

2 Corinthians 12:20

The Depth of the Flesh — Unjudged Sin and the Lord's Coming

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:20 — 13:14

“For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not; lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults. And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness, and fornication, and lasciviousness which they have committed.

This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established. I told you before, and foretell you, as if I were present the second time; and being absent, now I write to them which heretofore have sinned, and to all other, that, if I come again, I will not spare.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.”

A Height and a Depth in One Chapter

The end of this chapter is like the inverse of the beginning. At the beginning of chapter 12 we get the height of a man in Christ caught up to the third heaven. Here at the end we have the depth of the flesh at work and coming out — an awful contrast within the same chapter. And this is not an artificial chapter division; it is within a grouping of things that he is speaking of. If there is no experience with the height, the tendency of our hearts is to make excuses for the depths and gloss over them as normal, or as average, or just as good as others.

But when the two are set side by side, what a contrast there is.

Not Paul, But the Lord Is Coming

Verse 20 begins: for I fear lest when I come. Paul has been taken home in advance; we need not fear his coming now. The only one who is certainly coming is the Lord himself. How much more then do we have to take these two verses to heart. It is not Paul, but the Lord we are waiting for.

Rebecca comes to mind. When she was brought by Abraham's servant to Isaac, it says in Genesis 24:64 that she lifted up her eyes, saw Isaac, and lighted off her camel. Camels were unclean beasts. In anticipation of meeting her bridegroom, she got down off the unclean beast. It was the anticipation of meeting him that provoked her to that action. So in our verses there is a sense almost of urgency — something should be done in view of someone coming. And we need that circumcision of heart, that application of the sharp knife, to remove from us what would be unworthy of his presence, that there would be no materials for the flesh to work with when Christ comes. He is the holy and the true, and what we have in these verses is the flesh.

The Eight Disorders — Symptoms of a Deeper Root

The list in verse 20 — debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults — is a horrible list. But these appear to be the observable surface manifestations, not the roots. The root is in the next verse: some have sinned and have not repented. These eight things were not going to arise from an intense interest in debating, or from a particular commitment to envying. They were going to arise because sin had not been judged and repented of. How did it show itself? Not necessarily in the same sin repeating itself, but perhaps in a debate popping out, or an envy, or a wrath, or a tumult. The potential was there for something to come out, and this was what it would come out as.

From the early chapters of 1 Corinthians, we can see the flesh manifesting itself in one aspect after another: factions following different teachers, saints taking one another to court. The fourth chapter, verse 5, says, “Judge nothing before the time.” And that has to do with what is hidden — with judging motives. When you have a company well practiced in judging motives and judging by appearances, that is not only shallow; it produces plenty of strife and gives rise to all these things. Then, in the very next chapter, 1 Corinthians 5, they were to judge that man — judge righteous judgment, where the evidence was before them and they were to discern and act. Those are two entirely different things. Judging motives is condemned; judging righteous judgment is enjoined.

Strife brings to mind a tug of war — two factions pulling in their directions. Darby uses the word contentions rather than strifes in our verse, and that is a little different: contending for oneself, for one’s own position and point of view. There is something more of self in contention — a personal stake in the issue. Flesh is in both, but contention seems more self-involved. And one must notice that among these eight things, the noise level varies considerably. Most of them would be loud — the tumult especially, the wraths and contentions. But there is at least one there, the whisperings, that is quiet. Which means one cannot use the noise level to judge the current state of things. A quiet assembly may have whisperings at work, and that is still the flesh, still not submission to Christ and his Word.

Holding Their Peace — Acts 15

In Acts 15, a serious matter arose and the apostles and elders came together to consider it. There was much disputing. But just before the happy and blessed conclusion was reached, verse 12 says, “All the multitude kept silence.” And thus a great deal of progress was made. They held their peace. What was the matter with the debates, the envying, the wraths, the strifes, the backbitings, the whisperings, the swellings, the tumults in our portion? Nobody was keeping

silence. Everyone had something to say. There is a proverb along that line: where there is no talebearer, the strife goes out. Like a fuse heading towards an explosive charge — if there is a gap somewhere along the line, it sputters out, and there need not be an explosion at the other end.

