

The City of the Living God

"Wherefore seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight . . . and run with patience the race set before us"—Hebrews 12:1.

The great "cloud of witnesses" that we read of in v. 1 are those faithful men of old that the apostle enumerates in ch. 11. That chapter is often called "the Faith Chapter," because in it the apostle gives many examples throughout the history of mankind from Abel's time on down of how men were able to maintain their integrity and uphold the Truth of God in their day in the face of the many trials and troubles that came upon them:

"Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

"They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

"And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

These men were strong in faith. In their day they were men of God, who stood out against the rest of the world, determined to uphold God's Truth and walk in obedience to His will, regardless of what hardships might come upon them in this life.

Many of them—as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Moses—were almost alone in their generation as far as their work in the Truth was concerned. In the days of Noah, that one family stood alone in the midst of a world that had corrupted God's way upon the earth. He stood alone as a preacher of righteousness with faith enough in God to keep himself unspoiled and untainted by the wickedness of the world about him. It is easy to be strong and brave when surrounded by friends, but to maintain a course alone in the face of the world's jeers is another matter.

Moses, at times, had to endure the terrible agony of seeing the whole nation of Israel turn away from God to lust after other things and to worship idols. David in the Psalms speaks of one of these occasions, when Moses stood up against the whole nation when God was about to destroy them:

"They forgot God, their Saviour, which had done great things in Egypt. Therefore He said he would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath, lest He should destroy them" (Psa. 106:23).

Paul says that it was *through faith* that these men of old, these men of God in their day and time, were able to sustain themselves in the course of righteousness while the rest of the world went their own way. In the case of Moses it is said that he—

“ . . . chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward."

Moses knew that the pleasures of sin and the treasures of Egypt were only temporal and passing things, and that if he chose them he would be placing his confidence in something that would pass away with the using.

And as we look at it now we can plainly see what a wise choice it was that Moses made when he chose the course he did. Having endured as seeing him that is invisible, Moses now has a

permanent and important place in the future glory of the world to come. He will be a constituent of that great cloud of witnesses (of whom the world was not worthy) that will be made perfect along with all the people of God—*because they obtained a good report through faith*. But look at the treasures of Egypt now.

In this 12th chapter Paul says in verse 1,

set "Wherefore seeing we 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 before us."

When he speaks of running a race here, he is thinking about the races that were run in those days by the Greeks in Athens and other places. The runners were carefully trained over a period of time. In this period of training, they must obey all the rules of health so that they would be in the best possible condition when the time came for the race to be run.

But before the race started, the runner would lay aside every weight in the way of clothing or encumbrances, except what was barely necessary, so that he could run without hindrance.

No one would think of running a race with a lot of clothing on, and heavy shoes, or with any other weight that would hinder his progress. They could never win that way; for it is all they can do to win under perfect conditions. And so it is with us.

In those days the runner who won the race would be given a garland or crown of evergreen leaves woven together which he was allowed to wear as a reward of his victory. The race that we run in the Truth as we strive to the utmost of our ability for that crown of life that fadeth not away is for a much greater reward than the Greeks bestowed upon the winners in Paul's day.

"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize. So run that ye may obtain."

"And every man that striveth for mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it for a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.

"I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I not as one that beateth the air; but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself shall be a castaway."

Those are the things that we have to think about as we run the race that is set before us. Not as uncertainly—not just run regardless of the rules of the race or the place we are running to. Nor should we fight as one that beats the air with no definite enemy or opponent in mind. In order that we should not run uncertainly, or fight as one that beats the air instead of the enemy, Paul says that we should—

"LOOK UNTO JESUS the Author and Finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of God."

That is the way the race must be run and the fight carried on to a finish—in the way Jesus did. And when we begin to think that our course is too hard for us, and that our endurance may not hold out to the end, Paul asks us to consider the case of Jesus,

and "Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be weary and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin."

Of all the children of God that are being brought to perfection, under the discipline and care of the Father, none have ever been subjected to more severe trials than Jesus himself.

We have not resisted unto blood against sin. God has not required us to suffer as Jesus did. His suffering was great, but not just in a physical way. He had to endure the agony of seeing his own people forsake him at the last, and he was surrounded in his death—not by loved ones and well-wishers—but by Roman soldiers and Jews who mocked him.

But it was not for punishment in a personal way that God gave His Son into the hands of wicked men to die on the cross. This Paul explains, Heb. 2—

"For it became Him, for Whom are all things, and by Whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through suffering."

It is those whom God loves that He deals with in this way. He brings them through trials and suffering, through the furnace of affliction, that they may come forth as gold, tried in the fire.

We have noticed that the only metal in evidence in the Holy Place or the Most Holy Place of the Mosaic Tabernacle was gold. And of the holy city, New Jerusalem, that John saw coming down from God out of heaven, representing the Bride, the Lamb's wife, he says—

"And the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones."

Now gold and precious stones are rare. They are found in widely scattered places and in small amounts, and their lustre and beauty only comes after the refining process is over. *They cannot even be recognized as such when in the raw state*, mixed with the dross, and earth from which they come. It is only after careful refining and much cutting and polishing that the stone or the gold stands out in all its shades and color.

Gold, too, is a fit symbol of the eternal state of things to which the people of God stand related, because of the fact that of all metals, it is the least affected by the forces of decay and corruption, such as rust and corrosion. We can see the fitness, then, of Paul's words here in this 12th chapter of Hebrews—

"My son despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him. For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If you endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; but if ye are without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards and not sons."

If we follow the course of the apostle's line of thought through this chapter, we shall be able to see the wisdom of all God's dealings with His people as He develops and prepares them as vessels of gold, silver and precious stones, fit for the Master's use:

"We are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words, which voice they that heard intreated that the words should not be spoken to them any more."

No. We are not come to Mt. Sinai, where God appeared to Israel and gave them the words of the Covenant, in a great voice from the top of the mountain.

"But ye are come unto Mt. Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels.

"To the general assembly and church of the first born, which are written in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

Those are the heavenly things that we have come unto, and to which we stand related under the New Covenant. To the general assembly and ecclesia of the firstborn, written in heaven.

This places us in the very center of the heavenly light that reveals God's purpose on the earth. We are thus brought directly within the circle of His operations as He gathers the material and shapes and prepares it for the time when all things will be made to reflect His glory and honor His Name.

"See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh."

Since we have been bathed in the light and glory of God's heavenly message, and since our eyes have been opened to the revelation of the mystery of His will, it is too late now for us to turn away into the shadows again. Only tribulation and anguish awaits us there. We must rise to the demands of our calling—

"Wherefore lift up the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way, but rather let it be healed."

Let us then be wise. Let us squarely face the facts as we see them here this morning from the position we have arrived at since we have come to Mt. Zion, the city of the living God—the heavenly Jerusalem.

We look around us, and what do we see? Nothing but gold, pure gold—clear as crystal—gates of pearl, and the walls garnished with all manner of precious stones. *Nothing there but beauty, purity and holiness.* Nothing but the best of everything—not even a trace of alloy or base metals—only the most precious of stones do we see set in the walls and in the foundations.

These are the symbols that the Divine mind has chosen to represent the people, the characters and hearts, of those who will be the constituents of the Bride, the Lamb's wife, in the day when God makes up His jewels. The light that sparkles and shines forth from the polished surfaces of the precious metal and stones, is the light of the glory of God, reflected out of pure hearts that have been purged of all that defiles, or works abomination or makes a lie.

We look around too, at the company that will be standing around us in that day in this general assembly and church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. Pre-eminent among them will be such men of faith as Abraham, who offered up Isaac, of whom it was said,

"In Isaac shall thy seed be called, accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure."

Moses will be there, of whom it is testified that he was the *meekest man in all the earth*, and to whom God spoke face to face as a man speaks to his friends, and not in visions and similitudes as to the other prophets.

Job will be there, for he said through the Spirit:

"I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand in the latter days upon the earth; and though after the skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

Yes, Job will be there in that great company that shine as lights of that age, for God's own testimony concerning him is:

"Hast thou considered My servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil?"

There will be Daniel, whom the angels called a man greatly beloved, and to whom the promise was made:

"Go thy way, Daniel, till the end be; for thou shalt rest and stand in thy lot at the end of the days."

As we look into our hearts now—as we measure our state of development toward the perfection of godliness, against the background of these symbols of the Holy City—as we compare our own faith in God, and the general course of our lives in the way of His Truth to those characters such as Abraham, Moses, Job and Daniel, *do we feel that we could stand with them in that day and feel that we belonged among them?*

Would we feel at ease and at home in that high moral and spiritual atmosphere, so that we could sit down at the table in Christ's Kingdom and be of one mind and spirit with the apostles and prophets seated around us?

If we find there—in the deep recesses of our hearts—any root of bitterness springing up, any fleshly thoughts of malice, envy, pride, or evil thinking against our brother—it must be purged out NOW; for the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will reveal it in that day—

"Nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest."

"Wherefore," says Paul, at the close of the chapter—

"We, receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire."

To Timothy Paul wrote,

"In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver; but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor and some to dishonor.

"If a man therefore shall purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work."

The vessels unto honor are such as the prophet Malachi refers to:

"Then they that feared the Lord, spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His Name.

I "And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels. And will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him." —E. W. B.
