencies and habits. Such greater awareness might make the work of cleansing seem discouraging to us, if it were not for the assurance of the

Lord's Word that he regards us, not according to the flesh, but according to our intentions, desires and endeavors.—I Sam. 16:7; Ps. 103:8-14

OUTWARD AND INWARD CLEANSING

The Apostle Paul mentions both the cleansing of the flesh and that of the spirit. After we have accepted the Lord, we take our stand with him as the Captain of our Salvation, who helps us in the fight against sin and all the works of our flesh. Before long, in the case of many, a considerable outward change is manifested. Careless language is avoided, passions are restrained, and selfishness is curbed, at least in its outward manifestations.

This is good, but it is not sufficient that we merely avoid outward wrongdoing. We must also cleanse our mind. We must learn to hate sin and to repel its first advances. We must learn that our minds and bodies are the temples of God and that everything contrary to his laws of righteousness and love must be barred.—I Cor. 3:16,17

Others may witness, to a certain extent, our trials and triumphs of an outward kind. However, our most important battle is the one known only to ourselves and to the Heavenly Father—the battle of our new mind and will against the influences of our old, fallen disposition. The true soldiers of the cross will find this battleground quite sufficient to engage all of their combativeness and keep them fully occupied. Such ones, on the alert to develop their character, will no longer want to spend their consecrated time criticizing neighbors, friends or brethren. They will find enough in themselves requiring vigilance and restraint.

On the contrary, as they progress in this direction, they become more sympathetic toward others who similarly have weaknesses and inclinations contrary to the divine standard. They sympathize especially with their brethren, who likewise have given their all to the Lord and are also battling against the world, the flesh, and the Adversary.

A GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION

Those who have already come into relationship with the Father as children should remember that God's promises are that we shall be more and more received into his fellowship in proportion as we are loyal to his principles. If we have turned away from the world and from sin and find that we have certain contaminations in our flesh, we should seek to put all these away. The more we energize ourselves in this direction, the more we will be pleasing and acceptable in his sight.

The word "spirit" is frequently used in the Scriptures to represent the mind or the will. The Lord's children have this new will, this new treasure, in an "earthen vessel." (II Cor. 4:7) We have a natural, fallen disposition that tends toward sin. Additionally, we have minds that, even though striving to put away the things of sin, have more or less of a recollection of these. Thus, while we draw ourselves away from that which is sinful, we must strive also to purify our minds. (I John 3:2,3) We are to "put off" everything in us that is sympathetic with sin. We are not to think on those things, nor are we to permit ourselves to ponder anything sinful. Instead, we are to set our minds, our "affection," on things above.—Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:2-10

The Apostle admonishes, “Be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds.” (Rom. 12:2) Our minds are not only to be turned away from sin, but are to be renewed, or turned in a new direction, and filled with holy thoughts. Thus, we are enabled, as Paul continues, to examine and “prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

OUR CLEANSING AND GOD’S CLEANSING

The cleansing of ourselves includes examining to see whether there is anything in us that is impure and putting those things away from our conduct, and still more importantly, putting it away from our minds. As we do this, holiness spreads through all the avenues of life. If, as Christians, such is taking place, it shows that we are properly attending to the matter of our cleansing. Therefore, let us daily give attention to purification in our outward relationship to mankind, and, inwardly, in our relationship toward God.

A scripture which speaks of God as participating in this cleansing work is found in the Psalms. “Cleanse thou me from secret faults.” (Ps. 19:12-14) These words of the Prophet David are the sentiment of all of the Lord’s true people. David showed his recognition of the fact that he was not capable of cleansing himself without God’s help. He saw that he might even have “secret faults” which he did not recognize. He desired God to cleanse him from these, thus indicating his desire to get away from everything that was not in harmony with righteousness.

This is the proper sentiment for all Christians. We should pray that God would show us whatever in

our lives is not fully pleasing and acceptable to him, and that he would help us to see ourselves as he sees us.

PERFECTING HOLINESS

Our opening scripture declares that such a purification of flesh and spirit, body and mind, constitutes a “perfecting” of “holiness.” Holiness cannot be attained in a moment, but rather it must be gradually developed. A right view of this matter will hinder us from falling into dangerous thinking. Holiness is not a charm which we may put in our pockets, nor a garment which may be worn occasionally.

Holiness resembles more the tempering of a piece of metal. It enters into our entire character, changing its general characteristics. It is transforming in its influence. Indeed, there is a “robe of righteousness” which is reckoned to the Lord’s people, granted to us when first we turned from sin, accepted the Redeemer, and consecrated ourselves to God; but this is just the beginning. We must work into our characters that which we have willed. As the Apostle expresses it, we must allow the Lord to work in us his holy will, so that holy conduct is brought to pass as opportunity and conditions are overruled by our Heavenly Father.

“THESE PROMISES”

Examining the context to see what “these promises” are which Paul refers to in our text, we find in the preceding verses this declaration. “Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye

shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”—II Cor. 6:17,18

What a marvelous promise that we, by nature defiled and imperfect, should not only have the notice of our almighty Creator, but also be invited to become his “sons and daughters.” We are assured of his parental affection for us, “like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear [Hebrew: reverence] him.”—Ps. 103:13

Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul declares that this is not the end of the matter, but merely the beginning. He states, “If children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.” This is the thought implied in the terms “sons of God” and “children” of God—Rom. 8:14-17

The special blessings and riches of the Father are to be extended through our Lord Jesus, to the “little flock” which is now being selected from amongst mankind to be his “bride” and associates in the kingdom. (Luke 12:32; II Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2,9) The Apostle John writes, “Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be.” If we are faithful, however, John continues, saying, “We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”—I John 3:2

“ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD”

Paul writes, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren.”

(Rom. 8:28,29) Here we are assured of God's supervision, that not the slightest thing can happen to those who have accepted the heavenly calling now, except what he sees would be for our eternal welfare.

However, we must show our love, devotion, and oneness of spirit with the Father and the Redeemer before we can be counted in as his bride in the full, complete sense, and be granted a share in his glory. It is to demonstrate the possession of these graces that the consecrated ones are developed in the midst of evil and unfavorable surroundings, to prove their love of righteousness, their opposition to iniquity, and their love for God and faithfulness to him. (I Pet. 2:19-23) If they stand these tests faithfully, it will mean that they will have to endure considerable opposition from the world, the flesh and the Adversary, but they will be correspondingly strengthened by these experiences.

To this class Paul writes, "If we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him." (II Tim. 2:11,12) We are to suffer as Jesus did, for right doing even when others are blind as to what is the right, proper course. We are to suffer joyfully whatever cup the Father may pour for us, knowing that he is too good to be unkind and too wise to err.

Let us then, dearly beloved, cleanse ourselves from all outward and inward defilements, and continue to strive to perfect, or complete, holiness in the reverence of the Lord. As Peter declares, "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