

“SHALL HE FIND FAITH ON THE EARTH?”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 6, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

We begin our study with a reading of the first eight verses of the eighteenth chapter of the gospel according to Luke: “And he spake a parable unto them, to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint; saying, There was in a city a judge, who feared not God, and regarded not man: and there was a widow in that city; and she came oft unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversaries. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming. And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge saith. And shall not God avenge his elect, that cry to him day and night, and yet he is longsuffering over them? I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”

The opening sentence of our text suggests the theme of the Lord’s parable--“They ought always to pray, and not to faint.” Had the inspired writer not designated the theme, we might have been left to wonder. With this forthright statement, however, we know that the message of the parable is intended to emphasize the value of persistent prayer.

The story, told in verses two, three and four of our text, is a very simple one. An unjust judge, who regarded neither God nor man, eventually avenged a poor widow of her adversaries, not because of any concern for the widow but because of his desire not to be bothered by her continual coming. In order to understand this parable we need to think of the contrast between our heavenly Father and the unjust judge of the story. We can understand this contrast best, if we insert the words, “how much more” into the story. If an unjust judge will respond to the repeated plea of a widow, “how much more” will our loving heavenly Father respond to our repeated entreaties?

God Will Provide

The explanation to the parable comes in verses six, seven and eight of our text. ““And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge saith. And shall not God avenge his elect, that cry to him day and night, and yet he is longsuffering over them? I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily.” Christians are to understand that God is concerned about their welfare and will respond to their entreaties sympathetically and quickly. The Lord was concerned that his followers know that God had not gone on a journey, but rather that he was aware of their needs and concerned to help them in every adversity.

We of the 20th century need to reexamine the situation in which the early church found itself. There was heavy persecution ahead. First, it would come at the hands of the Jews, as a result of their animosity against their own people who accepted Christ. Then, by the middle of the first century, persecution would come from the Romans. This persecution would be spasmodic and devastating. We are reminded of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when it is said that the streets of Jerusalem were plowed up, as Titus sought to settle the Jewish problem for all time to come. We are also reminded of the case of Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John. When arrested for being a Christian he was encouraged by a sympathetic Roman soldier to pay lip-service to Caesar and to go free. Polycarp responded, “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, and offer sacrifices, then listen plainly, ‘I am a Christian.’”

In addition to persecution, the church of the first century also faced many other powerful enemies. The early Christians were surrounded by worldliness of every kind. Paganism, sensualism, materialism, and vices of every kind were all about them. Un-Christian influences were everywhere. In addition, the early Christians were outnumbered, perhaps a thousand to one, or perhaps even ten thousand to one. Their lot was made even harder because of the ridicule of the pagans.

Turning back to our text, we come to the challenging final line of the paragraph, “Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” Even though God is concerned about the welfare of his children, even though he is quite willing to respond to their entreaties, it is not at all certain that they will be able to survive. Even though God is far more willing to avenge them of their enemies than the judge mentioned in the parable, the disciples of the Lord are in danger of being swept away by the persecutions and the worldly influences about them. The Lord has deep concern that when he comes to call men to salvation that he may yet find faith on the earth. We are reminded in our reading of church history that one of the major problems in the early centuries of the church was the problem of the “lapsed”--those who were overcome and allowed their Christian faith to lapse. It is in this connection that Jesus asked his question, “Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”

Doubts and Misgivings

In our day we measure and evaluate everything. For example, when a man feels some physical abnormality, he immediately talks with his doctor and undergoes a check-up. The doctor has a number of remarkable devices and techniques through the use of which he analyses the physical condition of his patient. Beginning with the simple matter of taking his patient’s temperature, he continues

through the reading of the blood pressure, the taking of x-rays, and the use of the electrocardiogram. In some cases he also recommends a blood analysis, or possibly a liver scan. Through such tests he is able to determine the condition of the heart, the lungs, the circulatory system, the liver, and other aspects of his patient's condition. Similarly, we are able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of our children. Tests of many kinds have been prepared. We can test a child's intelligence and personality. There are tests to determine the innate aptitude, while other tests evaluate scholastic achievements. There are emotional stability tests and tests that evaluate the degree of dominance of submission of our children. We are quite adept at measuring almost everything.

These examples have been suggested in order to emphasize the fact that we have no clear-cut means of measuring or analyzing the status of Christian faith in the world today. Even less are we able to predict the future of Christian faith. In measuring spiritual and religious qualities we are not so precise, nor so successful, as we are in measuring in other areas of life. In evaluating the spiritual strengths and weaknesses of our day the best that we can do is to register general impressions and recognize trends. We profoundly wish that we might have some means of knowing with exactness the condition of our souls and the direction in which we are traveling.