Toward the very end of his life, J.N. Darby wrote over and over again in his letters his exercise to let God act — not to meddle where God had not put him. If God put him into something, he was not afraid to act. But otherwise, he had learned to wait on God, to let God act. None of the eight things in verse 20 have the character of letting God act. None of them have the character of waiting on God. A tantrum is thrown because the person throwing it thinks something needs to be done, and that throwing the tantrum is the thing to do. But what was needed was for God to do something. The whole situation would have been better if they had waited on him.

Divisions and Sects — The Word Denomination

In 1 Corinthians 11:18–19, Paul writes: “I hear that there be divisions among you, and I partly believe it; for there must also be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.” The word for divisions is the same as the word the Lord used for the patch put on a garment that makes the rent worse. These internal divisions, if not checked by the Spirit of God through self-judgment in the saints, lead to the external heresies — that is, sects, a total rupture leaving two groups separated from one another. The factions of 1 Corinthians 3, “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas,” gave rise to all these things.

William Kelly remarked that the word denomination has been gotten up to hide the sin and shame of sect. You simply give a group a name, and then in polite company one does not call it a sect. But Scripture has, so far as can be found, only one designation for an open rupture where you end up with more than one

company, and that is the word heresy, or sect — a very solemn word. And so when the Lord has recovered truth, and after a while an open breach comes in, and another generation looks back at this and says, well, we believe pretty much the same thing, and the two groups begin to recognize each other as gathered to the Lord's name — that is contravening plain Scripture. It is not a complicated subject; persons have been very busy making it complicated. Just as the word denomination has been gotten up to hide the sin and shame of sect, so the mutual recognition of groups in open division as all gathered to the Lord's name hides what is in fact the case. They are not together — that is as plain as anything can be. There was a state that led to this, and that state is not really addressed when the acknowledgment is made vague and the whole thing made to look good. God has a controversy with his people, and Scripture is violated.

Waiting for the Lord to Straighten It Out

Is there any ground in verse 21 for saying: we have people in this condition, but we will just let them go until the Lord comes and straightens it out? That is an extraordinarily evil thing to say, and that is not why the apostle wrote this passage. What he expected was that when they read this at Corinth, their consciences would be reached, and they would act. Both of these verses begin with a lest. And “lest when I come again my God will humble me” — if they truly loved the apostle, that ought to have given them something to think about. Do they want to see the apostle humbled? He had not sinned. But it is the character of a true servant — like Moses who said, “Blot me out of thy book,” like Nehemiah and Daniel, who took the sin of the people upon themselves and identified with it.

We will soon appear before the judgment seat of Christ. To say, the Lord is coming very soon, we will just leave these things for him to straighten out — he will straighten them out, including the matter of why they were left unjudged. To profess to be gathered together to the name of him who is the holy and the true,

and then to act as if the holy and the true will tolerate an attitude of leaving unjudged leaven in his midst because he will sort it out at the end — that is a terrible thing. Leaven and Christ's presence are simply not compatible. The name of the Lord Jesus does not stand for these things. Professing to be gathered together to his name is a solid responsibility to maintain the holiness due to his presence.

Three words are used: uncleanness, fornication, and lasciviousness. It is not a threefold repetition of one word. Together they are quite inclusive when it comes to moral matters. Great care is necessary on the part of each saint, and on the part of the saints collectively as professedly gathered to the name of the holy and the true, that no moral blots be associated with his name. These persons needed to get before God about these things; and as with the man in 1 Corinthians 5, these are things that must be removed from the assembly. If they were not, the apostle said he would come with a rod and deal with them. If judgment came in and the assembly dealt with these things, if real repentance was brought about, then there would be occasion for a happy visit. If not, he would not spare.

The Benediction — Three Divine Persons

The thirteenth chapter also ends with a threefold expression: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all." And it is interesting to notice that this chapter, which ends with uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness at its lowest point, has its counterpart at the very end of the epistle in the whole Trinity brought before them. The Lord Jesus Christ is clear. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is clear. The love of God refers to the love of God the Father. So we close with the whole Trinity presented, and God in the totality of what he is in his three persons is for us. Mr. Patterson remarked somewhere that if all Christians would separate from all known evil, they would be found together in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

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Holy Ghost, be with you all.*