

The Year Before Us

*“When these things
are beginning
to occur, raise
yourselves, and lift
up your heads; for
your deliverance is
drawing near.
Thus, ... know that
the kingdom of
God is near.”*

*—Luke 21:28,31,
The Emphatic
Diaglott*

ANOTHER YEAR HAS passed and 2023 is here. The world’s outlook for the year is uncertain and foreboding. During 2022 the distress among nations, instead of diminishing, increased, as throughout the year the enfolding flames of political, social, religious and economic trouble continued to spread among

people and nations.

These sobering words of the prophet come to mind: “Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Behold, evil shall go forth from nation to nation, and a great whirlwind shall be raised up from the coasts of the earth.” (Jer. 25:32) Whatever this enlarging sphere of trouble will mean by the end of 2023, no one knows. While this lack of knowledge causes the world to look to the incoming year with fear, the Lord’s dedicated people, knowing what the final

outcome will be, are able to face impending events with confidence and peace of heart.

Never before have the words of the Master found in our opening text had a greater significance. Many things foretold by the prophets are transpiring before our eyes, and their effect upon us, instead of being that of discouragement and bewilderment, should be to encourage and cheer. This does not mean that we are happy because the world is suffering. We are happy, rather, that all the world's present troubles and sorrow will soon give place to peace and everlasting joy. Jesus said that we should lift up our heads because our "deliverance is drawing near," and "the kingdom of God" is nigh at hand.

Understanding the plan of God, we know that when the church is delivered and glorified, the blessings of the world will follow. Thus our rejoicing is not only on behalf of ourselves, but for all mankind as well. For this reason, all the increasing evidence that the manifestation of God's kingdom, under the rulership of Christ, is near at hand is cause for Christian joy. Therefore, at the beginning of this, another year, as we view these things with increasing clarity, our hope should be bright. Indeed, our "rejoicing in hope" should be so real and whole-hearted that it will radiate comfort and cheer to all with whom we come in contact.—Rom. 12:12

PREPARATION NECESSARY

To be reminded of the blessed fact that our deliverance is drawing near should also impress upon our minds and hearts the necessity of being prepared for that grand consummation of our hope. This means that we should more than ever be on the

alert to properly use every means of grace which the Lord has provided to enable us to be properly developed in Christian character. More than ever, also, we should be “redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:16) Because of the increasing strain upon life due to world conditions that are becoming more ominous and distressing, the Christian is sure to find that during 2023 it will be more difficult than ever to concentrate on the things which have real spiritual value.

Thus, all the consecrated will need courage and determination, not that which is begotten of self-assurance or worldly wisdom; but rather, a courage and determination which find their roots in the sure promises of the Scriptures. These assurances tell us that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Ps. 46:1-5) No matter to what extent the trouble may increase, our God will still be a very present help, an ally possessing infinite wisdom and strength by which he is able to protect us and overrule for our every need.

As dedicated followers of the Master we must remember, however, that our needs are primarily spiritual, not material. God will care for our material needs in a manner that will serve our spiritual interests the best. This might not always mean earthly comfort and health. The Lord’s wisdom may see that our spiritual necessities will be best served by permitting us to feel the pinch of earthly needs along one line or another. He may permit physical suffering or material poverty in some measure, in order that we, like Jesus, may be touched more fully with a feeling of the world’s infirmities, and thus be better prepared to assist in

administering the Messianic blessings of the incoming age.—Heb. 4:15

God has not promised to prevent trouble from coming upon us, but he has promised to be a “present help in trouble.” Jehovah permitted the three Hebrews to be put into the fiery furnace, but an angel, one “like a son of the gods,” went in with them and prevented their destruction. (Dan. 3:25, *Revised Version*) Perhaps many of us will be permitted to go through fiery furnace experiences of one kind or another during 2023, but we will be able to go through them unscathed, spiritually, if we put our trust fully in the Lord. Indeed, he will be with us, and will not permit the “fiery trials” to injure or destroy us spiritually.—I Pet. 1:7

ACCORDING TO OUR FAITH

Faith is required in order to lay hold upon the exceeding great and precious promises of God. The degree of faith we are able to exercise will be the measure of our peace of heart and joy in the Lord. If our faith in the divine arrangements and in God’s care for us is not as strong as it should be, then we will, to some extent, be harassed by the same fears as the world has. If our faith is strong, however, then the very conditions which cause the hearts of the world in general to be filled with fear will prompt us to look up and “lift up” our heads, and, as faithful watchers, discern with ever increasing clarity the onward march of the “King of kings, and Lord of lords.”—Rev. 19:16

Faith is scarce in the world today. The Master inquired, “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8) We are now

living, we believe, in the time of the Lord's second presence, and as we look about us and note how little genuine faith there is, even among professed Christians, we realize how accurately Jesus foresaw and foretold the conditions of our day. Real faith in God and in his Word has been on the wane for many decades, and the distress and troubles rampant in practically all the nations of earth has accelerated this drift towards unbelief.

The reason many have lost their faith due to world developments is because they have had a misunderstanding of God's plan. Many have thought that the world was supposed to get better and better, and that Christianity, as they knew it, was supposed to triumph throughout all the earth. They cannot reconcile that view with what they see taking place, so their faith is weakened. However, those who know God's plan are affected in a reverse manner. These know that what is taking place has been foretold in the prophecies. They understand that the glorious triumph of Christianity lies beyond this present period of trouble. They know, too, that this age was not the time appointed for converting the whole world, but merely for selecting and preparing the true church to live and reign with Christ in the Messianic kingdom, now so near.—II Tim. 2:11,12; Rev. 20:6

It is upon the basis of knowledge that the Lord's consecrated people today are able to view the scenes of darkness around them. They do not see these as representing the defeat of Christianity, but as a token that through the Messianic kingdom soon to be established the whole world will then be at peace, and enjoying health, happiness, and everlasting

life. (Isa. 25:6-9; Rev. 21:1-5) Shall we not, then, rejoice in this knowledge of the divine purpose? Shall we not do all in our power to show our appreciation to God for the fact that he has taken us into his confidence and revealed to us some of the features of his plan? If we do not properly appreciate this knowledge, we will risk losing it.

The faith that gives us peace and joy amidst confusion and trouble, is based upon our knowledge. This means then that when we, like the disciples of old, ask the Lord to increase our faith, we will be diligent in the study of his Word in order that our understanding of his will and plan may be increased. We do not, of course, yet understand every detail of the prophecies, nor exactly how the various phases of the present period of trouble are to develop. If we mistakenly assume that we do, and then the details do not work out as we expect, this places a strain upon our faith. However, if we continue to faithfully watch the prophecies, and the manner in which they are being fulfilled, then we will be able to discern the general trends of their accomplishment, and our faith will be made increasingly strong.

HUMBLE STUDENTS

For this reason, we may look ahead into the New Year resolved that we will be more humble and careful students of the Word than ever before. Indeed, we should strive to be faithful watchmen, not slumbering and indifferent. Furthermore, we should especially strive to be humble watchers, realizing that we cannot be truly wise above that which is written and revealed. We may think we know a lot

of things, and yet, from time to time, are brought face to face with circumstances and events which, if we are prepared to learn the lesson, will teach us that we perhaps do not know as much as we may have thought.

Surely, we can know nothing at all about God's plan except as he reveals it to us through his Word. Through the Bible he has made known the great principles of his plan to us, and we should rejoice in that knowledge. How precious is the understanding that the kingdoms of this world will soon be set aside, to be replaced by the glorious kingdom of Christ. (Heb. 12:28) Let us treasure this appreciation and hold earnestly to it. Let us also, however, be watchful lest this God-given knowledge of the divine plan give us an exalted opinion of our own wisdom and ability to interpret the prophecies and to tell, in advance, the details of what is to occur. Let us not strive to be prophets, but rather students of prophecy.

“YE HAVE NEED OF PATIENCE”

Although we have courage and faith, based upon a knowledge of God's plan, we will also need patience as we encounter the divinely permitted experiences of 2023. We will need patience both from the standpoint of cheerful endurance of trials, and also from the standpoint of waiting upon the Lord. We are in the world, and though not partaking of its spirit, we will share the sufferings and hardships that are common to all. This will call for cheerful endurance in order that we may not be embittered and begin to doubt the Lord's loving providences directing our affairs.

The mental strain and general distress that are upon the earth today increase the tension under which we all live and call for a large measure of cheerful endurance. This strain may even be apparent in our association with the brethren. Here, too, we will need patience and longsuffering based upon a sympathetic understanding of each other's experiences and trials.—Rom. 12:10; Eph. 4:2,3

“One day is with the Lord as a thousand years,” and “a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.” (II Pet. 3:8; Ps. 90:4) Our concept of time, however, is often different. We are prone to measure the development of God's plan from the standpoint of our own short span of natural life. Hence, we may find it hard to wait on the Lord's time for the fulfillment of his promises. When we see the storm clouds gather and the tempest already breaking in fury over the earth, we cry out, “How long, O Lord, how long” must these conditions continue? We wish they could be all over in a short time, and the kingdom ushered in for the blessing of the people, thus we need patience to wait on God's time.

The year 2023 will be a blessed one to all fully dedicated Christians in proportion as they are able to view all matters from the divine standpoint. While we long to see the end of war and the end of suffering and death, yet our faith should enable us to realize that God is just as interested in the human race as we are, and that his wisdom knows best as to just how fast the divine purpose and plan should progress. Like the skilled surgeon who wounds deeply in order to heal, so the Lord, in his great love and superior wisdom, knows exactly

what is best for all nations and people in order that their everlasting blessings may be assured.

