

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## What Judgment?

*For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator. (1 Peter 4:17–19, KJV 1900)*

Folks who cannot discern that the Bible teaches many different salvations typically wrest this passage dreadfully. It is not uncommon to hear many of these folks describe this salvation as eternal—the ultimate and final—salvation, but they wrongly conclude that Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice for our sins barely, "scarcely" saves. Supposedly, if God had required just one more condition, however minuscule, Jesus' work would not have accomplished our salvation.

The correct interpretation of the passage examines the verse in its context of Christian suffering, not a context at all of going to heaven when we die. Viewing the particular saving of the verse in that context as deliverance through suffering, the passage is highly instructive. Both in Scripture and in the history of the faith, we read of many giants in the faith enduring unbelievable persecution for their faith. Though the trial was fierce, they remained steadfast in their faith. The errant view of this passage would allow that these folks earned their wings to glory, but that any lesser believer's eternal state is questionable. Have you ever thought about some of these godly men and women who suffered for their faith and wondered how you might react if you were subjected to similar persecution? Likely, if you have so wondered, you questioned whether or not you would stand tall and faithful to the Lord in the heat of such suffering? Under the pressure of such trials, would you react as a righteous and faithful soldier of Jesus Christ, or as "...the ungodly and the sinner?"

Another point that Peter makes quite clearly in the passage is that the judgment in question begins at the "...house of God," not at the Great White Throne. Further, Peter reminds us that the time has already come; it is not a yet-future event that shall occur at the end of time. Paul admonishes the Corinthians to examine themselves as they sit at the Lord's table and take the Communion emblems. (1 Corinthians 11:28) In this context, Paul warns the Corinthians that they must examine and judge themselves as they sit at the Communion table, or the Lord shall judge them. (1 Corinthians 11:29-32) Later he admonishes the Corinthians more generally, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith...." (2 Corinthians 13:5)

In both of the Corinthian contexts, we see a judgment that occurs in the specific setting of the church, the "...house of God." (1 Timothy 3:15) Not only do such judgments occur in the unique setting of the Lord's church, but we should also note that the fiercest persecutions of Scripture and Christian history were aimed against the Lord's church. So we find New Testament testimony that self-examination and judgment, as well as the Lord's judgments occur in the church.

Although I have often witnessed wise, godly judgment in churches by the people who made up those churches, I suggest that the judgment to which Peter refers in this passage is the Lord's judgment, not the church's. Peter does, however, teach us that this particular judgment of the Lord occurs in the setting of church, "...the house of God."

As clearly as the idea of "...scarcely saved" does not at all relate to Jesus' finished work and our eternal salvation, it quite accurately describes the trial of faith and the response of believers to persecution, to suffering for their faith. Throughout the history of the faith, intense persecution has proved that some who appeared to be among the most faithful crumbled under the pressure of persecution, while others, not always those who appeared the strongest in the faith, did endure. As we ponder the possibility of persecution for the faith, we should always view that potential experience through the prism of God's merciful grace. When the heat of persecution let its fires loose against the saints, some of those who appeared strongest in the faith failed the test, while some who appeared to be weak in the faith were emboldened and stood faithfully by their Lord. We cannot explain this outcome by our view of who appeared to be strong or weak in the faith. Perhaps the strongest in the faith in one setting relied on their own strength when persecution came, and their strength failed. It was wholly insufficient. In the same fires, those who were weak and struggling laborers in the faith may have realized their frailty and cried out to the Lord for grace and strength to endure, and grace, as it always does, came through. Thus, the explanation of the mystery of a frail believer standing in strength far beyond his/her personal ability must be understood through that

person's leaning on the Lord for help, not on self. We can hardly imagine the personal torments of conscience that a believer might experience who thought himself/herself to be faithful, but who crumbled in the day of adversity. And Peter's lesson calls us to ponder that precise experience.

*Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing....* What is the meaning of suffering according to the will of God? When we examine the dynamics of persecution, either in Scripture or on the blood-stained pages of Christian history, the cause of persecution is not a righteous cause by any stretch. It comes from wicked, angry haters of God, or from equally angry, misguided zealots of false Christianity. And God is in no way the cause of either.

Paul sheds some light on this question in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7. Notice the opening line of this passage, "For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from..." God's will in the lives of His children always commands and convicts them to live "...soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." (Titus 2:12) When we quench the conviction of the Holy Spirit in our thinking and conduct, we make choices and take actions that contradict the will of God for us. And Scripture warns that this sinful conduct always brings the severe chastening of the Lord upon His erring children.

In the context of our study passage, Peter has admonished us not to suffer as "...a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters." (1 Peter 4:15) How do we not suffer as the practitioner of such sins? We avoid this suffering by faithfully avoiding the named conduct. If we permit these sins to command any portion of our lives, we shall suffer the Lord's judgments for those sins. And in that conduct, we cannot also suffer "...according to the will of God." We suffer according to the will of God by living our daily lives "...according to the will of God." We further ensure that we suffer "...according to the will of God" by the manner in which we respond to suffering when it comes. If we react to our suffering with complaints, our reaction is not "...according to the will of God. However, if we, like those early apostles and Christians in Acts, endure persecution with the Lord's assisting and enabling grace, we go our way rejoicing that we were counted worthy to suffer for Him. And that rejoicing manifests that we are suffering according to the will of God, and not according to our broken human perspective.

*...commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing.* Regardless the malignity of those who inflict the suffering on us, our one "...according to the will of God" response must be to continue in well doing, and to equally abide in the mindset of committing our souls to the Lord, faithfully believing that He shall faithfully stand by us and supply needed grace for every trial. Peter leaves no ground for us to complain about how we were

mistreated. Our one "according to the will of God" reaction to suffering as a Christian is to remain faithfully in the path of well doing.

*...as unto a faithful Creator.* Many years ago, I recall reading about a young lady who had been a believer for a number of years. She was faithful to a degree, but not in a way that made her stand out above the rank and file of believers. The time came when she was arrested by the authorities for being a Christian. She was given two choices, 1) recant her faith and go free, or 2) stand by her faith and be burned at the stake. To the surprise of many who knew her, she faithfully stood by her faith through all the trial. Finally, she was tied to the stake, and her persecutors stacked the wood around her feet. Her last opportunity to deny came, "Deny your faith or burn." She looked at the man holding the torch, ready to light the wood, and spoke in godly calmness, "My Lord has always been faithful to me, even when I have not been faithful to Him. He has never forsaken me. Why then should I forsake Him now?" Those who witnessed her death testified that, as the fires and smoke grew in intensity, this young saint started singing hymns and praising her Savior for His sustaining grace right up to the moment that she could no longer speak. Go back to Acts, Chapter Six, and read the account of Stephen's martyrdom. (Acts 6:8-15) When the fires of persecution burn their hottest, God's grace shines the brightest.

In terms of overt, life-threatening persecution, most of us have never had such an experience. We should pray for delivering grace that we never face it. However, in some way or another, we shall face the choice of faithfulness or surrender in our lives. The same clear choice, and the same firm promises of the Lord's sustaining grace apply in those lesser trials as they might in the life-threatening trials that so many in the faith have faced.

At no time in our lives is the realization of the Lord's faithfulness as important as when the voice of trial, enticing temptations, or threats against faithfulness hurl their weight against our souls. *"...as unto a faithful Creator."* We can face whatever trial comes our way with godly grace to the extent that we keep our minds clearly aware of His faithfulness to His promises. Doubt His faithfulness, and you'll stagger and stumble in your own walk. Steadfastly trust His faithfulness, and you shall realize and understand the mystery of a young woman who endured the fires that destroyed her life with only joyful praise to God, as if she never felt the first pain of the fire. Praise God for His unwavering faithfulness!

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor