

GETTING READY FOR THE TIME OF TROUBLE

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There is something very simple and obvious about enduring the time of trouble. It's nothing more nor less than living like Jesus lived. Christ was our divine Guest on this planet, and we treated Him badly. But He showed us where true values lie and what is genuine happiness. The time of trouble will be the grand opportunity for God's believing people to learn how precious is His way of life.

For example, we have long known (and shuddered at the prospect) that we will have to leave our homes and seek refuge in wilderness places. Jesus said of this time, "Flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. . . . Then will be great tribulation, such as had not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be."¹ "The people of God will flee from the cities and villages and associate together in companies, dwelling in the most desolate and solitary places. Many will find refuge in the strongholds of the mountains."² But this is no worse than the way Jesus lived! He said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head."³

¹ Matthew 24:16-21.

² *Great Controversy*, p. 626.

³ Matthew 8:20, RSV.

The time of trouble will be something like going camping with Jesus. Would you accept His invitation?

In the time of trouble, people will be hungry, and the child of God is promised only that "bread will be given him, his water will be sure."⁴ There is no promise of cake and ice cream! But again, Jesus knew what it is to be hungry and to eat very simple food.⁵ The time of trouble will be eating with Jesus. Would you accept His invitation?

God's people will be dragged before courts and magistrates to answer for their faith. "Many of all nations and of all classes, high and low, rich and poor, black and white, will be cast into the most unjust and cruel bondage. The beloved of God pass weary days, bound in chains, shut in by prison bars, sentenced to be slain, some apparently left to die of starvation in dark and loathsome dungeons."⁶ Again, this is no worse than the treatment the world accorded Jesus and His apostles. He was beaten and crucified. The point is this: the time of trouble will simply give God's people a first-hand acquaintance with the way Jesus lived on earth. It will establish for them a close sympathy with Him, a tie of intimacy that will hold for all eternity. Would you accept Jesus' invitation to go to court with Him?

A Final Lesson in Real Happiness

Jesus, sleeping on the ground, finding refuge in prayer alone in the mountains, shunning the big cities, caring nothing for wealth and luxury, has

⁴ Isaiah 33:16, RSV.

⁵ Matthew 4:1, 2.

⁶ *Great Controversy*, p. 626.

proven to us all that real happiness does not inhere in material things. Thank God for giving Him to us! Otherwise, we would never have found our release from the captivity of this worldly enthrallment. The time of trouble will be the occasion when Christ gives His people His diploma, which He said is “my peace . . . not as the world giveth.”⁷ Even within affliction and persecution, God’s people will learn an inner peace and happiness that transcends sensual and materialistic pleasures. At last, the confused values of this world will be straightened out in their minds and hearts!

The comfort and joy of Christ’s presence will never be so fully realized as in these afflictions. A dungeon cell shared with Him will actually be more delightful than a luxurious suite in the finest Holiday Inns without him. “The assaults of Satan are fierce and determined, his delusions are terrible; but the Lord’s eye is upon His people, and His ear listens to their cries. Then affliction is great, the flames of the furnace seem about to consume; but the Refiner will bring them forth as gold tried in the fire. God’s love for His children during the period of their severest trial is as strong and tender as in the days of their sunniest prosperity; but it is needful for them to be placed in the furnace of fire; their earthliness must be consumed, that the image of Christ may be perfectly reflected.”⁸ Again, what is happening is simply that Christ’s bride is learning to know Him as a Bridegroom. This includes acquaintance with His life-style.

⁷ John 14:28.

⁸ *Great Controversy*, pp. 627, 621.

Believers in Christ who live through the final time of trouble are simply taking Christ at His word, and accepting His challenge: “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”⁹ Perhaps the Lord has permitted the fantastic luxury and opulence of life in this twenty-first century in order to highlight the reality of this final consecration of those who believe in Him. Our forefathers didn’t have as many things to give up as some of us have today. Devotion is much more meaningful if wealth and luxury are voluntarily, knowingly, surrendered for it.

The Victory that Overcomes the World is Our Faith

Getting ready for the time of trouble is not a do-it-yourself exercise in hair-shirt martyrdom. No self-sacrifice or denial of worldly pleasures is worth anything apart from that faith in Christ which effects heart union with Him. It’s a matter of receiving “the mind of Christ,” learning to look on things as He does. Such closeness to Christ makes the whole world appear differently, as when you view ordinary objects in ultra-violet light.

We have heard much about leaving the cities, for example. Lot’s wife physically left Sodom, but she took Sodom with her in her heart. If we follow the inspired counsels about moving to the country while we still invite the corruption of the cities into our homes through TV, we haven’t accomplished

⁹ Matthew 10:37-39, RSV.

anything really worthwhile. The Spirit of Christ is not attuned to the spirit of the world, its driving selfishness, its obsession with phonies, its cruelty, its cacophony, its weary restlessness, the vanity and oppression of its concrete jungles.

It is during the time of trouble that “Babylon the great city” is “thrown down with violence,” like “a great millstone” cast into the sea. “The light of a lamp shall shine in thee no more. . . . Thy merchants were the great men of the earth, and all nations were deceived by thy sorcery.”¹⁰ The endless deceptions of TV and magazine advertising, the machismo appeal of sports, the allurements of sensuality, all this is “sorcery” that captivates the mind and soul of modern man. During the time of trouble, this psychic spell will be broken for everyone. What I think of is a passage in Isaiah: “The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?”

“He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; he shall dwell on high: his place of defense shall be the munitions of rocks; *bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure ...*” (33:14-16).

I don’t know how Isaiah could any more clearly speak of TV.

¹⁰ Revelation 18:9-23.

Any fiction in TV or movies is to be eschewed, and especially that which consists of violence.

Beware of the “love” of violence! The Lord has said something very severe about it: “The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth” (Psalm 11:5).

A violent movie on TV may be exciting for youth to watch; but what the Lord virtually says is, “You love violence? I will have to let you have what you love; I won’t deliver you from it in fact when it comes.”

To watch a violent movie involves a hardening of the heart; it is always inevitable. And a hardened heart will not find entrance into the Lord’s New Jerusalem, the City of peace.

I once gave Bible studies in a family where there was some welcome for them; but the papa in the family was not interested. I tried to interest him, but he was cold. His pastime? Pulling the wings off flies!

A tiny little bit of violence? I believe it had its dire effect on his soul.

Outside of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, are those who “love and make a lie” (Rev. 22:15). In simple language, that means “fiction.”

Let us plead with the dear Lord to give us a love for truth!

Those who believe in Christ will rejoice that at last reality has come, while those locked into rebellion against God will blaspheme heaven because Babylon’s vanity fair has collapsed in ruin.

It’s everywhere in the media, with graphs and charts explaining the collapse of the housing boom, with horror stories of foreclosures. Some couples

are left with debt and no assets to account for it, for they have lost the house and still they're in debt because they had furnished the house they couldn't afford to begin with. Credit was too easy.

One lady, when finally the dust settled, was forced to scrounge and discovered that when it was so good an enthusiastic sales agent had her down with income of \$4000 a month when in fact it was hardly more than half that. Things were so good she could hardly believe that young as she was she had this huge new house with room for three cars and a pad for a boat. Some couples barely out of their teens with modest resources had housing fit for semi-millionaires, all on easy credit, and sometimes with expensive vacations also.

But painful foreclosures may be God-given good news, evidence of the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Trouble may be needed to teach us how to get our feet settled on "solid rock," not only economically but spiritually (cf. Psalm 40:1, 2).

The apostle Paul has a good lesson in godly economics. He writes young Timothy to "withdraw yourself" from the "gain is godliness" teaching (1 Tim. 6:5, KJV). "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (vss. 6-8, NKJV).

There is something basically immoral about reveling in materialist wealth on this great cosmic Day of Atonement. The argument is vain that your personal self-denial can't really help someone in Darfur, so why not revel? If you are a

multimillionaire by inheritance, you can't help yourself on that score. But you can do what the Lord Jesus tells us, "sell what you have and give to the poor" (Matt. 19:21). The biblical idea constantly is, beware of this world's empty wealth. To get obsessed with it can lead to losing the eternal. Let's live and have our being in the light of the love revealed at the cross as agape.

To overcome is to learn to see things as Christ sees them. The mind of Christ sets us free today from the tyranny of self. It makes it possible for us to live in the world yet not be of the world. Our eyes and ears may be assailed with the flood of evil around us, but we are undeceived and unallured. We can today prepare for the time of trouble by seeing what Paul saw: "What I mean, my brothers, is this: there is not much time left, and from now on, . . . those who buy [should live] as though they did not own what they bought; those who deal in material goods, as though they were not fully occupied with them. For this world, as it is now, will not last much longer."¹¹ That vision will automatically result in living in a new-found freedom from worldliness.

The problem is that our human nature is innately deeply opposed to this reality. We are obsessed with unreality. That which is passing away rivets our devotion. We have had a lifetime love affair with sinful materialism. There would be no fear of the time of trouble among God's people if this were not so. We are ambivalent in feeling drawn to Christ,

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, TEV.

while at the same time we are repelled by His demand for taking up the cross to follow Him. A preparation for the time of trouble resolves this ambivalence. And the One who does the work is the Holy Spirit. We simply learn to cooperate with Him.

Learning to be Close to Christ

Not one name will ever be blotted from the book of life who has “overcome.” The promise will be kept: “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.”¹² Overcoming is saying Yes to the Holy Spirit and No to the love of self.

This is the simple, basic lesson that Jesus has taught us. “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame.”¹³ Jesus was as fully tempted by materialism and sensuality as we are today. Don’t think for a moment that when the devil offered him all the shopping marts and kingdoms of the world if He would only recognize Satan’s principle of love of self, that Jesus was not terribly impressed with the glittering prospect. All this fabulous wealth of the world, including today’s electronic marvels, all to be His, if He will only give up His crazy idea of going to a cross! The truth of the Incarnation insists that Jesus was as fully human as He is fully divine.

¹² Revelation 3:5.

¹³ Revelation 3:21.

Scripture is plain that He was tempted in all points like we are, yet without sin.

Young people ask questions, like: “Is it realistic to expect that we can **overcome** all sin? Can ordinary people become truly Christlike? Aren’t we expected to continue being tempted and falling until Christ comes again? Who wants to be a monk or a nun living in an isolated desert cave so as to be holy?”

Well, the “seventh angel” is right now blowing his trumpet, and “the mystery of God” is being finished now, in this grand cosmic Day of Atonement (Rev. 10:1-6; 11:15-19). What has never before happened is to happen—a corporate “body” of God’s people will indeed “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, . . . without fault before the throne of God” (Rev. 14:4, 5). And to accomplish this previously unheard-of feat comes “the third angel’s message in verity”—a grasping of “the everlasting gospel” as Good News better than any previous generation have ever seen it to be (18:1-4).

Don’t let yourself fall to the temptation to despise what God will accomplish!

The motivating power in that “everlasting gospel” is “the grace of God,” not a paralyzing fear motivation, but a heart-appreciation of how magnificent is that “grace” of “the Lamb,” the crucified Son of God. As present-day High Priest, He ministers that grace 24 hours a day. He “teaches us to say No! to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled [ah, that’s the rub!], upright and godly lives in this present age [with all its alluring fleshly and electronic

temptations]” (Titus 2:11, 12, NIV). Does it really work?

“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it’” (Isa. 30:21). That “grace” won’t let you fall into sin unless you “resist” Him. The ball is in your court. You will vote for the Day of Atonement, or you can vote to kill it. (The latter would embarrass you greatly in the final day.)

If you were offered everything that Macy’s and Mercedes-Benz could give you, you would not be tempted as much as Jesus was. Yet He said “No.” “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.”¹⁴ Like a teacher drilling her kindergarten pupils in their ABC’s, the Holy Spirit teaches us how to respond to temptation as Jesus did: “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions. . . . Jesus Christ . . . gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own.”¹⁵

Our battle is always one of faith, never of works. Note that it is “the grace of God” that teaches us how to pronounce that decisive word, “No.” It’s not fear of punishment, or hope of reward, that motivates us to follow Christ. Faith appreciates His sacrifice for us, and good works follow naturally. Learning to believe God’s good news, learning to appreciate His grace, this is our battle. Overcoming is simply accepting the yoke which unites us to Christ. He does the pulling, He bears the weight.

¹⁴ John 5:30; 6:38.

¹⁵ Titus 2:11, NIV.

We cooperate with Him. We learn to understand and appreciate His character and what it cost Him to redeem the world. This is how we overcome even as He overcame.

The Mysterious Power Inherent in the Cross

Preparation for the time of trouble resolves itself into taking up our cross and following in the footsteps of Jesus. But no one can find the strength and courage to do so until he sees and appreciates the heavenly love that led the Son of God to take up His cross and carry it all the way to His supreme sacrifice at the end. Neither fear of being lost or hope of reward in heaven can motivate us to follow Him truly. Only “the love of Christ constraineth us.” The verb means to compel, to motivate. Here we come face to face with the mysterious attraction of Christ’s cross: “We thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead.” That is, all would be dead if He had not died for “all.” Simple, decent human honesty and gratitude dictate the only response possible: “He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again.”¹⁶ Without mentioning the word “faith,” Paul masterfully paints for us a picture of what it is—the motivating force of a heart-appreciation of that magnificent love revealed in its fullness at the cross.

It is true that preparing for the time of trouble will make vast changes in our lifestyle. But the point I am making is that the motivating force that accomplishes these miracles is like that which

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15.

causes a bride to harmonize her lifestyle with that of her bridegroom. Love does it, or to state it more accurately, an appreciation of the bridegroom's love and of his character, does it.

Someday you and I will be in God's eternal kingdom of glory, thanks to our Savior. We'll look back on our earthly pilgrimage, wondering why it took us so long to **overcome** our worldliness, our selfishness, our sinful addictions, yes, our Laodicean lukewarmness. We will see that pure "river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1).

"The Lamb"? Yes, the crucified Christ. We will at last understand why Paul said long ago that he would "glory" in nothing else "save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14), why he "determined not to know anything among [us], save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). We will then begin to understand, "clear as crystal," how Christ as the Lamb of God "tasted" our second death, endured the horror of hell in our behalf, endured being made the "curse of God," "made to be sin for us, who knew no sin," experienced in Himself all the agony of the total of all our human terror multiplied by the unspeakable agony also of divine terror, endured to the fullest the reality of every man's worst nightmares,—and then at last we will sing with new understanding the anthem, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain" (Heb. 2:9, Gal. 3:13, 2 Cor. 5:21, Rev. 5:12).

But what a pity if we can't begin to understand all that today! Or can we? If we could, we would find

the victory over our worldliness, our sinful addictions, yes, our deep-seated selfishness, not sometime far off in eternity but NOW, today. True, a little child can't appreciate what happened on the cross; he/she can only laugh and coo and enjoy his superficial level of life (thank God he/she can!). But who of us is content to remain a little child forever? Is it not time to begin to "grow up into Him," to "come" into "the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown person, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13)?

Ask the Father to lead you to His Son's cross so you can begin to see what happened there. You'll never be the same person again.

This is what the New Testament means when it speaks of righteousness by faith. And that is the only true preparation for the time of trouble.

Chapter 18 of Revelation describes the economic infrastructure of the world itself during that "time of trouble" so often described in the Bible. We must not fixate on its horror nor "borrow" trouble ahead of time. So, enjoy the electricity you have today, and your telephone; and your access to the local market; and the gasoline in your car's tank; and your freedom to travel; yes, and to gather to worship as you choose. But keep in mind that every one of these taken-for-granted blessings is a part of the expression of God's unmerited grace bestowed on us. We don't "deserve" any one of them, even though our patriotic forefathers bled and died to make them secure for us. Say "Thank You, Lord!" when you switch on the lights; and let Thursday be a true "Thanksgiving!" Day for everything you

temporarily enjoy. If you're wealthy, ask the Lord to give you more of His grace to be humble at the same time. If you're not wealthy, count every blessing you do have that most lack. And let the Holy Spirit impress you how to use all you do have every day, every hour, "henceforth" in service to the One who "died for us and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).