

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

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Dear Reader

WHY THINGS HAPPEN TO CHRISTIANS

While the contents of this issue are not exactly *assembly truth*, it is truth that has a major effect on us all in our assembly lives and, in fact, in every aspect of our lives. I cannot help being struck by the many unpleasant things that have happened recently to Christians within my circle of family and friends, often with people who apparently are desiring to go on in the pathway given us in God's Word. There is serious or painful long-term sickness, misfortune, injury, even (from our perspective) premature death, and other things too. Is this bad luck? Bad genes? Being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Where is our loving Father in all this? What does the Bible say? It says plenty, as we will see.

Man was not created to suffer and die. But Adam and Eve sinned, and suffering and death are the outcome for all (Rom.5:12). Yet when it is God's will He can even control these things as when the Israelites were promised, *contingent upon their obedience*, to be free from the diseases of Egypt (Ex.15:26; Dt.7:15). This freedom went well beyond the strict sanitary measures given by the Law of Moses in a day of no understanding of germs: the Lord would heal them (Ex.15:26). God's power over the aging process was seen in the conception of Isaac (Gen.18:10-15; 21:7) and in Joshua not aging during the 40 years in the wilderness (Josh.14:7-14) where the rest of adult Israel died.

During the unique time of the Lord's ministry on earth He healed and raised the dead. Matthew 8:17 (quoting from Isaiah 53:4) says the Lord "took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses," *not on the cross* (as is so often taught), but in His healing the sick during His earthly ministry! The apostles at first could heal and perform other miracles (Acts 5:12-16), but that was for the first generation of believers who heard the Lord (Heb.2:3). Later in life, even the great apostle Paul apparently couldn't heal (Phil.2:25-30; 2 Tim.4:20). All was in the Lord's hands. But can you imagine the apostle Paul dying before he had written 2 Timothy, when he *then* could say, "The time of my departure is at hand" (2 Tim.4:6).

The third great principle is found in Hebrews 12:5, "Whom the Lord loves He *chastens*, and *scourges* every son whom He receives." "As many as I love I rebuke and chasten" (Rev.3:19). The Greek word for *chasten* in

Three Great Principles

"And we *know* that to the ones loving God, *God* works together all things for good to the ones being called according to purpose" (Rom.8:28, Literal Greek from Nestles' Interlinear New Testament). This is a marvelous truth. The people spoken of here are not some elite class of Christians, but all of us. The words contrast *Christians* to the *unsaved*. We who have been called to God according to His eternal purpose (Rom.8:29-31; Eph.1:4-6) do not live lives of chance! *God* is behind the scenes working all things for our final good. We are *never* out of His love (Rom.8:35-39). Romans 8:28 doesn't say that *we* (or even *He*) will count all things as good, or that He is the *cause* of all the things we call "bad," but *He* is working those things we call both good and bad, *together* for our final good. No one would think a cup of flour tasted good, or would willingly drink vanilla syrup, etc., but when all the ingredients are added together in the right proportions and baked and frosted, a fantastic cake results, loved by all! God's *intent* is for us "to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom.8:29). He wants us to be "good and faithful servants" (Mt.25:21, etc.). The world, the flesh (our sinful nature) and Satan are against God and us in this plan. While these things often seem to have victories over us, God is still working for our ultimate good, and we all will arrive safely in glory, although, to varying degrees, we will lose millennial reward because of our failures in obedience and faithfulness.

The second great principle is found in 2 Timothy 3:12, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus *will suffer persecution*." "A servant is not greater than his Master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (Jn.15:20). There is a way around this persecution, although certainly not a desirable or honorable one, and that is to live like the world and not as a Christian. But then, such a worldly life brings *chastening*, as we will see in the next paragraph.

these verses is *paideuo* (verb) and *paideia* (noun) which means to train or correct children (Vine). Hebrews 12:5-11 is in the context of the perfect divine love of the Father of spirits to His children, who wants their best

possible present and future. He chastens us “*for our profit* that we may be partakers of His holiness” (12:10). So the biblical thought of *chastening* is far more than *punishment* as we will see. Yet the word *scourge* (Gk: *mastigoo*) has the definite thought of *physical and/or mental infliction* with the loving intent of changing the person to be more conformed to the image of Christ. So, as we shall see, God can and does get our attention by physical means.

Do Not Judge

I suppose we all fall into the trap of speculating on why certain people get sick, injured or die seemingly prematurely. While we *must* judge that which is manifest (or how could we “depart from iniquity” — 2 Tim.2:19, etc.), we should not and cannot rightly judge what is within the person, what are the motives, or why God acts as He does. These are dealings between God and the person (or family) involved, and we need to leave them there! Yet every individual should be *very sensitive* to the *personal dealings of God* with him or her, as to why God has caused or allowed certain things to happen, since there is no *chance* or *bad luck* or being at the wrong place at the wrong time for the Christian. Yet when something happens to another, we can surely realize it could have happened to us. Scripture indicates that this aspect of another’s trial is vital, as we shall see.

Some Points of Child Training

Bob Costen points out there are at least 11 results of the Father’s child training in Hebrews 12:5-15. We better realize the dignity of sonship (v.5) and the Father’s love (v.6). There is correction, but for our profit that we may be partakers of His holiness (v.10), bringing the peaceable fruit of righteousness if we are trained by it (v.11). Prayer is suggested by verse 12. Healing is a result (v.13), with peace (v.14) and the grace of God made more evident (v.15).

Some of the ways that God child-trains us are:

- Testing
- Learning to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ
- A thorn in the flesh: prevention
- Learning to be content
- Need to get our attention
- Correction

Testing

We need to be very careful to never attribute our sin to God. God does not *tempt* anyone to sin (Jas.1:13). “But

each one is tempted when he is drawn away *by his own desires* and enticed. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (v.14). Yet God *tests* us, just as He did Abraham with respect to sacrificing Isaac (Heb.11:17). The “genuineness of our faith” may be “tested by fire” of persecutions, things going wrong, etc., that it “may be found to praise, honor and glory” (1 Pet.1:7; 4:12-15). As we saw, we will suffer persecution simply for living a Christ-like life: we will suffer as a Christian (1 Pet.4:16), even though we might think we deserve the very opposite. Yet, as with Job, God allows us to go through the trial to prove our mettle, and He will reward us in the end, as He did with Job. Moreover, God used Job’s trials to bring to light hidden pride, which then was confessed and forsaken (Job 42:6). So we are to “endure testing” (Jas.1:12) and even count it joy when the Lord tests us (Jas.1:2-3). And we have God’s fullest assurance that the test will never become more than we can bear (1 Cor.10:13). Sometimes *that* seems hard to believe when we are going through the trial, but *God* has said it! How will we respond?

Becoming a Good Soldier of Jesus Christ

We are in the Lord’s army, as the Sunday School song says. Therefore, we “must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim.2:3) and thus not entangle ourselves in the affairs of this life (v.4), so we may please the Lord who has enlisted us as a soldier. Isn’t this one of our greatest failures? We don’t want to leave behind that which is “fun,” that which “pleases us” (our sinful nature, that is). Many people, such as top athletes and top soldiers, leave behind certain things in this life to receive *man’s* acclaim, and for personal satisfaction. *That* becomes their one goal and they push themselves to and past the limit. That’s the kind of dedication *God* wants of every one of us in divine things. Isn’t *His* “well done” worth it? But we often miserably fail spiritually in such things. Thus you can understand the popularity of the unscriptural clergy system: a few are paid to live spiritual lives (and many genuinely desire to do so): the rest of the people (the laity) don’t have to.

A Thorn in the Flesh: Learning Contentment

Paul, like Moses, was an elite man of this world. No expense was spared to give him the best training. He, like Moses (Heb.11:24-26), left it all behind for Christ (Phil.3:7-11). But the Lord knows what is in us — that pride, that tendency to think too highly of ourselves (Rom.12:3), etc. So consider Paul’s example in relation to your life. Paul was a brilliant man, naturally, and he had seen (and even been to) heaven (2 Cor.12:2-4). He was one of only three living people who had seen the

glorified Christ (Acts 9:27; 1 Cor.9:1). He had much to brag about. God knew Paul's tendencies, so "lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a So as with Job, God allowed Satan to physically hurt or partially incapacitate Paul — evidently near blindness (Gal.4:13-15; 6:11) — that in whatever he accomplished he would know that God's "grace is sufficient for you, My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor.12:9). And verse 10 shows Paul accepted it from the Lord. Paul thus *learned* to be content in whatsoever state he was (Phil.4:11) and that God alone supplied his, and will supply our needs (4:19), although not necessarily our *wants*. Consider Psalm 106:15 as to demanding our *wants*. God may well deem it necessary to limit us in various ways for His glory and our ultimate blessing. Are we content to let Him do what is for our eternal best?

