

**THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS**

by J. N. Darby

Jude 3

It is a great thing for us, beloved friends, in all our path to know where we are, and then to know the mind of God, not only as to where we are, but as to our place in the path in which we find ourselves.

Not only has God visited us in grace, but we have to take into our minds what the actual present result of that grace is, so that we hold fast the great principles under which God has set us as Christians; and at the same time be able to apply those principles to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. These circumstances may vary according to our position, but the principles never vary.

Their application to the path of faith may vary and does. I mean such a thing as this: in Hezekiah's time they were told, "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength", and the Assyrian should not even cast a bank before Jerusalem. They were to stay perfectly calm and firm; and the host of Assyria was destroyed. But when a certain time of judgment was come, in Jeremiah's time, then he that went out of the city to the Chaldeans, their enemies, should save himself.

They were still God's people as much as before, though He was saying for the time in judgment – "not my people", and that made the difference. It was not that God's mind was altered or His relationship to His people changed – that never will be. Yet the conduct of the people was to be exactly the opposite. Under Hezekiah they were protected; under Zedekiah they were to bow to the judgment.

I refer to these circumstances as a testimony, to show that while the relationship of God with Israel is immutable in this world, yet their conduct at one time had to be the opposite to that at another.

Look at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, as regards the Church, God's assembly in the world. There I find the full display of power; all had one heart and one mind and they had all things in common; the very place was shaken where they were. But suppose I take the Church now, including the Roman Catholic system and all, if we look at all that and own it, we bow down to everything that is evil at once.

While God's thoughts do not change and He knows His people and so on, yet we need spiritual discernment to see where we are, and what the ways of God are in the circumstances, while never departing from the first great principles which He has laid down for us in His Word. Another thing, too, we have to take account of as a fact of Scripture, is that wherever God has set man, the first thing man has done has been to spoil the position; we must ever take that into account.

Look at Adam, Noah, Aaron, Solomon and Nebuchadnezzar. God goes on in patient mercy, yet the uniform way of man, as we read in Scripture, has been at once to upset and destroy the thing which God set up good.

Consequently, there cannot be any walking with a true knowledge of our position if this is not considered. But God is faithful and goes on in patient love. Thus in Isaiah 6 we find "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes" and so on, but it was not fulfilled for 800 years, and when Christ came they rejected Him.

Patience went on in that way, individual souls were converted, there were various testimonies by the prophets and a remnant was preserved still. But if we should plead the faithfulness of God, which is invariable, to put a positive sanction upon the evil which man has brought in, our whole principle is false.

That would be exactly what they did in Jeremiah's time when judgment was coming, and what Christendom is doing now; they said, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these", and "The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise," when they were all going to Babylon. The faithfulness of God was invariable, but the moment they applied that to sustain them in the place of evil, it became the very ground of their ruin. The same principles which would be our security become, if we leave out the sense of where we are, our ruin.

We get the Word, "look to the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look to Abraham your father and unto Sarah that bare you; "for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him", Isaiah 51: 1; a passage constantly misapplied. God is saying there, Abraham was alone and I called him. Israel, to whom God spake this, was then but a little remnant – Do not let that make you uneasy, I

called Abraham alone.

Their being little was of no consequence – God could bless them alone as well as Abraham.

Now in Ezekiel, a similar statement by the people in different circumstances, is denounced as iniquity. They said there, "we are many", "Abraham was one and he inherited the land", Ezekiel 33: 24; God blessed him and so He will bless us still more. From want of conscience, really, they misapprehended the condition in which they were, and with which God was dealing. So now, if we leave out the sense of our condition – I mean that of the whole professing Church in the midst of which we stand – we shall be utterly wanting in spiritual intelligence.

We are in the last days, but sometimes I think people do not weigh the full force of that. I think I can show you from Scripture that, the Church as a responsible system down here was, from the very outset, that which had got into the condition of judgment, and the state of it was such as to require individual faith to judge it.

The great thought that is current among hundreds and thousands is to get away from the present confusion to a kind of resource, that the Church teaches and judges and does this and that; but, on the contrary, God is judging the Church. Patience He does show and grace, calling souls to Himself as He did in Israel; but what we have to look in the face is that the Church has not escaped the effect of that principle in poor human nature, that the first thing it does is to depart from God, and ruin what He has set up.

When we speak of the last times it is not a new thing, but one which we have in Scripture, one which God in sovereign goodness has given us before the closing of the canon of Scripture. He allowed the evil to come up so that He could give us the judgment of Scripture upon it. If you look at Jude – and I take now merely some of those principles which the Church of God wants – he says, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints". The faith was in danger already, they were obliged to contend for that which was slipping from them, so to say, for there were "certain men crept in unawares", etc., so that you must look at judgment now. God saved the people out of Egypt and afterwards had to destroy them that believed not. So, too, with the angels in like manner.

Then again Enoch prophesied of those of whom Jude speaks, the ungodly, on whom the Lord will execute judgment when He comes again. These were then, and the starting point of it in the Apostles' days was sufficient to give the revelation of God's mind by His Word. The ground of judgment when the Lord comes again was there present already.

If you take John's first epistle, chapter 2: 18, he says, "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists, whereby we know that it is the last time". So that it is not a new thing that is developed, but it began at the first, just as in Israel they made the calf at the outset, yet God bore with them for centuries, but the state of the people was that which a spiritual man judged. John says, "we know that it is the last time". I suppose the Church of God has hardly improved since then. In verse 20 he adds, "But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things" – you have that which will enable you to judge in these circumstances.

Again, take the practical state of the Church as seen by Paul in Philippians 2: 20-21, "I have no man like-minded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's". That was in his day. What a testimony! It was not that they had given up being Christians.

He tells Timothy, "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me; I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge", 2 Timothy 4: 16. Not one stayed by him! Peter tells us that "the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God", 1 Peter 4: 17. I name these as the authority of the Word of God, showing even then, at the very beginning, there was that going on outwardly which the Spirit of God could discern and testify to as being the ground of final judgment, but already manifest in the Church of God.

There is another thing that shows this principle strongly, and that is the ground of action, under the circumstances disclosed in the seven churches in Asia; Revelation 2 and 3. I do not doubt but that it is the history of the Church of God, but the point is, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches". The churches could neither guide nor have authority, nor anything else of the kind but whoever had an ear to hear God's Word had to judge their state. That very evidently is an important principle, and a very solemn thing it is. Christ is speaking to the churches, not as Head of the body, though He is that for ever and ever, but they are being looked at as responsible down here on the earth. It is not the Father sending messages to the Church, as in the different epistles; it is not that, but it is Christ walking in the midst of them to judge them. He is here, therefore, neither the Head of the body, nor the Servant. He has His garment down to the feet – I tuck it up if I want to serve. He is walking in the midst to judge their state. That is a new thing.

It is a question of responsibility, and so you find some approved and some disapproved. Their condition is the subject of judgment on the part of Christ, and they are here called to listen to what He has to say. It is not the blessing of God properly, which you get in the churches, though they had many blessings, but the condition of these churches when these blessings had been put into their hands. What use had they made of them?

Look at the Thessalonians in their freshness – the work of faith, labour of love and patience of hope are manifest. But in the first epistle to the churches, that to Ephesus, we read, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience". Where were the faith and the love? The spring was wanting. The Lord had to say "I will ... remove thy candlestick ... except thou repent". They were put in a place of responsibility and He deals with them according to it. The first thing is, "thou hast left thy first love"; so the time was come when judgment should begin at the house of God.

Peter's words allude to Ezekiel, when he says, "begin at my sanctuary", Ezekiel 9: 6; God's house at Jerusalem, for that is where God looks first for what is right – to His own house. I feel it is an exceedingly solemn thing, and one that should bow our hearts before God. The Church has failed in being the epistle of Christ – it was set as such in the world – but now is it anything like it at all? Can a heathen – that is the way to look at it – see anything of it? Individuals may be walking blessedly; yet where do we get faith like Elijah's, though he knew no one in Israel who was true, while God knew seven thousand. Blessed man he was, but even his faith failed and God asks him, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" This should not be discouragement either, for Christ is sufficient for us. Nothing reaches the full perfect faithfulness of God's own grace, and our hearts ought to be thoroughly bowed as to that.

Neither is it the thought of attacking or blaming, for we are all in it in one sense, but our hearts should take notice, that what was set up so beautiful in the power of God's Spirit – what has it all come to? It casts us on the strength that can never fail!

When the spies returned to Israel, the faith of ten gave way. Caleb and Joshua say, "neither fear ye the people of the land for they are bread for us". It is the same for us in view of difficulty and opposition now. We are called to see where we are, and what the path and the place are, in which we have to walk, and to have a consciousness of the state all is in around us. Yet if the Church has utterly failed, the Head can never fail. Christ is just as sufficient for us now, in the state of things in which we find ourselves, as at the first when He set up the Church in beauty and blessedness. It may require us to look at His Word and see what His mind is, but we are not to hide our eyes from what the state is in which we are.

In reading the Acts it is most striking to see that there is power in the midst of evil. When we get to heaven there will be no evil at all, we shall not want faith or conscience in exercise then, but now we do, and the only thing we have is the power of the Spirit of God where evil is dominant, and by it we should be dominant over the evil in our path.

It does not say that every Christian will be persecuted, but it says, "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution", 2 Timothy 3: 12. If a man show the power of the Spirit of God, the world will not stand it; that is the principle. In the Acts, when we get the power of the Spirit shown in miracles, as in Christ before, what did it draw out? The enmity which crucified the Lord. What we have now is good in the midst of evil – that is what Christ was, perfect good in the midst of evil; but the effect of the display of God in Him – inasmuch as the carnal mind is enmity against God – was that it drew out hostility, and the more the display, the more the hostility drawn out; and so for His love He had hatred. As yet we have not come to the time when evil is removed – that will be when Christ comes again – and that is the difference between that time and this time; that time will be the coming in of good in power, so as to bind Satan and put down evil. But Christ being in this world, and afterwards His saints, is on the contrary, good in the midst of evil, while Satan is the god of this world.

When once these became mixed up, the good was swamped and all floated on together. Take the wise virgins and the foolish; while they are asleep they can all stay together – Why should they not? But the moment they trim their lamps comes the question of the oil, and they do not go together any more. And we shall find it the same. Again in Joshua it was a time of power. True they fail at Jericho and get beaten at Ai, but the general character is power. Enemies were subdued and cities walled up to heaven were taken, faith overcame all, and that is a blessed picture – good in the midst of evil and power carrying on the good and putting down enemies. In Judges it is the contrary; God's power was there, but power was manifested by the evil because the people were not faithful. They got at once to Bochim – Judges 2: 1-5 – i.e., tears, weeping, while in Joshua they went to Gilgal, where the total separation of Israel from the world had taken place; they had crossed Jordan and that was death, and then the reproach of Egypt was rolled away. But the Angel of the Lord went to Bochim; He did not give up Israel though they had left Gilgal. It was grace going after them. And on our part, if we do not go to Gilgal, if we do not go back to the utter humiliation of self in God's

presence, we cannot come out in power.

If a servant's intercourse with God does not surmount his testimony to men, he will break down and fail. He must renew his strength. The great secret of Christian life is that our intercourse with God should make nothing of ourselves. God, however, did not give up Israel, and they built an altar to the Lord, but they were weeping at the altar; they were not in triumph, but were constantly being triumphed over.

Then God sent them judges and He was with the judges, though the people had lost their place. That is what we have to consider in the same way. "All seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's". Was not that losing their place? – not that they had ceased to be the Church of God, I do not mean that. Unless we consider thi