When we turn the spotlight of our attention upon the area of ethical standards, even though we have no precise yardstick with which to make our measurements, we get the general, unmistakable impression that the materialism and secularism of our day have dulled man's sense of values. Modern man is not nearly so concerned about the ethical qualities of honesty, integrity, hard-work, and truth-telling as were his forefathers. Instead of the basic principles of ethical morality, we sometimes hear people talking about the relativity of truth. They tell us that there is no absolute body of truth, no absolute principles of right and wrong. While the ten commandments and the teachings of Jesus may be generally admirable, they must be modified in terms of each individual's own situation. Nothing is true for everyone, everywhere, all the time. It depends upon the time, the place and the persons involved.

This is like sending our children out to drive one of the ever-increasingly powerful automobiles of our day, yet taking down all road-signs. Imagine what it would be like to drive along the highways with no stop signs, no red and green lights, no markings for curves and crossings, and no indications of destinations. Imagine sending our children out to drive with no indication of where each road leads and no guidance at the cross-roads. Imagine trying to drive with no white line down the middle of the road and no yellow line over which one must not cross. The result would be chaos and death everywhere. The condition is not less alarming when some modern leaders try to tell our young people that there are no absolutes, no eternal rights and wrongs.

When we turn the spotlight of our attention on the area of morality, we are alarmed by what is known as the new morality. The sensualism of our day is too obvious for any of us to fail to see it. The lack of self-discipline and self-control is also obvious. When we turn our attention to the area of respect for authority we are also aware of problems. There is obviously in our generation a declining respect for parental authority, for the authority of teachers, and for the authority of elders in general. Workers do not respect their employers as in previous years. There is a sharp decline in respect for property. There is a growing disregard for government and the laws of government in our land. Finally, there is an obvious disregard for the great truths and laws of God.

When we turn our attention to the realm of religion we also have misgivings. In place of the acceptance of the clear-cut teachings of God, we find compromise and a watering-down of religious tenets. Religious division is everywhere accepted as unavoidable and permanent. In addition there are the great and powerful influences toward atheism rather than faith. In looking at all of these aspects of modern life, we find a timeliness in Christ's concern, "Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"

### Signs of Hope

In spite of the alarming concerns just mentioned, there are also some hopeful areas. At graduation time we see our students in a different light from that in which we have observed them earlier. The routine of classes, term papers, and examinations is finished. Our students, now that they come to the end of their educational careers, deserve a fresh new look. As they dress up for graduation, we discover that there is a new maturity about them. They are fine, wholesome, clean young people. They are well trained in the fields in which they have chosen to specialize. We also find that they are rather mature in their understanding of the scriptures. They have high purposes and goals for life. As they prepare to go out and battle the forces of evil in the world about them they cause us to feel a new confidence for the future.

A boy drops into the office just to express appreciation for a class in Bible. A girl introduces her parents with the words, "This is my teacher of whom I spoke so many times." A father seeks a quiet moment in which to express appreciation for what the study of the Bible has meant to his daughter or his son. An occasional note is written at the end of an examination paper expressing appreciation for a course and what it has meant in helping one make major decisions in life. These are a few of the signs that make us believe that there is yet hope that when our Lord comes he will find faith upon the earth.

When we stand before a young couple at the supremely important moment in which they promise their love to each other for life, we also have a window through which to look into their souls. The open, serious look as they exchange their vows and the serious, high-purposed way in which they talk about the establishment of a Christian home are grounds for hope in the future. The training of the young is our only hope. In our homes, in the church, and in the schools we have the privilege of planting the faith of Christ deep in the hearts of our children. And this holds hope for the future of the world.

When Christ was on the earth he did essentially one thing--he trained eleven faithful disciples. He did not travel widely. For example, he never made any effort to go to Rome in order to consult with the leaders of his day. He wrote no books. He made no effort to gather an army of men to advance his Cause. He made no effort to secure the financial backing nor the power of those who were influential in his day. Rather, he just walked up and down the countryside, teaching those who would listen and training eleven men to carry on his work.. He did not arrange large, formal addresses in Jerusalem, but rather quietly walked along the people and talked with them about the issues of life and death. This training of humble men was his means of perpetuating his Cause.

### Resiliency

There is a resiliency about Christian faith that is inspiring. When one thinks of the persecutions that faced the early church, and then thinks of the un-Christian pressures that were about them on every side, when one remembers that the early Christians were outnumbered hopelessly and ridiculed widely, it hardly seems that Christianity had a chance. But Christian faith has survived through all the centuries and it will survive until the end of time.

We do not say that all men will become Christians. Such was not the case in Christ's day, nor is it to be expected in our day. Rather, we remember that Jesus said, "Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straightened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it." (Matt. 7:13-14). The heedless multitude in Christ's day and in ours rushes headlong to destruction. It behooves us to be on the Lord's side, rather than in the thoughtless crowd. If we will have the faith to believe that our heavenly Father listens to our prayers and will avenge us of our adversaries, then we confidently believe that when the Son of man cometh he shall find faith on the earth.