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TRIBULATION – OUR OPPORTUNITY

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"[We are] hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; [we are] perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed-- always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)

Today's modern believers simply do not like to hear about trouble, suffering, and pain. They look on them as something negative, unbiblical, and diabolical while attempting to flee from difficult circumstances, or praying for God to solve them as soon as possible. Some do not believe that it is God's will for man

to face difficulties and trouble, because they are "in Christ". Certainly it is logical to say that various troubles exist. Not every trouble comes directly from the Lord. Some troubles come because of wrong choices or spiritual failure; yet in whatever manner they come I believe that God is always with us in every difficulty with the desire to be glorified through us by His strength.

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The Word tells us to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all things, even when we are in distress. "Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18) Paul confronted us with one unquestionable fact, with which we often struggle, that is that trouble is our destiny and we will never fully resolve it while we are on this earth. We cannot escape trouble in this life, we must understand this and accept it. If we do not accept trials and tribulations as a part of life on earth we will live in a Christian illusion in which many Christians have been found and consequently turned from Jesus Christ.

When we came to Christ no one promised us that we would be free from trouble in this world. Jesus never said this, rather He promised to be with us "even to the end of the age". I believe that a false gospel of peace, prosperity, and earthly pleasure has led many believers to disappointment and a false illusion, for which many have wearied of

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faith and active Christian service. This is the reason for this message, to emphasize that trouble is a part of the life of every believer. Rather than fleeing from it in a false illusion that could lead to disaster, trials can be used as given by God as an opportunity for spiritual development and strengthening of our inner man, as well as bold service for Christ.

1. TROUBLE OCCURS IN THE LIFE OF EVERY DEDICATED BELIEVER.

First of all, I would like to say that trouble comes to every dedicated believer. No dedicated and faithful believer is automatically exempt from life's troubles.

The apostle Paul is a good example of a dedicated believer, yet we see that God, despite his dedication and call, did not exclude him from trials and tribulations. Actually, at the time of his conversion, the Lord told him that He would show Paul how many things he would suffer for His name's sake. (Acts 9:16) The Greek word used for "suffer" is *pascho* and describes a sensible experience of evil things, namely agony.

The following is an account of his life: in all things he suffered trouble, he did not know where to turn; he was persecuted, thrown to the ground, and always bore in his body Jesus' suffering. Interesting, is it not? If we would be honest I think that we would find ourselves in those words. What is more important is that

we have a positive attitude toward trouble and that we cast aside a false belief that often drives us to despair because of those who claim that trouble is not a normal part of a dedicated believer.

It is unfortunate that believers fall away from Christ after a time, or no longer wish to serve Him because they did not use trouble as an opportunity; rather than turning to God in times of trouble they were concentrated on their pain and difficulties. Many Christians have created scenarios in their minds from which they cannot escape because they have been concentrated on their own strength and momentary troubles. This is one of the main reasons why many turn away – a bad attitude is created because they live with the belief that if they are joined with Jesus Christ they should not have to endure any kind of trouble. I am convinced that in this time of crisis many believers will fall away and pull into themselves and their own selfish worlds due to these wrong teachings and beliefs, because they did not accept the fact that trouble comes to every Christian.

The Apostle Paul did not only share his troubles with the Corinthians, he also told the believers in Thessalonica that trials are a normal occurrence for every believer. He said this, "...for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you

know." (1 Thessalonians 3:3b-4) Some Christians in Thessalonica turned to God in times of trouble hoping to flee trouble on this earth. The Apostle Paul reminded them that God did not promise anyone that life would be without trouble; rather he said that He would grant us strength to endure. Let us not forget that the Christian life always includes obedience, regardless of trials and tribulations.

Jesus also said this about trouble and persecution, as a part of the life of every dedicated believer, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great [is] your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

Many dedicated believers, from Abraham to today's believer, have experienced trouble. Actually, believers throughout the Word, as today, have experienced trouble, persecution, and difficulties. We must accept the fact that trouble

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is a part of Christian life, if we wish to grow spiritually and serve Him. This is something that will not change until the Lord Jesus Christ comes again.

I am concerned for believers who have begun their relationship with Jesus in hope to be free from their troubles and receive success in all that they do. Of course, when we come to Him, He will free us from many things, make life easier, and at times successful. However this does not necessarily mean that He will protect us from all of life's problems on earth. I believe that the erroneous belief that trouble is not a part of the Christian life has caused many to pull away from Jesus and the church. Life in an illusion causes many to collapse at the first trial, because they were not prepared for the reality of the existence of trouble.

Therefore, regardless of whether or not we are dedicated believers, troubles will come and they are a part of the Christian life, we cannot escape them.

★ How can Christ be glorified and show His strength through us if at the first mention of trouble we flee, pull into ourselves, or attempt to “break the powers of darkness”, not allowing Christ's suffering to be made manifest in our bodies?

2. TROUBLES COME AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO STRENGTHEN THE INNER MAN

“...always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (2 Corinthians 4:10)

We ought to always view trouble as an opportunity to strengthen our inner man. The inner man is not the outer man. Our flesh often looks like this: when we say that we ought to improve ourselves we often think about our bank account balance, body-building, vitamins, or having a better and bigger car in the garage (with more air bags for greater security). Today's idea of improvement means to become a property owner, to have an inner circle of people with position and power, or to have as many diplomas and titles as you can.

Our problem is that many Christians today live a fleshly life. By that I do not necessarily mean that they live in open sin, rather that they begin their Christian life for the wrong reasons. Many desire for Christ to make their life better so they can have a successful career. Many expect Him to coddle them, care for them, and work miracles all the time. While there is truth in all these elements, many begin with a wrong gospel and fall away at the first test when they are met with tribulation.

Yet, how can Christ be glorified and show His strength through us if at the

first mention of trouble we flee, pull into ourselves, or attempt to “break the powers of darkness”, not allowing Christ’s suffering to be made manifest in our bodies? Rather than strengthening the inner man and using this opportunity, we grow bitter or focus on the pain that brought about our present difficulty.

Consequently we come to a standstill on the path God has for us, giving ourselves over to the flesh and worldly pleasures.

Paul’s desire was for the Corinthians, and all of us, to focus on something much greater than the things around us. We are so bound with a love for this world and the pleasures of this world that we do not have a great desire to be with the Lord or to serve Him. We actually want Him to serve us and make this world a better place. Our behavior, focus, and how our strength is directed demonstrate that we are not living by faith, but by sight. This is why many Christians today cannot declare from the heart that they are strangers in this land, because they are so bound to the things of this world; their activities and their frame of mind depend on them. This is why it is very important that we do not view trouble as something negative, but we ought to use the opportunity to grow in the Lord. Often only through trouble can we see what is in our hearts and what we are standing on in times of trouble. Paul emphasized the inner man to the Ephesians, not the outer man, when he said, “That He would grant you,

according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” (Ephesians 3:16-17)

We do not need to hide away when we find ourselves in the midst of trials and tribulations; we do not need to proclaim our faith and pretend that nothing is going on; this is hypocrisy and does not display real and true Christianity. Trials and tribulations are an opportunity for our faith to be tested, which is more precious than anything on this earth.

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Paul said that he made it his aim to please the Lord, “whether present or absent”. He said that we must all come before “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10), which is why we must use the opportunity when our faith is tested, and not complain in difficult times.

In the end, what does it mean to us to have a great bank account, a better car, or bigger salary if we lose our faith in the Lord, if we turn from Him and His plans for us? The Apostle Peter said that faith is more precious than gold, because if we cease to believe no amount of gold can save us on that day. “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, [being] much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

(1 Peter 1:6-7)

✦ Moments of trouble are times when we can renew our dedication and service to Christ. They are times when we can focus on eternity, because our weakness in trouble enables Christ’s resurrection power to strengthen us.

3. WE NEED NOT FAINT IN TIMES OF TROUBLE BECAUSE WE HAVE A HOPE IN ETERNAL GLORY.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward [man] is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding [and] eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen [are] temporary, but the things which are not seen [are] eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Often when trouble comes we lose heart; we lose the desire and strength to continue with life in the things that God has for us. Why is this? Because we do not walk by faith, but by sight. When all around us seems difficult, if we do not walk by faith, putting our trust in the Lord, we begin to respond in a fleshly and worldly way because we have a wrong understanding of what is valuable. If we place value on the things of this world, when our seemingly perfect circumstances and the sense of security we feel from our worldly things seem to collapse around us we will automatically fall, lose heart, and abandon our walk with Jesus. The reason for this is a faulty view of Christ and Christianity. Consider how absurd it is that He must always give us secure and happy things, a life without suffering and pain on earth.

Nevertheless, Paul had strength despite

difficult circumstances and did not despair because he didn't look at those things that are seen, but unseen; namely those things that are not passing. "...while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen [are] temporary, but the things which are not seen [are] eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:18) Paul was not concentrated on difficulties and those things that eventually fade, for example, his outer man that was stoned, scourged, hungry, exhausted, and thirsty. Despite this he had strength and did not grow weary because he knew that temporary, small, earthly trouble brings an imminent, great, and eternal glory. He spoke more about this in the next chapter when he said, "For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven." (2 Corinthians 5:2) Or when he said that he is always filled with confidence and that he would rather leave this body to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)

Paul did not look at the circumstances surrounding him to direct his feelings and activity for the Lord. No, he used trouble to strengthen his inner man and continued forward focused on eternity and faith, not momentary pain and suffering. He did not drain strength through pain; rather he built strength through the inner man by the Holy Spirit. This didn't weary him, it led him. His perseverance left a mark on many who read his letters. His life was similar to

Abraham's, our father of faith, for whom the Word says that he did not look at his circumstances rather he went forward in faith against all hope, leaned on the Lord and not on the difficult circumstances around him. "Who [Abraham], contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." (Romans 4:18)

The Apostle Paul knew that momentary sufferings were not worthy of our focus on pain and difficulties when compared to the glory that would be revealed in us one day. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy [to be compared] with the glory which shall be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18)

This is why we must never allow trouble, criticism, or pain to distance us from the work God has for us. Moments of trouble are times when we can renew our dedication and service to Christ. They are times when we can focus on eternity, because

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Therefore, do not lose heart, do not faint. Although trials and tribulations do not necessarily change quickly, our attitude and service can be different and always advancing. Now, in light of understanding trouble, we can understand why Paul could victoriously say, "[We are] hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; [we are] perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

In other words, we do not have to pretend that we don't experience trouble; it will still come in greater or smaller measure because we live in an imperfect world. Situations can be discouraging, but because of our walk in faith, because of our concentration on Jesus and eternal, imminent glory, we will always go forward from glory to glory, from victory to victory. We will not have to forsake Jesus and withdraw from those we serve. If we are focused on eternity we will have more strength and courage. Then we will be

able to say with Paul that no one and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [Shall] tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." (Romans 8:35-37)

"For the mountains shall depart And the hills be removed, But My kindness shall not depart from you, Nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,' Says the LORD, who has mercy on you." (Isaiah 54:10)

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