

Peter's Strengthening Words to the Brethren

*“The Lord said,
Simon, Simon,
behold, Satan hath
desired to have
you, that he may
sift you as
wheat: But I have
prayed for thee,
that thy faith fail
not: and when thou
art converted,
strengthen thy
brethren.”*
—Luke 22:31,32

WHEN JESUS AND THE twelve were together in the upper room the night before the crucifixion, he addressed to Simon Peter the words of our opening text. Peter was a firm believer in Jesus. He was convinced that his beloved Master was the foretold Messiah. Hence, when the Lord spoke of Peter's future conversion he did not mean a change from being an

unbeliever to being a believer. Rather, the reference was to a change of viewpoint which was to take place in Peter's understanding of the full

scope of his Master's place in God's plan, and of the position to be occupied by his disciples.

OPPOSITION

Peter was a rugged fisherman and accustomed to carrying out his own plans in life quite as he wished. It was natural for him to assume that the great Messiah of promise would be even more capable of accomplishing what he desired. Consternation filled the disciple's heart when, on an earlier occasion, Jesus had let it be known that he was going to Jerusalem where he expected to be arrested and put to death. To Peter this must have seemed like surrendering to the enemy, so he said to his Master, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee."—Matt. 16:21,22

Jesus replied to Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." Then, addressing his disciples in general, he added, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (vss. 23-25) To the disciples this must have seemed like a strange statement. Peter had advised Jesus not to expose his life to danger, but the Master explained that in this Peter had expressed a human viewpoint.

The generally accepted thought among mankind is that one must protect his own interests, and the interests of those near and dear to him, at almost any cost. The idea of deliberately choosing a course that leads to suffering and death would surely be

frowned upon by those who are guided by the wisdom of this world. This was the case with Peter. Not only did he endeavor to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem where his enemies were waiting for him, but later even tried to prevent his arrest, going so far as to cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest.—John 18:10,11

Peter was in this frame of mind that night in the upper room when Jesus said to him, “Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.” Satan was working hard with Peter in an attempt to wrest him away from his Master’s leadership. He had found a slight area of difference between them, and was exploiting this point of difference. However, Jesus assured Peter of his prayers, and said to him, “when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” Jesus had confidence that Peter would come through this experience and would ultimately gain the proper viewpoint.

ENLIGHTENED

The transformation of the apostle to the divine perspective did not begin in earnest until Pentecost. Then he received the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, and saw the reason for Jesus’ suffering and death. Indeed, in his Pentecostal sermon, Peter called attention to prophecies pertaining to Jesus’ death and resurrection. (Acts 2:14-36) If he had discerned the meaning of these prophecies when he was with Jesus, Peter would not have endeavored to prevent his crucifixion. Now, however, he knew without doubt that his previously wrong viewpoint and the experiences to which it had led, was a special preparation enabling him to appreciate

the subject more clearly than might otherwise have been possible.

Thus, Peter was well prepared to strengthen the brethren, as stated in our opening text, along the line of Christian suffering and the place it occupies in the outworking of God's plan. This comes to light in his first epistle, which Peter may well have written recalling his Master's admonition to strengthen his followers. All of the Lord's people need strengthening along this line. Suffering is not pleasant, and the flesh will endeavor to avoid it whenever possible, whether it be physical pain, or mental discomfort due to the frown of our neighbors or of the world in general. To face ridicule, persecution, suffering or even death, when perchance we could choose a more pleasant course, requires faith and courage which is the outgrowth of conviction that we are doing that which is well-pleasing to our Heavenly Father.

STRENGTHENING THE BRETHERN

How did Peter strengthen the brethren, even down to our day? First, he emphasized that we are not seeking for earthly blessings, but heavenly. He reminds us that we have been begotten again "unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."—I Pet. 1:3-5

It is in the hope of this inheritance that we have our chief cause for rejoicing, rather than in the material good things of life which might be ours if

we bent our energies to secure them. We “greatly rejoice” because, as Peter states, “the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.” (vss. 6,7) Thus the apostle emphasizes that the Christian’s joys are based not upon the abundance of the things which they may possess in this life, but upon faith in the heavenly inheritance to which they have been called, which will include the joy of being with the Lord Jesus and the Heavenly Father.

Peter further tells us that our redemption and salvation are because Jesus, in keeping with his Father’s will as set forth in the Old Testament, gave his life on our behalf. We are redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” (vss. 18,19) Jesus was, indeed, “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”—John 1:29

TO OFFER SACRIFICE

The converted Peter presents another line of thought which concerns the matter of following Jesus. In I Peter 2:5 he explains that we are “a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.” In Old Testament times, the priests of Israel offered animals in sacrifice, but not so with the holy priesthood of the present age. We offer ourselves to be consumed upon a symbolic altar, where our sacrifice and service are made acceptable through the blood of Christ. We go to him “outside the camp, bearing His reproach.” (Heb. 13:10-13, *New King James Version*) We need

only to think of the burning animals in the arrangements of Israel to realize that in the offering of ourselves there will be suffering, and eventually death, into which we voluntarily enter.

When Peter endeavored to prevent Christ's crucifixion, he thought of him as an earthly king, not as a priest to offer sacrifice, and certainly not the sacrifice of himself. He hoped to be with Jesus in his kingdom, to share his rulership, but he did not expect to suffer and die in order to attain this high position of glory. However, when he was enlightened by the Holy Spirit, Peter then gained a clear vision of this aspect of the divine purpose. Then he could strengthen the brethren to endure their suffering. He wrote: "This is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously."—I Pet. 2:19-23

All of the Lord's consecrated people need to be strengthened in order to take patiently the ridicule and suffering that is inflicted upon them unjustly. This was the position of Jesus. He spent his life going about doing good. He never harmed anyone, and yet his enemies reviled him and finally put him to death. This is the example which we are

invited to emulate. This is the course laid down for us—to follow in the footsteps of the Master. This is what it means truly to be one of his disciples.

There are many Christian churches which teach that a child of God will be blessed with material gain. A common view claims that success in business, securing the best employment, enjoying good health, and having many friends, are evidences of God's favor. This was not Jesus' viewpoint, however, nor that of the apostles and those in the Early Church who followed their teachings. Instead, suffering for well-doing, and taking it patiently without any disposition to fight back, is that which results in God's favor. Thus, our association with one another should be as described by Peter: "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing."—I Pet. 3:8,9

SUFFERING FOR CHRIST

Since we are in the world, but not of its spirit, we may often find ourselves surrounded by coolness and opposition. It is most fitting, therefore, that all who are walking in this narrow way together should be of one mind, and have compassion one for the other. Due to our fleshly imperfections misunderstandings will occur, but those who are laying down their lives doing good, and are not returning evil for evil, will surely want to be guided by this same Christian principle in their dealings one with another. These will realize that having their own

way is not nearly so important as endeavoring to be all of one mind and purpose, and to be sympathetic toward all.

Peter continues to strengthen the brethren by reminding them that God will not permit them to be harmed as New Creatures if they keep on following the right path of sacrifice. He wrote: "Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled."—I Pet. 3:13,14

We see that Jesus, as a man, was reviled; his enemies spat upon him and placed a crown of thorns upon his head. They nailed him to a cross and let him hang there until he died. They inflicted much suffering upon the Master, but they did not harm him as a New Creature; for his suffering and death was his pathway to glory, honor, and immortality. (Rom. 2:7) It is the same with us. Suffering inflicted upon us by our enemies can harm us only if we permit such experiences to embitter our hearts so that we will begin rendering evil for evil. This might result in temporary satisfaction to the flesh, but, if continued, will lead to the loss of our inheritance with Jesus in the heavenly phase of his kingdom.

Continuing his message of encouragement, Peter wrote, "It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit." (I Pet. 3:17,18) Prior to being "converted," Peter surely would not have admitted that it is better to suffer for well-doing than for evil doing. He knew

that Jesus' entire life was one of well-doing, and he rebelled at the thought that such a man would be made to suffer and to die.

Now, however, Peter knew the purpose of his Master's suffering and death, and he knew that we, his followers, have the privilege of suffering and dying with him. To know why we suffer, and to be assured that this is the will of God for us, is surely a great source of strength in facing our experiences. As the apostle said: "Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind."—I Pet. 4:1

NOT STRANGE

Continuing to strengthen the brethren, the apostle 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) To Peter, before Pentecost, it was very strange indeed that fiery trials should come upon Jesus, leading to his crucifixion, but since he had learned that this was God's plan for him, and it had been foretold by the prophets, he realized it was "not strange." We, too, should not think it strange when fiery trials come into our lives, for, as Peter explains, we are partakers of Christ's sufferings. If we partake of his sufferings, and endure courageously and faithfully to the end of the narrow way of sacrifice, we will share in his glory.—Rom. 8:17

How strengthening it should be to our faith to realize that the trials which come to us as a result

of faithfulness to the Lord, to the Truth, and to the brethren, are not due to our Heavenly Father's lack of interest, but because he is supervising our experiences to prepare us for joint-heirship with his beloved Son in the kingdom! The human mind is prone to say, "How strange that this great trial has come into my life!" Peter says, though, that we should not reason in this manner, but rather, rejoice, inasmuch as we are partakers of Christ's sufferings.

It requires faith to take this viewpoint—a faith that is based on an understanding of the reason that the narrow way is so difficult. True, we do not always understand in detail just why certain experiences are permitted to come into our lives, but we know the plan of God in arranging for us to suffer with Christ, and the details we can leave in his hands. If the way of the cross seems hard, we have the assurance of divine grace to help in our every time of need, and our faith should enable us to say that we would rather walk in the dark with God than go alone in the light.—Heb. 4:16

FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

Not all suffering is acceptable to God. Sometimes our trials may be due to our own imperfections, which cause us to say and do things that are contrary to the divine will. Peter calls our attention to this, saying, "Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf."—I Pet. 4:15,16

From God's standpoint we could become murderers through the assassination of a person's

character by evil speaking. By misrepresentation we could “steal” another’s good name and reputation. Those who do these things frequently find themselves embroiled in trials and difficulties, but they cannot properly rejoice in such experiences on the grounds that they are the sufferings of Christ. These are sufferings which result from wrongdoing, and are a cause for shame on the part of those who experience them. Only those who “suffer for righteousness’ sake” can be assured of the Lord’s approval and look forward to receiving their inheritance with Jesus in the kingdom of heaven.

GOD CARES

While the way of the cross is a difficult one, its joys far outweigh its sorrows. These joys are largely in the assurance of our Heavenly Father’s love and care. Peter wrote, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.”—I Pet. 5:6-9

We are to humble ourselves before the Heavenly Father and to accept without question the experiences which he permits. He who cares for us is never weary; his eye is watchful for our every need; and his ear is always open to our cry. God is abundantly able to do for us more than we can possibly ask or think, and will do so, if we continue humbly to look up to him in thankfulness for all the blessings

which his love provides—even for our trials. (Eph. 3:20,21) These trials also are blessings in disguise, because they have a special part in preparing us for glory, and for sharing with Christ in the great restoration work of bringing mankind back into harmony with God in his promised kingdom.—Matt. 6:10; Rev. 21:1-5

We are thankful that Peter was faithful to the commission Jesus gave to him to strengthen the brethren by giving them the assurance that Christian suffering is God's will for them, and an evidence of divine favor! Thus, we can take to heart and rejoice in the words: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."—Rev. 2:10 ■