

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Dear Friends,

Special Announcement

A dear brother and friend, Elder Arvell Charles, left this world and went to glory yesterday. He had a stroke earlier this week and quickly declined. Brother Arvell was one of those rare men who linked with me the first time we met. Whenever we were together, we were comfortable, enjoyed each other, and could talk about whatever was on our minds. I will miss him sorely.

He was one of the most kind, faithful, and devoted men I've ever known to his Lord, to his faith, and to the people he served. Please keep Sister Brenda, New Bethel, and Holtville churches in your prayers through the days ahead.

Our study passage this week deals with Jesus' beginning His preparation of Peter for a special work he would be blessed to accomplish at a future time. If Satan could have limited the Christian faith to a tiny fragment of Judaism, he would have celebrated. I love the Lord's surprising (To us) methods. He called Paul to serve as the apostle to the Gentiles, while He primarily appointed Peter to minister to the Jews. However, it was Peter whom He sent to a Gentile family, opening the gospel to the people of God, regardless their race, their culture, their language, or any other superficial human distinctions between them. Paul affirmed this truth in his writing to a primarily Gentile church at Ephesus.

And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. (Ephesians 2:16-18 KJV 1900)

In this passage, "both" refers to Jews and Gentiles (A word in the New Testament that includes all races and/or cultures other than Jews). When believers in Jesus follow their Lord and grow in their imitation of His example, they consciously work at removing "enmity" from relationships. Oh how this foundational truth of the faith is needed in our present world. The more time we spend with our Lord and His Book the less we will focus on or exaggerate differences, real or imagined, and the more we will come to realize that we, as believers in Jesus, are united in one glorious heavenly family. And we will also understand; the more we can work to realize that family union in the here and now the more our Lord, our "Father in heaven," will be pleased and bless us to grow stronger in Him and in our "Family" ties.

At the time Jesus lived in human flesh and completed His work for His "Family," the Old Testament Jew-Gentile barrier still existed. However, a careful reading of the gospels and of Jesus' regularly blessing Gentiles with His miracles, healing, and teaching will prepare us for the point that Paul makes in this passage, and the point that Jesus Himself made in our study passage.

Considering this godly union which the Lord taught and generated through both Paul and Peter in the first generation of the faith, how should you and I deal with our present stress, both related to COVID-19 and related to our culture? Should we create tension and schism with those who do not agree with

our assessment of either situation? For example, should we feel--and voice--our angry pride against a believer who, because of age and/or health, or, for that matter, because of basic health concern, chooses to wear a mask in public and maintain safe distance from other people? Or should we kindly respect their choice and pray for their safety? Should we embrace one of the endless conspiracies or quasi-conspiracy theories that seem to abound, pridefully "Bullying" anyone who is so dumb as to dare disagree with our supposed superior knowledge? Or should we strive to show the Lord's gracious kindness to the people in our world, whether they agree with us, or look like us, or not?

The profession versus the actual practice of true faith stands or falls with how we treat each other during times of stress and trial. Think, thoroughly reflect, over your activities during the last week. How much time, words (Your voice or your keyboard), and mental energy did you invest in conduct that encouraged and considered other believers over yourself? How much time did you invest in verbally "Strong-arming" others to agree with whatever ideas or opinions you have regarding the distressing issues which we face? And how much time did you honestly devote to conduct that follows the peaceful, gracious example which Jesus demonstrated toward Jews and Gentiles with no distinction at all? If you applied one simple Bible verse as a filter to your conduct last week, how much of what you did would pass the filter, and how much would be rejected?

Let all things be done unto edifying. (1 Corinthians 14:26b)

We manifest that we understand and honestly believe Jesus' words to Peter by the quantity of our actions that passed this "Edification filter." If you were to give yourself an honest grade on your conduct of the last week, would you grade yourself with an "A" or an "F"? Would Jesus who "...preached peace to you which were far off, and to them that were nigh" agree with your self-grade?

A major point appears in our study passage. First, Biblical conversion is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. If we study Scripture and strive to practice our faith, we shall experience many "Conversions," similar to Jesus' words to Peter. The Lord told Peter that he would have such a conversion long years after his initial conversion to leave his fishing boat and follow Jesus. And Scripture reminds us; with each opportunity we face for another "Conversion," the Lord gives us yet one more precious opportunity to grow our faith, and our imitation of Him in our lives stronger and more like Him. Are we prepared for such change? Are we willing to grow kinder, gentler, and more "Edifying" in our interactions with other believers? Buckle your seatbelt! You are in for an "E" ticket ride, but the outcome will become your life's greatest blessing--to yourself and to the people the Lord has placed in your life.

Lord help us,
Joe Holder

The Dynamic of Christian Growth

And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. (Luke 22:31-32 KJV 1900)

We live in a strange age in many ways. Increasingly, people outright reject anything that resembles Biblical Christian ethics and lifestyle in favor of one or another famous person's ideas, often ideas that never worked. If a colorful personality can put an appealing spin on a cliché, people will buy into the idea and think it is the best thing they ever heard. Folks, it is not wisdom to keep repeating ideas that simply do not work, that never worked. Our culture is sick and bleeding today. But the people who are hurting and bleeding most seem to ignore the one thing that would give them

hope for healing, God and His way as set forth in Scripture.

When we turn from our culture at large to the populist Christian culture, things are not that different. The name of Jesus is repeated often enough, but His teachings are openly ignored. How many radio or television sermons have you heard recently that urged you to take Jesus' Sermon on the Mount ethics and lifestyle seriously?

Within my own church fellowship and culture, things often are sadly more imitation of this cultural dysfunction than shining the light of Scripture to a better way. Have you heard anyone say, "The older generation of preachers preached nothing but doctrine. We need duty. I'm going to fix this problem. I will only preach duty"? If preaching one part of the Bible only created a problem, can't you see that preaching another isolated part of the Bible will not solve anything? It will merely create a different problem. What is the solution? Follow Scripture, and preach doctrine and duty blended together into one integrated, balanced New Testament message. In the New Testament, doctrine and duty are merged together, doctrine forming the foundation for duty. If you preach either without the other, you fail the New Testament model.

A common feature in the broader Christian culture is exposed by our study passage. Many of the most popular preachers in the culture never preach much of anything other than how to get people saved. They reveal in this emphasis that they have lost sight of the meaning of Jesus, whose name means "Savior"! Do you save people, or does Jesus save them? (Matthew 1:21) This wrong focus leads to the problem I have in mind. In the mind of most modern preachers and Christians in the pews, belief or faith is a binary. You either have it, or you don't. They seem to have lost the Biblical sense of a growing dynamic faith. This mindset will often lead the people who have this problem to say, "You have doubts? If you have the least doubt for even one minute, you are likely not saved. You need to start over from the beginning." So much is wrong with this mindset, it is difficult to know where to begin. First, it is wholly self-focused. Everything you think and do aims at gaining something for yourself. The idea of a Jesus first, and serving others next, which lies at the heart of Jesus' message of self-denial, not self-indulgence, is unknown in this attitude. Secondly, this mindset contradicts multiple passages throughout the New Testament, passages that often record Jesus confronting His chosen twelve men with—and for—*their unbelief*. Yet not once did Jesus tell these men that they were likely not really saved, so they should start over. He confronted their unbelief. He rebuked them for it, and He taught them how to grow stronger in their faith. In our study passage, Jesus tells Peter that a time will come when he shall be "converted," come to a new and better understanding, to change one's mind in a way that turns him/her more toward the right way. Again, the contemporary populist idea of "Conversion" teaches a once-in-a-lifetime "Conversion." The New Testament, exemplified by our study lesson, teaches a growing, developing faith and lifestyle, not divinely decreed, but the right goal of a healthy faith, pursued by the believer who seeks to follow Jesus and His way. Coupled with this dynamic Biblical faith is the true quality of frequent "Conversions" from our own ideas to God's, to His "Faith way" of thinking and living.

Simon, Simon. Scripture does not so divide the child of God as to imply two wholly separate personalities in one person, but it repeatedly teaches that we do live with two conflicting and contradictory natures. Perhaps in this name reference, "Simon, Simon," not "Peter, Peter," the name Jesus gave to Peter which refers to a strong solid piece of rock. The "Simon" in this disciple was impulsive, act-first-think-later, and often more emotional than deliberate in his faith. Jesus knew that Satan looks for our weak spots, not our strengths. It is those weak spots that he will assault to bring us down.

Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. Will believers ever learn? Satan is not your best friend. **He and God are not on the same team, working together.** If you believe in Jesus and seek to serve Him in your life, be aware. Satan has you in his crosshairs. He works to tear

you down and destroy your faith any way he can. In first century Judah, after wheat was beaten out on the threshing floor, it was typically shaken through a screen or “Filter.” The small wheat kernels would fall through the screen onto the threshing floor, and the larger, lighter chaff would remain in the screen. Satan has a very deliberate design in his stressing and assaulting you. He will do everything he can to separate you from everything good and precious in your life. Get rid of it. He wants to shake you till the only thing left in you is useless chaff! And he will use every strategy he can imagine to succeed. Pastors sadly often see and hear these deceitful, literally “Devilish” strategies from believers who have been so sifted and deceived by this “Great Deceiver.” “I tried God, and He just didn’t work for me.” Really? How long did you “Try” Him? How did you try Him? “I didn’t know what to do, so I sought counsel from people I knew in the church.” What this really means is that the person had already made up his mind, and he kept asking professing believers for advice till he finally found a believer who told him what he wanted to hear, not what God said in Scripture. “This is just the way I am. Take me or leave me.” No, Scripture teaches all of us, as believers, to deny self, who we “Are” in our natural bent, and to “...**be transformed by the renewing of your minds.**” (Romans 12:2)

Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. First century Greek language in which the New Testament was first written was far more sophisticated than our contemporary English language. For example, it used specific—and different—word forms for singular and plural second person pronouns. Our English language uses only one word form for the second person pronoun, “You,” whether referring to one person or many. In the King James Bible, “You” forms of the second person pronoun reflect the Greek plural second person pronoun. Those passages refer to more than one person. And the King James also communicates to us in English when the Greek second person pronoun is singular by using “Thee,” “Thou,” “Thy,” or “Thine.” Thus, what naïve Bible readers complain about as an archaic flaw in the King James Bible is actually one of its strong points. It communicates this precise information to us, despite the fact that our “Normal” English dialect cannot do so.

In this sentence, Jesus used the plural form of the pronoun. He addresses Simon, but He is telling Peter and the other disciples that Satan has the same destructive strategy in mind for all of them, not just for Peter.

*But I have prayed for **thee**, that **thy** faith fail not.* In the middle of this lesson, Jesus changes the reference from all of the disciples present, “you,” to Peter alone, “thee,” “thy.” In some quite specific point of “Sifting,” Satan hopes to derail all of the twelve, but Jesus prays for Peter to be the man who “Converts” the brethren and foils Satan’s design.

Whatever the “Screen” Satan intended to use would compromise Peter’s faith. We learn through a study of Acts what this deceitful ploy of Satan was. He tried to convince the first generation of Jewish believers that Jesus was Savior of Jews, but not so much of Gentiles. A Gentile must convert to Judaism in order to gain the blessings of Jesus in his life. We see this deceit working on some believers in Acts 15, and likely also in Galatians. From Acts 15, we learn that the people who created the turmoil and controversy in Antioch Church, primarily a Gentile church, were Jewish members of Jerusalem Church, primarily a Jewish church. And what were they teaching that created this controversy? They taught that circumcision was essential for salvation, either salvation in its ultimate sense of eternal salvation, or salvation in its temporal idea of deliverance from error and false faith. How did Paul and Barnabas react to this idea? They confronted it and strongly, steadfastly opposed it. We do not read of Paul and Barnabas minimizing the error and claiming it was one of many “Non-essential” ideas in which believers are allowed personal freedom to think as they wish. For them, it was essential that faithful believers not embrace this idea regarding Jesus. In the end, Jerusalem Church agreed with them and rejected the idea their members were falsely advocating in Antioch Church.

Why did Jerusalem Church, influenced by Peter, so strongly reject this idea? We learn the

details by reading carefully Acts 10 and 11. When Peter followed the Lord's direction to visit Cornelius, a Roman military officer, a Gentile, he discovered something he had not formerly understood.

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. (Acts 10:34-35)

This is one of those half-quoted passages that naïve believers misunderstand because they never consider the whole sentence. Why is God no respecter of persons? Peter has now been “Converted.” Instead of believing all believers must become de facto “Jews” first to become a “Real Christian,” he then understood that God's saving grace worked in every race and culture, and His children in every culture who fear Him and work righteousness are—already—accepted with Him. This idea seems elementary to us, but it was transformative to first century Jewish believers, even to the apostles.

When Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, his Jewish brothers questioned him. The exact term is “...contended with him.” However, Peter patiently and kindly explained his whole experience to them. In the end, Peter's “Conversion” on this belief indeed strengthened the whole church.

Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life. (Acts 11:17-18)

Despite this powerful “Conversion” for Peter and, through him, the whole Jerusalem Church, old habits are ever so easy to hang onto their foothold in our minds. Thus, some of these believers fell back into their “Jewish Christianity” mindset when they arrived in Antioch Church and witnessed their rather “Gentile” habits. Even Peter stumbled at one time, as Paul records in Galatians 2:11-21, but Paul confronted his stumble and reasoned/admonished him back to sound faith.

What can we learn from these men and their personal experiences in the faith? First, our reliance must be on the Lord and not on any man, however strong his history. Secondly, the Lord has given each of us all the resources and abilities we need to curb ourselves and to selflessly honor Him in our lives. How well have we used what He gave us for His glory? Will we follow the record of great men and their failure? Or will we follow the example of Jesus and “...**glorify God in your body, and your spirit, which are God's**”? (1 Corinthians 6:20) How many “Conversions” have you experienced in your faith journey? Consider that each of those experiences may have given you an opportunity to grow stronger in your faith. How well have you used these events for growth in your faith?

Elder Joe Holder