Getting Our Attention By Discipline

God constantly seeks to have us more conformed to the image of His Son. Yet so often in our lives the Holy Spirit is either "quenched" (cooled off) or "grieved" (1 Thes.5:19; Eph.4:30) by either our inaction when He wants action, or by our wrong action. So often when we read or hear God's Word preached, we easily apply it to someone else (it seems so clear), *but so very seldom to ourselves!* We refuse to see the "beam" in our own eye and cast it out (Mt.7:4-5). We are "unwise" because we don't understand what the will of the Lord is for us (Eph.5:17). We allow the flesh (our sinful nature) to rule us.

Think how easily we break the speed limit when God says to obey the Government (Rom.13:1-7) and then have the nerve to ask the Lord to bless our journey! We live for fun, for materialism. We hurt peoples' feelings and stumble the young and weak. We have secret sins. We have ungodly attitudes and hurtful words. We demand our rights (as we think of them). We easily "forsake the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb.10:25) when under similar circumstances, we wouldn't seriously think of missing work or school. You get the idea. A loving Father who seeks our best now, and desires our greatest future blessing, will not, cannot, allow wilful sin in our personal or assembly lives to go unchallenged. Further, "to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Lk.12:48). I am held responsible for the truth I know! *Many of us are very responsible!*

Other than with Paul we have at least two examples of God acting in a physical sense regarding believers. And in both cases it is evident that God's physical discipline

messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure" (1 Cor.12:7). It was also a *preventative*, helping to keep Paul from acting in that exalted nature.

was intended to have a wider effect than for the person(s) directly injured or sick or killed, etc.

First we have the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). They were Christians in the Jerusalem assembly. They concocted a little scheme which amounted to lying to the Holy Spirit (v.3) and making themselves "better" in the eyes of others. God dramatically took their lives! "So *great fear* came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things And believers were increasingly added to the Lord" (vv.11,14). That severe discipline was necessary! God never over-reacts. Many others were kept from disobedience. Do we pass off something dramatic that happens to another believer as just an unfortunate set of circumstances, or does it cause *us* to "fear"? It should! Does it increase *our* obedience? It should! There are no *accidents* with God.

Please clearly understand that while all death should speak to us of eternal things and of the shortness of this life, and that only what's done for Christ will last, and of the importance of using our time, energy and money for the Lord, most apparently premature death is not punitive. Think of the martyrs Stephen (Acts 7:54-60) and James (Acts 12:2) and Antipas (Rev.2:13). They died early, not because of some punishment from God, but because of man's hatred for Christ whom these martyrs represented faithfully. Think of the young lady at Columbine High School who was killed when she refused to deny Christ. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Ps.116:15). God calls some of us at a younger age than others, to be with Himself simply for His pleasure, and "to depart and be with Christ is *far better*" (Phil.1:23) — it is "gain" (v.21). There is no loss of reward as there is with one taken home because of disobedience. But our death is never an accident. We are "put to sleep through Jesus" (1 Thes.4:15 WKelly) or "laid asleep by Jesus" (FWGrant) or "fallen asleep through Jesus" (JND). *He* alone decides when to call each of us home, for whatever reason. We don't die by chance!

The second case involves the brothers and sisters of the Corinthian assembly. In many ways that assembly was a spiritual disaster. There were divisions (1:11-13). They were acting in the flesh (3:1-4). Some were puffed up (4:18). They had open sexual immorality among them (5:1). They were going to law against one another (6:1-8). There were marriage problems (6:9-7:40) and problems with idols (ch.8). There were problems in

remembering the Lord (ch.11) and in the use of gifts (ch.12-14). Finally there were doctrinal problems In direct connection with the breaking of bread, but seemingly including all the disorders in that assembly, the Lord through Paul said, “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks *judgment* to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would *judge ourselves* we would not be judged. But when we are judged we are *chastened* [child trained] by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor.11:29-32). Remembering the Lord is serious business with Him. When I break bread without being “approved” (v.28, JND) — approved by the Lord in doctrine, attitude, practice — the Lord must child-train me. The Lord’s work on the cross and His Person and His Church are too important for Him to let sin pass. Here we are told such child-training for those not *approved* involves three things — physical weakness, illness, and even premature death! These things were happening to “*many*” at Corinth and the sad thing is, they didn’t even realize it! Would we? Do we? Let’s look at these three things in more detail.

Weakness: In the context of 1 Corinthians *weakness* (Gk: *asthenes* — without strength, Vine) seems to mean physical weakness, although it could lead to, and was a result of, spiritual weakness. Many had no strength to perform the necessities of life at home, business, the assembly. When God brings “weakness,” how much sorrow it causes, how many doctor’s bills, what loss of blessing in serving Him. *But there is always enough strength to do what He wants done!*

Sickness: Next is physical sickness, a step beyond weakness. How much more sorrow, how much disappointment, how much pain, how much money spent, often to no avail. Yet how seldom do we consider that *God* may be trying hard to get our attention (or the attention of someone in the family), to get us to wake up to our wrong attitudes and actions and beliefs. Yet how often sickness produces in us the exact opposite effect — bitterness against God, against others, against circumstances. In passing, I note that by sickness, God may be seeking to teach us not to abuse our bodies or be careless as to them. “Bodily exercise is profitable *for a little*” (1 Tim.4:8, JND). Also Paul “disciplined his body and brought it into subjection” (1 Cor.9:27) so it would not lead him into sin. Then again, I remind you of Paul’s testimony, “Most gladly will I rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor.12:9-10).

(ch.15).

Although it is not my position to judge others, when things happen to *me*, *my* family, *my* brethren whom I particularly interact with, I need to ask the Lord to make it clear if He is seeking a change in *my* life. I need to read His Word with that question in mind.

Death: Finally the Lord again brings us to the ultimate discipline. If weakness and sickness won’t get our attention and get us to alter the course of our lives which we have set in self-will (and it seems that often these things don’t change us), then He *can* bring death. Do I realize that “godliness is profitable for all things, *having promise of the life that now is* and of that which is to come” (1 Tim.4:8). As in Corinth, there “is a sin leading to death” (1 Jn.5:16-17). John keeps it very general, so we need to be careful here. But such sin seems to be that which is so determined, such a course of action against clear knowledge, that the Christian testimony is better off with the person dead. Only God can see the future and make such a determination. Don’t forget the cautions mentioned earlier as to judging others as to death.

Closing Comments

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness *to those who have been trained by it*” (Heb.12:11). Are we a trainable child? God is seeking *righteousness*. What in our lives are we putting ahead of pleasing and serving our Lord — of being “right” before Him? In our materialistic society, many of us need to confess that the world and its pleasures get too much of our limited time, energy and resources. “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Lk.16:13). Will we need the Lord’s chastening hand to make us realize and change this fact, or other matters in our lives? Has God been speaking to us and have we failed to listen? Am I seeking my treasure in heaven or on earth (Mt.6:19)? Are our attitudes a help or a hindrance? It is a terrible thing to stumble others (Mk.9:42; Rom.14:13). Am I wounding their weak consciences (1 Cor.8:12-13)? Do I harbor a root of bitterness (Heb.12:15)?

Although I am to expect persecution from without, I am even to bless those who persecute me (Rom.12:14). I also am to expect certain afflictions common to man (1 Cor.10:13) and this leaves room for preventative care on our part. I am to expect God to test me to see whether I am willing to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ, and only He knows the form or severity of that test and training.

But when it comes to punitive correction it is very much up to each of us how much of His heavy hand we will need. I am convinced we go through many unnecessary sorrows because of our self-will and lack of self judgment (1 Cor.11:31). Will I lay aside fleshly “weights” (Heb.12:1-2) and look away unto Jesus? If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.” How many of us *sincerely* ask our Lord, “Search me O God and know my heart; Try me and know my anxieties [anxious thoughts], and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps.139:23-24)?

For all that happens to us, even if we are truly seeking to live for Him, we can (and should) cast our care on Him, for He cares for us (1 Pet.5:7). Isn't that wonderfully comforting?

RPD