

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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In the Church or in the World? Is there a Difference?

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. (1 Peter 5:8–9, KJV 1900)

Many years ago I was talking with a man who grew up in a Christian community and a Christian home. When he moved away from his native region, he simply didn't bother to carry forward his Christian roots in his new location. The subject of church eventually came up in our discussion, and he quipped with a touch of cynicism in his tone, "I'd rather live in the world than in a church with all those hypocrites." The thought occurred to me. Do you ever encounter a hypocrite in the world? Are all hypocrites members of churches? Having spent much of my adult life in a secular career, I can bear personal testimony that contradicts the idea. For a number of years, I worked in public education. In that setting, I often heard teachers, administrators, and even elected board members talk in public in glowing terms about how all of their focus and desire was for the betterment of children in the system, but often I heard a very different theme when these people spoke in private. They were dedicated to almost anything other than the betterment of children, most often to their personal gain. And, yes, I also encountered some truly dedicated and admirable people who devoted their lives to helping children learn, a surprising number of them dedicated Christians. Name the field, you will encounter exemplary people who give themselves wholly to the noble benefit of others, and you will also observe people who play pretentious games to give observers an appearance that they are far nobler than they in fact are. I have indeed seen this hypocrisy in churches, but I've seen more of it outside churches than I ever saw on the inside.

*...knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. Whether in church or not, believers in Christ must face the insidious dangers of the roaring lion of which Peter warns us in this lesson. The lion roars in church and feeds egos to nudge people in church to act in their personal interest instead of practicing the mind of Christ and preferring their brothers and sisters above themselves. (Philippians 2; the first four verses emphasize this practice, but the whole chapter builds on this foundation) **It would wondrously benefit believers to read this chapter daily--every day, first thing in the morning, and then to work all day long trying to practice it.** However, the same*

lion roars against believers in the world who do not seek the shelter and fellowship of kindred, godly people in church. In the church or out, a godly believer must face the insidious roar of this lion. In the church, you benefit from the godly companionship and support of like-minded soldiers who, like you, oppose the lion. More importantly, you also have the added support and protection of another "lion," the Lion of the tribe of Judah. While He indeed aids His children in the world, Scripture consistently teaches that churches that faithfully seek to serve Him benefit from a greater grace in their times of need. This present benefit in no way adds to their place in heaven. All who shall spend eternity there shall do so on the merit of His finished work, not on their contribution to that place. Scripture describes heaven as an inheritance or a gift, not as a wage.

Our contemporary culture witnesses an errant and cruel attitude from a number of preachers that is generally categorized as the "Health and wealth" gospel. According to this devious teaching, if you are "Really" a sincere believer, your faith will enable you to avoid the trials and disappointments of lesser believers. You will make more money, enjoy better health, and generally never face the afflictions of life that lesser believers and unbelievers suffer. Many of these false professors trumpet the need for their followers to send them large sums of money to support their ungodly lavish lifestyles. And the greater cruelty surfaces in the poor souls whom these false teachers deceive. They really believe what they hear from these people. So when they face trials, financial difficulties, health problems, or other troublesome issues in their life, they also believe the false teachers and think that their trials came upon them because they in some way failed to live up to the Biblical standard of a "Real" believer. What do they do in an attempt to solve their problem? Often they send more money to the false teachers and work even harder to realize what Scripture teaches they shall never realize.

In fact, Scripture uniformly teaches that those who faithfully practice their faith shall suffer in this world. Peter teaches that both faithful believers in church and believers in the world face the same lion and must fight with spiritual sobriety and vigilance to withstand his onslaughts. In his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul said that he went from place

to place in his faithful ministry, knowing that "...bonds and afflictions abide me." (Acts 20:23) When I read or hear these false teachers promote their health and wealth heresy, I want to ask them, "Tell me. What was Paul doing that was so wrong that he never experienced the easy comforts that you describe as God's guarantee to the faithful? Was Paul so wrong and so unfaithful to bring these trials upon himself?" Based on secular historical accounts, eleven of the twelve apostles who faithfully spread the truth of Jesus and the resurrection died at the hands of their enemies, and the twelfth, John, spent many years on a prison island for his faith. Really? Were all twelve of these men so unfaithful that they never--even once--experienced this health and wealth phenomenon? And Peter expands his point to remind his readers that they and their brothers in the world also suffer at the hands of the roaring lion. John the baptist was beheaded after a time in prison because he boldly rebuked a political leader for his public sin. Was John also a failure as a believer? When you turn off the radio or television and spend more time reading your Bible, you realize how wholly errant these teachings are, how they consistently contradict the teachings of Scripture.

