Section II - Apostolic Tribulations and Encouragements


After Jesus spoke to the Twelve about the responsibilities they would have as Apostles, He moved on to talk with them about the tribulations they would have to face. The transition was natural. Why? Because all great people who are involved in God’s work, and whose fruit has staying power, will certainly experience sorrow to a greater or lesser degree. One of the penalties of moral greatness and spiritual power is to be hated and treated in an evil manner. Or, to put it in a different way, it is one of the privileges Christ confers on His friends.

Hatred is very hard to accept. The desire to escape it is one main cause of unfaithfulness and unfruitfulness. Good people tend to live their lives in such a way that they stay out of trouble. But when they go overboard and use too much (cowardly) caution, they degenerate to the point where they cannot and do not make a spiritual impact for Christ. It was so very important that the Apostles of the Christian faith not become powerless just because they were hated. Therefore, Jesus introduced the subject of tribulation to them. He wanted to strengthen His men and prepare them to endure suffering before it came into their lives. In the middle of His comments on this unpleasant topic, as if apologizing for introducing it, He said, “These things I have spoken to you, that you may be kept from stumbling” (Jn. 16:1; see also vs. 4). They were not to be surprised when the trouble came.

Resources for Facing Trouble

To give courage to the young soldiers of the cross, the Captain of salvation offered them various resources. First, He told them, without beating around the bush, what they could expect. By introducing them to the dark possibilities, He could make it less frightening for them. Jesus spoke about the world’s hatred as an absolute certainty. It was not necessary for Him to assert its certainty. He just assumed it. “If the world hates you” (Jn. 15:18) - as, of course, it will. Later on, without softening His language or talking around the issue, He described the kind of treatment they would receive from the world. “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God” (Jn. 16:2). [Note: The idea is that the murderers will believe they are offering an acceptable religious service or sacrifice to God]. These were harsh and shocking words. But since it was certain these things were going to take place, it was best that they know the worst.
Secondly, Jesus tells His disciples that whatever they may have to suffer, they will not be worse off than He. “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you” (Jn. 15:18). “Some comfort!” one might be inclined to say. Yet, it really is not so bad when you consider the positions of the two parties. The One who has already been hated is the Lord. The ones who will be hated are only the servants. Jesus reminded His disciples of this point. He repeated something He had already said to them earlier that evening (Jn. 15:20; see also Jn. 13:16 and 12:26). If they would just think about this truth, it would stop any grumbling. And, if they would truly take it to heart, it might even become a source of heroic inspiration. The servants should be ashamed to complain about difficult circumstances when their Master was not exempt from them (nor did He wish to be). The disciples should be proud to share in tribulations with the One who is their Superior. They should regard their experiences in the cross not as fate, but as a privilege.

Jesus uses a third resource to help the Apostles accept the world’s hatred: He let them know that it went along with their being elected (Jn. 15:19). This thought, when fully comprehended, has great power. Ordinarily, love is based on similarity of interest. People love those who hold the same opinions, occupy the same positions, follow the same fashions, and pursue the same goals. They tend to regard everyone who differs from them with indifference, dislike, or animosity, depending on the degree to which they are aware of the differences. Consequently, a dilemma arose for the chosen ones. Either they must forfeit the honor, privileges, and hope of their election and descend into the dark world which is without God and without hope, or they must be content to accept the drawbacks that come with the position they received when they were called out of darkness and be hated by those who love the darkness rather than the light because their lives are evil. What true child of light will hesitate with this choice?

Jesus Explains the World’s Hatred

The disciples had no alternative but to patiently submit to their circumstances. The reason? They were chosen. To demonstrate this, Jesus went deeper into the philosophy of the world’s hatred. He explained that when they were hated, He would also be hated. But it would also mean, in a radical way, ignorance of and hostility to God, His Father (Jn. 15:21). When He presented this truth, He took the opportunity to make some serious comments on the unbelieving world of Judea where He had labored. He interpreted their unbelief in the worst way, declaring it to be totally without excuse. He accused those who had been guilty of unbelief of hating Him without cause - that is, of hating Someone whose whole character and conduct, words and works should have won their faith and love. By hating Him, they revealed a hatred they had for that very God for whose glory they professed to be so zealous (Jn. 15:22-25).

How painful is the perspective that is given here of the world’s hatred of truth and those who witness to it! We would like to see that the harsh way the messengers of truth were received (including Jesus) was only the result of a misunderstanding that could be forgiven. No doubt,
this has been the origin of many religious animosities. There have been many sins committed against the Son of Man. To a much lesser degree, sins have also been committed against those who follow Him. For who has not persecuted the Son of Man or His interest, harboring bad feelings and speaking bitter words against His people, if not against Him personally, while under the influence of prejudice? Some have even gone so far as to inflict bodily injury on those who proclaimed these unfamiliar, unwelcomed truths. They simply obeyed the blind impulses of panic, fear, or selfish passion.

There are few people who have never, in one way or another, persecuted other Christians. And most people who have been persecuted focus on the guilt of their persecutors. Those who suffer for their convictions are greatly tempted to think of their opponents as the opponents of God. The wrongs they endure provoke them to think and speak of the wrong-doers as children of the devil. This gives importance to their cause and dignity to their sufferings. They think of their cause as God’s cause and their sufferings as something they must endure for God’s sake. One further point: Stating the issue before us as one between God’s friends and God’s foes broadly satisfies both the intellect and the conscience. The intellect demands an answer to the question that is simple and easily understood. The conscience puts you obviously in the right and your adversaries obviously in the wrong.

All this shows that much honesty, humility, and patience is needed before one can safely say, “The one who hates me, hates God.” Nevertheless, it is still true that a person’s real attitude toward God is revealed by the way he treats God’s present work and His living servants. It was on this principle that Jesus judged His enemies, even though He did not resent them and was always ready to allow for their ignorance. In spite of His love, He believed and said that the hostility He had encountered sprang from an evil will and a wicked, godless heart. He primarily had in mind the leaders of the opposition who had turned a mob of ignorant and prejudiced people into a hostile army. These were the men whom He denounced, without hesitating, as haters of God, truth, and righteousness. He pointed to the way they treated Him as conclusive evidence of this fact. His presence and ministry among them had ripped off their masks and exposed them for who they really were - hypocrites who pretended to be holy but, inside, were full of corruption and ungodliness. They hated genuine goodness and could not rest until they had thrown it out of the world and nailed it to a cross. With the history and sayings of Christ right in front of us, we must be careful not to be too sympathetic toward those who live in unbelief.

**Hope for a Brighter Future**

After Jesus digressed to speak about His difficult experiences in the past, He very naturally moved on to express hope for a brighter future. He enjoyed this. Before now, He had been despised and rejected by the people, but He believed it would not always be like this. Before long, the Jewish and Gentile world would begin to change its mind, and the Crucified One would become an
object of faith and reverence. He built this hope on a strong and solid foundation, the combined testimony of the Spirit of truth and of His own Apostles. With His face brightening, He said, “When the Helper comes (He had spoken to His little ones about Him. Now He mentioned Him as His own Comforter, no less than theirs), whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me” (Jn. 15:26). He did not mention here what results the Spirit would produce by His witness. He will speak to that issue a little later when He learns that those listening to Him have not comprehended what He meant - or, at least, they have not been able to find any personal comfort in His words. In the meantime, He quickly suggested that the disciples as well as the Spirit of truth would have a part in the honorable work of redeeming their Master’s name and character from disgrace. They would also bear witness because they were well qualified to do so. They had been with Him from the beginning of His ministry (Jn. 15:27) and knew everything about His doctrine and the way He had lived His life.

Jesus sought comfort for His own heart, as He faced the depressing weight of looking back over the difficult things that had happened in His life, and looked ahead to the immediate reality of His crucifixion. He sought this comfort by thinking about the future when the Spirit and the Apostles would bear witness of Him. But He also intended for the disciples to find their strength from the same Source when they encountered their tribulations. Truthfully, no thoughts could be more effective in helping these men face a hard life than those implied by the words Jesus had just spoken. In essence, He told them they would suffer for a cause that was favored by Heaven and for honoring the One they loved more than life. Who would not choose to be on the side for which the Divine Spirit fights, even when there were risks of being wounded? Who would not be happy to be rebuked and treated badly for a Name which is worthy to be above every name, especially if he was assured that the sufferings he endured directly contributed to the exaltation of that blessed Name to its proper place of sovereignty? It was this type of thinking, more than anything else, that supported the Apostles when they encountered their great and many trials. They learned to say, “For Christ’s sake we are killed all day long; we are counted as sheep ready to be slaughtered. But who cares? The Church is spreading; believers are multiplying on every front. They are springing up a hundred-fold from the seed of the martyr’s blood; the name of our Lord is being magnified. Therefore, we will gladly suffer for bearing witness to the truth.”

The Primary Source of Tribulations
Jesus began His message by giving these words to the disciples so they could persevere when difficulties came. He got more explicit about what the Apostles would have to endure (Jn. 16:2). We will only make one additional comment about what He told them: The disciples would learn from Jesus’ words, not only the nature of their future tribulations, but their source. In this part of His discourse, their Master warned them about the world’s hatred. But the world was not the non-religious, skeptical, easy-going, gross-living world of those who did not claim to know God.
Rather, the world was Judaism - anti-Christian Judaism. It was made up of those who regularly attended the synagogue, those who distinguished themselves from “the world.” They claimed to be the people of God, very zealous in their own way for God’s glory, and were fanatical about their religious opinions and practices. They were totally intolerant of any who disagreed with them, relentlessly excommunicated anyone who slightly violated their established beliefs, and believed that when they put someone to death for violating God’s law, it was not murder, but a religious service, an acceptable sacrifice to the Almighty. This Jewish world was assigned the distinction of representing the entire cosmos (world) of people who were alienated from God and truth. And if hatred for that which is good is the central characteristic of worldliness, then the distinction was well earned, for the power of hating reached its greatest intensity among the Jews. No one could hate like a religious Jew who lived in the apostolic age. He was known for his diabolic capacity for hating. Even the Roman historian Tacitus commemorates the hostile odium (hatred) of the Jewish race against all mankind. And the experiences of the Christian Apostles had fully justified the way Jesus singled out the Jew when He spoke about the world’s hatred. These men learned what the world’s hatred meant from the unbelieving Jews. The pagan world despised them but did not hate them. The Greek laughed, and the Roman went on his way with contemptuous indifference. At best, he would modestly oppose them. But the persevering, unrelenting, evil hostility of the religious Jew! It was bloodthirsty, without mercy, and worthy of Satan himself. So Jesus could truly say to the Jews, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (Jn. 8:44).

What a strange fruit, this wicked spirit of hatred that grew on the good vine which God had planted in the Holy Land! Israel was chosen to be the means of blessing for the whole world yet ended up being the enemy of the world, “contrary to all men,” provoking even decent people to regard and treat her as a nuisance whose destruction from the face of the earth would be a common cause for celebration. Look at the results of election when it is abused! Unusual favors feed man’s pride rather than motivating those who are favored to devote themselves to the noble task of serving mankind. A divine commonwealth (Israel) was turned into a synagogue of Satan, and God’s most deadly foes were those in His own house. Take note! The same phenomenon has reappeared in the Christian Church. The world that is the most opposed to Christ, Antichrist itself, is not to be found in the world of the unbelievers but in the church; not among those who are non-religious and skeptical but among those who claim to be God’s people.

**Jesus Helps the Apostles Cope**

As could be expected, the announcement Jesus made about the disciples’ future tribulations caused a big reaction. The dark probability of suffering that was revealed when Jesus briefly lifted the veil appalled them. Their faces revealed their concern, and sorrow filled their hearts. It was bad enough that their Master was going to leave them. But in their minds, to be left to this fate was even worse. Jesus noticed the response He had evoked and did what He could to remove it and help the hurting disciples recover their composure.
First, He apologized (in a way of speaking) for talking about such painful matters. In essence He said, “I would gladly have been silent about the troubles that are going to come on you. I have actually been silent as long as possible. But I could not think about leaving you without letting you know what you are going to face. I have done it now because the time for My departure is here” (Jn. 16:4). The kind feeling behind His comment, as I have paraphrased it, is evident. But the statement seems to be inconsistent with the other Gospels. From Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we learn that Jesus and the Twelve frequently talked about the hardships that accompany discipleship in general, and the apostleship in particular. Commentators have dealt with the difficulty in various ways. Some will admit there is a contradiction and assume that earlier conversations about persecutions (such as in Matthew 10) are introduced by the evangelist but not in chronological order. Others insist that there is a difference between the earlier words and the current ones, especially with respect to clarity. They maintain the earlier ones are vague and general, like the earlier allusions Jesus made about His own death. The latter ones, they say, are specific, definite, and clear, like the announcements Jesus made about His death near the end of His public ministry. A third group of expositors say the newness of this discourse on the world’s hatred can be found in the explanation that is given about its cause and origin. Still, a fourth group insists that the great distinction between this discourse and the previous ones is to be found in the fact that this one is a farewell discourse. Therefore, because of this situation, it made quite a unique impression on the Twelve.

Since so many differing opinions have been offered, it would not be right to be dogmatic. Our own opinion, however, is that the uniqueness of Jesus’ words about apostolic tribulations lies in the manner or style He uses, rather than in the substance of what He said. On earlier occasions, especially when the Twelve went on their trial mission, Jesus had basically said the same things. He had spoken about scourgings in the synagogues, if not excommunication from them. He had alluded to the possibility that the Apostles of the kingdom could experience violent deaths. But He had said all these things in a different way. At that time, He preached about persecution. Now He makes a very candid announcement. There is a vast difference between the previous discourse and the current announcement, similar to the difference between a sermon on the text, “It is appointed for men to die once” (Heb. 9:27), and a special hint to an individual, “This year you will die.” The sermon may say more about death than the hint, but what a difference in the way He said it, and what a different result!

The next means Jesus used in order to cure their grief was a friendly rebuke. He gently reproved the disciples for their silence, which He took as an indication of their hopeless, despairing sorrow. “But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart” (Jn. 16:5-6). Jesus is saying, “Why are you totally in despair? Don’t you have any questions to ask Me about My departure? You were full of questions at first. You were curious and wanted to know where
I was going. I would be grateful if you asked that question again, or if you asked any question, whether it is a wise or foolish one. The most childish questions would be better than the gloom of despair which is evident by your silence.”

The question, “Where are you going?” had already been sufficiently answered. So it might have been superfluous to ask it again. However, based on the words spoken to them about their future sufferings, the disciples could have asked Him other questions which were neither superfluous nor irrelevant. They probably would have asked those questions if they had not been so depressed. They could have said, “If it is going to be so bad for us after You go, why don’t You stay? While You have been with us, You have sheltered us from the world’s hatred. Now You tell us that when You, our Leader and Head, are gone, that hatred will be directed against us, Your followers. If this is true, how can we possibly think about your leaving us as anything but a disaster?”

Jesus proceeds to answer these unspoken questions next. He boldly asserts that whatever they may think, it is for their good that He goes away (Jn. 16:7). His comments are made with special reference to their work as Apostles, though true in other respects also. In the earlier part of Jesus’ farewell address, He had explained to His disciples how His leaving would affect them as individual believers. He had assured them that when the Comforter came, He would make them feel as if their departed Master had returned to them again. In fact, it would seem as if He were more present with them than He had ever been. Here, His goal is to show them the impact His departure would have on their work as Apostles and to make them understand that His going away would be good for them as they performed their work for the public.

The proof of this assertion follows. He said, in essence, “When I leave you and go to My Father (Jn. 16:7-15), two essential needs that are important for the success of your work as Apostles will be met. When that time comes, you will have receptive hearers, and you will be competent to preach. Neither of these needs even exist now. The world has rejected Me and My words. And you, though you are very sincere, are very ignorant and do not understand what I have taught you. After My ascension, there will be a great change in two respects. First, the world will be more open to hear the truth. Secondly, you will be able to declare it intelligently. The change cannot come until then. For it will be brought about by the work of the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, and He cannot come until I go.”

The Holy Spirit’s Ministry

We have given the general meaning of this part of His discourse. In this same text, Jesus quickly outlined the Spirit’s converting work in the world (Jn. 16:8-11) and then His work of enlightening the minds of the Apostles (Jn. 16:12-15). He described the first aspect of the Spirit’s ministry in this way: “And He, when He comes, will convict (produce serious thought and conviction in) the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment.” Then He explained the special
ways the Spirit would bring these great moral realities to the minds of the people. Here, He only expounded what He had already said about the Spirit’s testimony regarding Him (Jn. 15:26). He told His disciples that the Comforter would witness for Him in the hearts and consciences of people and would convince them of sin, especially those who are unbelievers. He would convince them of righteousness in connection with His departure to the Father. And He would convince them of judgment (the one to come), because the prince of this world had already been judged (that is, he would have been judged before the Comforter began His work).

The second and third explanatory remarks are baffling. Instead of throwing light on the subject, they seem to make it more obscure. His comments have caused so much argumentation and difference of opinion, that to elaborate on them would be a waste of time, and to be dogmatic would presume too much. One great point in the dispute has been: “What righteousness did Jesus allude to - His own, or that of sinners? Did He mean to say that the Spirit would convince the world, after He had left the earth, that He was a righteous man? Or, did He mean that the Spirit would teach people to see in the Crucified One, the Lord who is their righteousness? Our own opinion is that He did not mean either one. He meant both. Righteousness is to be taken generally without defining it. The idea is that the Spirit would use the exaltation of Christ to make people sincerely think about the whole subject of righteousness; to show them the absolute rotten character of their own righteousness, whose crowning accomplishment was to crucify Jesus; to bring home to their hearts the solemn truth that the Crucified One was the Just One. Ultimately, the Spirit would put them on a path for finding in Jesus their true righteousness by raising this question in their minds: “Why did the Just One suffer?”

We believe the meaning of the third explanatory remark is this: “When I am crucified, the god of this world will have been judged, both this world and its god. The latter will be judged finally and irreversibly. The world, though it currently follows Satan, is capable of being converted. When I have ascended, the Spirit will use the judgment of Satan to convince people that there is a judgment coming. He will help them see the prophecy about a final separation that will occur between Me and all those who obstinately persist in their unbelief. By speaking about the horrors of perdition (hell), they will be brought to repentance and faith.”

What Jesus said about the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit and its impact on the minds of His disciples amounted to this: “I will equip you (the Twelve) to be intelligent and trustworthy witnesses of Me and to be leaders for the Church in doctrine and practice.” For these two great purposes, two things would be necessary. First, they must understand Christian truth. Secondly, they should possess the gift of prophecy so they can foretell the future (in a general way) in order that they might warn and encourage believers. Jesus promised them both of these advantages which would come from the Spirit’s enlightening influence. He assured them that when the Comforter came, He would guide them into all the truth that He had personally taught
them. He would remind them of the things that had been forgotten, explain things that were not understood, and develop basic principles into a system of doctrine which was above their current ability to comprehend (Jn. 16:12). He went on to inform them that this same Spirit would show them things to come such as the increasing number of heresies and apostasies, the coming of Antichrist, the conflict between light and darkness, and their final outcome as described in the Book of Revelation.

**Delayed Changes**

These were the changes that would be brought about in the world and in the disciples’ lives by the coming of the Comforter. Truly, they are great and profitable changes. But why can’t they take place before Jesus leaves the world? Jesus hinted at the answer to this question when He said the following things about the Spirit: “He will not speak on His own initiative” (Jn. 16:13), and “He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you” (vs. 14). It was necessary for the personal ministry of Jesus to come to an end before the ministry of the Spirit began, because the latter is merely an application of the former. The Spirit does not speak on His own. He simply takes the things that relate to Christ and shows them to unbelievers so they can be brought to conviction and conversion. He shows them to believers so they can be enlightened and sanctified. But until Jesus had died, risen, and ascended, the essentials about Him would remain incomplete. The materials for the gospel would not be ready. There could be no apostolic preaching nor any demonstration of the power of the Spirit to accompany the preaching. It must be possible for the Apostles and the Spirit to bear witness of One who, though perfectly holy, had been crucified in order to show the world the atrociousness of its sin. They must have the power to declare that God made the same Jesus whom they crucified to be both Lord and Christ, who was exalted to heavenly glory before their hearers could have their hearts convicted and exclaim in terror, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). It was only after Jesus had ascended into glory and become invisible to mortal eyes (Jn. 16:10) that people could understand that He was not only a righteous man personally, but He was the Lord, their righteousness. When this happened, the following question would enter their minds: “What could be the meaning of the Lord of glory becoming a man and dying on a cross?” By the Spirit’s teaching, they would learn to reply in a different way, than in the days when they were ignorant, when they said, “He suffers for His own offences.” Now they would say, “Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...He was pierced for our transgressions” (Is. 53:4-5).

Finally, not until the Apostles were in a position to say that their Lord had gone to heaven could they fully impact unbelievers with the doctrine of a judgment. Then they could say, “Christ is seated on the heavenly throne as a Prince and a Savior to everyone who believes but also as a Judge to those who continue in rebellion and unbelief. “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:12).
The disciples did not understand all of this. They had no conception of the Spirit's work on the conscience of the world or on their own minds. Nor did they have any understanding about the relationship between the Third Person of the Trinity and the Second. Therefore, Jesus did not elaborate on these topics. Rather, He restricted Himself to the bare essentials to provide the truth they needed. The time did come when the disciples understood these matters. When it did, they fully appreciated the words the Lord spoke about the dispensation of the Comforter. Then they acknowledged that the assertion was really true that it was best for them that He go away. They rejoiced when they remembered they had once thought otherwise. They perceived the word “advantage” (Jn. 16:7), far from being too strong, was a rather weak expression chosen to graciously accommodate their feeble spiritual capacities. The stronger word would have been “indispensable.” When the Twelve understood these things, they had the same feelings about death as we imagine redeemed people feel about it when they get to heaven. On this side of the grave,

_Timorous mortals start and shrink  
To cross the narrow sea;  
And linger, shivering, on the brink,  
And fear to launch away._

But to those on the other side, how insignificant a matter must death seem! How strange must it seem to their purged vision, that it was ever necessary to prove to them that it was better to depart to heaven than to remain in a world of sin and sorrow!