GOD-LIKE LOVE

When we speak of God's love, we speak of something that should more and more fill our hearts during the year ahead. Even courage and faith to remove mountains, plus patience to endure the severest of trials, would amount to nothing so far as our spiritual standing is concerned, if we have not love. (I Cor. 13:1-3) Divine love should be our pattern. It is a love that bestows blessings upon all, even enemies. To be filled and controlled by such a love, while surrounded by hate and selfishness, will not be easy. To make progress in love under such circumstances will require the keeping of truth's vision clear, and our faith in that vision strong. It will require courage and patience in meeting the rebuffs, and possibly outright opposition and persecution, of the world.

However, God will help us, and does so every day. He helps us through the blessed assurances of his Word. He helps us through fellowship with his people. He helps us in his providential overruling of all our affairs in order that we may have just those experiences we need most for the development in us of the image of his Son. (Rom. 8:29; II Cor. 3:18) Let us strive more faithfully to use the divine means of grace that thereby we may be more filled with and controlled by that God-like love which will keep us sweet and sympathetic in our attitude toward all, even towards our enemies.

CONTINUED SERVICE

Our zeal for the service of the Lord should be increased rather than diminished because of the

world's troubles. This day of perplexity and distress among mankind affords glorious opportunities for making known the Gospel, or "good message," of the kingdom. (Matt. 24:14) Let us not refrain from making every possible effort to tell others about it. If ever people needed a message of comfort, they certainly need it now. What a joyous privilege we have of binding up the brokenhearted and comforting those who mourn!—Isa. 61:1,2

What will be our privileges along this line during 2023? We are inclined to think that, in general, they will continue, and possibly increase in some quarters. We have no assurance of this, however. For as long as we find work to do for the Lord, we are instructed to do with our might what our hands find to do, and then leave the results with him. (Eccles. 9:10; Col. 3:23) At present the Gospel message continues to be proclaimed through many avenues of endeavor, and there are no indications as yet that there will be a curtailment of activity. Let us all continue to take advantage of these privileges as long as the door of opportunity is open.

The carrying on of the work of putting forth the Gospel message depends, of course, upon the continued mutual help and cooperation of the brotherhood. What a blessed privilege we all have of thus working together in the common cause of truth and its spread. We are happy to work together in the promulgation of this message because we know that it is from the Word of God, and because it is so wonderful that we want to tell the whole world about it. "I love to tell the story, it did so much for me," wrote the poet Katherine Hankey in 1866 while convalescing from a serious

illness, “and that is just the reason, I tell it now to thee.”

Sometimes we may, in a measure, overlook what the Gospel message has done for us. Think of the condition of mind we would be in today if we did not know something of God’s glorious plan for man’s recovery and blessing! Think also of the great privilege that may be ours of helping to comfort and give a measure of hope to one who is now lost in the fog of worldly confusion. Would not that privilege be worth all the sacrifice we could possibly make? Even if we make the sacrifice and see no immediate result from our efforts, such service increases our own appreciation of the Word of truth. There is no time when the promises of the Scriptures seem so wonderful to us as when we are telling them to others, especially to those who have never before heard these beautiful divine assurances.

The “old, old, story” of the Bible is so glorious that, as the poet Katherine Hankey further wrote, “Those who know it best, seem hungering and thirsting to hear it, like the rest.” How blessed it is that in this time of world confusion and distress we have a theme of conversation and conduct that lifts us up above the trouble and keeps us rejoicing in the blessings that are ahead. In the Apostle Peter’s prophecy of the symbolic present heavens and earth passing away, and of the “new heavens and a new earth” which God has promised, he reminds us of what manner of persons we ought to be in “all holy conversation and godliness.”—II Pet. 3:10-13

HOLY CONVERSATION AND CONDUCT

All conversation that pertains to God’s plan for the world and for us, is holy conversation. Not only

our words, but our thoughts and actions also, are properly included in what the apostle refers to as “conversation.” This means that our conduct and whole course in life should be governed by our knowledge that the present order of things is soon to give place to the glorious new order—God’s world of tomorrow.

This means that throughout 2023 we will more earnestly than ever “seek ... first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness,” touching ever more lightly the transitory things of this world. (Matt. 6:33) It may become increasingly difficult to keep ourselves detached from the world and its spirit. The trend of the present time is towards extreme polarization of thought and action, and while we recognize the many evidences of this in the world around us, yet the Christian must continue to be guided by the Word of God. His will and character qualities of love, mercy, forgiveness, patience, and longsuffering must come first in all things.

As followers of the Master, we enter the New Year with courage and faith, resolved to persevere patiently through the trying days which may be before us. We are resolved, also, that love shall continue to rule in our hearts, and that we will zealously do all we can to comfort and cheer those with whom we come in contact, especially by bearing witness to them of the glorious Messianic kingdom now so near. While we continue to tell others of the blessings to come, we will keep our own affections set on “things above.” (Col. 3:2) Daily we will zealously strive for a place with Jesus in the spiritual phase of his Father’s kingdom. What a hope and prospect is set before us, and soon for all mankind! ■