The question arises. If believers in church and believers in the world likewise face the assaults of the roaring lion, why bother to attend and belong to a church? Peter's letter, as well as much of the New Testament answers the question. Do you prefer to face this cruel lion alone, all on your own, or would you prefer to face him with a band of godly, faithful soldiers at your side? There is something wonderfully disarming to the lion's roar when believers band together in mutual faith in the Captain of their salvation and in vigorous support and encouragement of each other. Scripture teaches that this fellowship of believers honors the Lord so that He not only approves, but He also intervenes to defend, protect, and enrich them in their mutual faith in Him. Not only do we enjoy the company of other like-minded believers, but we also realize the greater safety of the Lord Himself engaging the lion on our behalf.

And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen. (Romans 16:20, KJV 1900)

In the battle of the ages, whom do you believe shall win, the Lion of the tribe of Judah or the roaring lion of whom Peter warns us? No contest, Jesus wins!

...*shortly*. In the final battle in the end, Jesus shall surely win the war, but Paul encourages the Romans and us of an outcome that we witness and experience in the near-term, "shortly," not at the end. The folks who doubt that Jesus shall faithfully honor all of His promises or believe that He cannot do so typically misrepresent the colossal battle of the ages in the closing chapters of Revelation.

They depict a massive engagement in which Jesus and all the saints fight the roaring lion and his band with the outcome uncertain and accompanied with massive loss of life and limb for the faithful. Do they not read the text of which they speak? A reading of these passages gives us a different view. Jesus alone goes onto the battlefield, and, in the end, He alone wins an undisputed victory. The saints who accompany Him are ***dressed in linen garments***, the clothing of priests in the Old Testament, ***not the armor of a soldier on the battlefield***. In that battle, Jesus is the sole combatant for God, and the saints are present to witness His victory, not lose their lives in the war.

How should soldiers on the battlefield face their enemy? Should each soldier decide his own private battle strategy and engage the enemy with no thought for his fellow-soldiers, or his commander? If you observe many professing believers in churches today—and outside—you'd reach that conclusion. However, Scripture contradicts the point, and it does so with consistent gravity. Why do so many Christians conveniently ignore the teachings of Philippians 2 and fiercely petition their fellow-believers in church for such trivial matters as the color of carpets or the décor of the church building? Why do so many believers strive to promote their private ideas about Scripture's teachings contrary to their pastor's teachings? And, yes, why do pastors on occasion ignore the things that they have believed and promote new ideas and doctrines to gain more popularity and perhaps more disciples? Did God change His mind about the truth of Scripture? Does God at all care about the color of carpet or the décor of a church building? No! But He does reveal in Scripture that He cares—and deeply so—about the unity of His followers behind Him and His commandments in their lives and in their battles with the roaring lion. Ponder the implications of Psalm 133. Inspired Scripture here makes a clear association between God's anointing oil to Aaron's priesthood with unity among believers. The moment a believer advocates ideas or does things contrary to the unity of which Scripture speaks he/she effectively dis-anoints himself/herself from serving as a godly priest and king to the Lord. (1 Peter 2:1-12, especially verses 9-10; do not overlook that Verse 11 warns us that our fleshly lust which seeks to promote what we want or think ***wars against our soul***, effectively putting us on the side of the roaring lion, not on the side of the Lion of the tribe of Judah; Revelation 1:6)

While believers one and all must face the lion's roar, there is a powerful benefit to those who face him from the position of greater strength and support in a band of New Testament believers, a church. See you in church on Sunday?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor