

Not Yet Unto Blood

*“Ye have not yet
resisted unto
blood, striving
against sin.”
—Hebrews 12:4*

IN THE ELEVENTH CHAP-

ter of Hebrews, Paul mentions many heroes of faith of Old Testament times. There was Abel who offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than did Cain. The apostle speaks of Noah who obeyed God and built an ark in which he and his family escaped the waters of the Flood. Abraham is mentioned, whose faith was greatly demonstrated as he cooperated with God in connection with the birth of Isaac, and later showed his willingness to offer him in sacrifice.

Paul recalls Moses, who through faith was willing to suffer affliction with the Israelites, his brethren, rather than enjoy the pleasures and position he had in the Egyptian court. There were the three young Hebrews who defied the Babylonian king, refusing to bow down before the great image which he had set up, and as a result were cast into a fiery furnace, from which the Lord delivered them. Daniel is also mentioned, who refused to give up his life of prayer in order to conform to the edict of the Median king

and was cast into a den of lions; on whose behalf the Lord sent an angel to close the lions' mouths.

These and the many others mentioned by Paul constitute what he refers to in the opening verse of the next chapter as a "cloud of witnesses." We quote the first four verses of this twelfth chapter: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin."

In this wonderful summary of the faith life of the Christian, Paul reminds us that it is like running in a race. Athletes in ancient days sometimes weighted their feet when training, and then as they entered the scheduled race would remove the weights. This made their feet seem lighter, and they could attain greater speeds and had better endurance. So it is with the Christian. Before he enters the race, he is frequently loaded down with many "weights," the cares of this world, perhaps, or the deceitfulness of riches. He realizes that he cannot run the Christian race and carry these encumbrances along with him, and Paul admonishes him to lay them aside.

The apostle also mentions "the sin which doth so easily beset us." Every follower of the Master has besetting sins of one sort or another, perhaps some more bothersome than others. Here, however, it

would seem that Paul is referring to the sin of faithlessness. All through the Book of Hebrews Paul calls attention to the failures of God's covenant people, the nation of Israel, which were due to their lack of faith. This epistle seems designed to strengthen the lagging faith of the group of Hebrew Christians to which it is addressed.—Heb. 3:8-12; 4:1,2

If we lack faith, we will fall short along all lines. A deficiency of faith means a lack of courage, zeal, and the spirit of sacrifice. It denotes a lack of love for the Lord, the truth, and the brethren. So important is faith to the Christian that Paul writes, “without faith it is impossible to please” our Heavenly Father. (Heb. 11:6) Through a lack of faith the ancient Israelites failed to enter into the rest which God provided for them. We also will come short of entering into the rest provided for us in Christ if we lack the faith to fully believe the promises of God and zealously act upon them. (Heb. 4:1-11) It is only by removing our earthly weights, and laying hold firmly upon the promises of God, all of which are made sure through Christ, that we will be able to “run with patience the race that is set before us.”

THE GREATEST WITNESS

Having reminded us of the vast “cloud of witnesses” we have in the Old Testament as incentives to faithfulness, Paul then refers to the greatest witness of all, and encourages us to “look unto” him. It is in Jesus that we have the perfect example of faith, and what it means in the life of one who is wholly dedicated to God and to the doing of his will. Jesus was tempted and tested in all points as we are, yet without sin—either the sin of faithlessness, or

any other deviation from the full doing of the will of God.—Heb. 4:15

Our Lord was faithful under the most trying conditions, even to the agonizing pain of dying on the cross. He was given strength to do this by his faith in the promises of God. He endured the cross and even despised the shame, Paul says, because of the “joy that was set before him.” This joy was set before Jesus’ mind and heart by the many promises of God, but it required faith to lay hold on these promises and secure from them the needed strength to endure. Only by faith was he able to endure to the end, and subsequently be exalted to the “right hand of the throne of God.”

One of these promises Jesus claimed as his own reads, “I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [Hebrew: *sheol*, the grave]; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”—Ps. 16:8-11

By the promises of God, Jesus was assured that he would be raised from the dead; that his soul, his being, would not be left in *sheol*. He was shown by these promises that although his path to life involved suffering which would end in death, his resurrection by the power of his Father would bring fullness of joy. He would be exalted to the right hand of his Heavenly Father where there would be blessings and gladness forever. What joy indeed was thus set before the Master!

BLESSINGS TO MANKIND

In Isaiah 53 we have a prophecy of the sufferings of Jesus, and another aspect of the great reward set before him which enabled him to endure the cross and despise the shame that was heaped upon him. Isaiah states, “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.”—vss. 3,4

Continuing, “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.” (vss. 10,11) In verse 8 the question is raised, “Who shall declare his generation?” From the natural standpoint none could point out the “generation,” or offspring, of Jesus, for he died without children. However, because of his unique position in God’s plan for man’s salvation and restoration he becomes the life-giver of the whole world of mankind. The entire human race restored to perfection on the human plane will become his “seed,” and because of this he “shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.”

Here, then, was another great joy set before the Master which enabled him to endure his suffering—the joy of participating in his Father’s loving plan to restore the human race to life, a “pleasure” of God which is yet to “prosper in his hand.” Thus, we see the two great joys which, through the Scriptures,

were set before Jesus—the joy of being exalted forever to his Father’s presence, where there are eternal blessings, and the joy of carrying out God’s purpose of blessing all mankind.

These, and other joys as well, enabled Jesus to endure the cross and despise the shame. The same joys are set before us, his footstep followers, the “holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling,” who have Jesus as “the Apostle and High Priest of our profession.” He is our “merciful and faithful high priest, ... For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.” —Heb. 3:1; 2:17,18

CONSIDER JESUS

Hebrews 12:3 reads, “Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.” How great indeed was the contradiction of sinners against Jesus! He was opposed by the scribes and the Pharisees by the many arguments which they stirred up against him in their endeavors to find something with which they could charge him to bring about his arrest.

Beyond these, however, and of greater importance, were their contradictions of the main aspects of the Master’s life. He was the Son of God, and from the very beginning of his ministry this great fact was challenged. The devil, the chief of sinners, tempted Jesus along this very line, saying, “If thou be the Son of God,” command the stones be turned into bread so that you can eat; or cast yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, so that God can save you. In other words, prove your sonship.—Matt. 4:4-7

It was not long prior to this that Jesus had heard the voice of his Heavenly Father saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17) Jesus did not need further proof of his sonship, and especially not by such an unwise performance as casting himself from the pinnacle of the temple. He knew that this would be unlawfully tempting God to "prove" his sonship, which he did not need to do anyway.

Satan, however, did not give up on this point. He spoke through his cohorts, who shouted to Jesus while he was hanging on the cross, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." (Matt. 27:40) The Master ignored this challenge for the same reason that he ignored the devil's temptation at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus knew that it was the Father's will that he should be crucified, and any move on his part which would interfere with the carrying out of that purpose would be disloyalty to God. He would thus fail to participate in the good pleasure of his Father for the blessing of all the families of the earth through providing a ransom for all mankind.

Jesus was also destined to be a great king, who ultimately was to rule over the earth until all enemies of God and righteousness would be destroyed, including death. (I Cor. 15:24-26) His enemies in Israel, however, would not accept this, and endeavored to contradict it whenever they could. A crown of thorns was placed upon his head in derision. The inscription placed above him on the cross read, "JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS." The religious leaders tried to persuade Pilate to change the wording to read that it was merely the claim of Jesus that he was the King of the Jews.

Pilate refused to make this change, but through it all the attempt was again made to cast doubt on the true position of Jesus in God's plan.—John 19:19-22

WE ALSO SHOULD ENDURE

These important truths concerning the trials endured by Jesus are not in the Bible merely as stories. Paul cites the “contradiction of sinners” against our Lord so that the manner in which he endured them may be an example to us. There is little likelihood that any of Jesus' followers today will be called upon to hang upon a cross or suffer the jeering of an angry mob and their casting of doubt upon what we believe and what we endeavor to be.

Our “contradictions” are, for the most part, of a more refined type. In them, however, we see a similar principle in operation. Jesus knew that he was the Son of God and the future King of kings, yet he did nothing as he hung there upon the cross to substantiate these realities of his position. He was willing to die under a cloud of mockery and scorn. What about ourselves? The great fundamentals of God's plan are realities to us, and while we are to do all we can to proclaim and defend them, let us not undertake any rash action in order to prove to an unfriendly world that we are right. It is better that we die with the world saying, as it were, “As a person he was all right, but we completely disagreed with his impossible beliefs, and felt that his way of life made no sense at all.” Can we thus endure the contradiction of sinners?

This principle may also be called upon from time to time in our fellowship with the brethren. As we have noted, the great fundamentals of the Truth are

held by all of us in the same light, but in the case of associated details there are often differences of opinion and interpretation. Can we endure departing a study meeting with the knowledge that our viewpoint on a certain matter was not agreed upon by all, or do we continually feel an impelling urge to justify our views before the brethren? If we do, a good remedy might be to think of Jesus' attitude while hanging on the cross, and in fact throughout his entire ministry of suffering. If we are correct the Lord will vindicate us in his due time—perhaps only on the other side of the veil. This was Jesus' consolation, and we should be satisfied in having the same attitude.

Failing to properly consider Jesus, and to note the way in which he conducted himself in his times of great trial, might lead to our becoming “wearied and faint” in our minds, even discouraged. We live in a world full of ridicule and derision. Because of human frailty, even our brethren may temporarily seem unfriendly at times, especially if they do not agree with our viewpoints. This may be a trial to us, or perhaps bring a measure of suffering, unless we can learn, in humility, that it is not important to justify ourselves before men. Let us leave this in God's hands, as Jesus did, while we continue zealously in the divine service of proclaiming the Gospel and laying down our lives in service to the Lord and the brethren.

FOLLOWING JESUS

The reason it is important as Christians to look unto Jesus that we might be encouraged by his example of faithfulness is that our covenant with the Heavenly Father calls for following in the Master's

footsteps. (I Pet. 2:21) He is our exemplar and our forerunner. Those who will live and reign with Jesus in his kingdom are those who have been faithful in laying down their lives as he was faithful in laying down his. They are shown with him on Mount Sion, and the explanation is given that these “follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.”—Rev. 14:1,4

Jesus was led into death by the Holy Spirit, and if we follow him faithfully, we also will be led into death. (Rev. 2:10) We will not prove worthy to live and reign with Christ by following human leadership, whether represented in family ties or by prominent ones in the church. Only by following Jesus all the way into death can we hope to be with him in the kingdom, and reign with him for the blessing of all the families of the earth.

In the beginning of their Christian experience, the Hebrew brethren had been faithful in following Jesus. To these brethren Paul wrote, “Remember the days gone by, when, newly enlightened, you met the challenge of great sufferings and held firm. Some of you were abused and tormented to make a public show, while others stood loyally by those who were so treated. For indeed you shared the sufferings of the prisoners, and you cheerfully accepted the seizure of your possessions, knowing that you possessed something better and more lasting. Do not then throw away your confidence, for it carries a great reward. You need endurance, if you are to do God’s will and win what he has promised. For soon, very soon (in the words of Scripture), he who is to come will come; he will not delay; and by faith my righteous servant shall find life; but if a man shrinks back, I take no pleasure in him. But we are

not among those who shrink back and are lost; we have the faith to make life our own.”—Heb. 10:32-39, *New English Bible*

From this it is clear that the Hebrew brethren had been very faithful for a time and rejoiced in the privilege of suffering with and for Christ. It also seems clear that for some reason their zeal had begun to cool, and Paul encourages them to remember the time when they were first enlightened and had that first love and zeal, with the implication that they should endeavor to return to that attitude and continue on the way of sacrifice.

The reason for their waning zeal was apparently a partial weakness of faith and confidence that God would indeed fulfill his promises to them, and that fulfillment would be realized in due time. It was important for the Hebrew brethren, and important for us also, to realize that it is not sufficient to run well for a time. We have consecrated to do God’s will, and to serve him, faithfully even unto death. Only those who fulfill this covenant will receive the crown of life, which is “glory and honour and immortality.”—Rom. 2:7

The Hebrew brethren had also been faithful in serving the Lord’s people. Paul wrote to them, “God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end.” (Heb. 6:10,11) Paul’s desire that these brethren should show “the same diligence” to the very end seems to imply that in the area of serving the brethren these Hebrews were also showing signs

of a cooling zeal. Here again we are reminded of the importance of continued faithfulness in the narrow way, and of keeping in mind the promises of God as they apply to supplying our present needs of grace and strength. Likewise, we are to remember those promises of the joy to follow our cross-bearing, which will be the glorious privilege of sharing in the work of blessing all mankind, and in partaking of those pleasures which belong to those who will be exalted to the presence of our Heavenly Father.

UNTO BLOOD

Our Scripture lesson closes with Paul's reminder to the Hebrew brethren, as noted in our opening text, that they had "not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin." (Heb. 12:4) They had run well for a time and had endured much suffering. They had taken joyfully the spoiling of their goods, but they had not walked fully with Jesus. If they had properly considered the Master, they would realize that following in his steps meant sacrifice and suffering even unto death, for he did not complete his sacrificial service until on the cross he cried, "It is finished." (John 19:30) His was a sacrifice "unto blood" because he actually laid down his life.

This was not yet true of the Hebrew brethren, however, nor is it true of us as long as we are in the flesh. Being faithful in one trial, or a series of trials, is not enough. We must be faithful "unto blood"—that is, unto death—if we are to win the prize of the High Calling of God in Christ Jesus. We must be, symbolically speaking, "beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God," if we are to live and reign with him as priests and as kings.—Rev. 20:4

Let us, then, lay aside all weights, and any sins which might easily beset us, and run with patience and perseverance the race that is set before us. Let us keep looking to Jesus, who kept before his mind the joy that was set before him, and who endured the cross, and was rewarded to sit at the right hand of the throne of God. Let us consider him, and his faithfulness under all circumstances, that we may be encouraged to endure, and not become weary and faint in our minds. Finally, let us always remember that we can win the crown of life only by being faithful “unto blood,” and so continue on the narrow way until our sacrifice is completely consumed. ■

