

WHAT SHALL WE BE?

by Ray C. Stedman

Beloved, we are God's children now, it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. {1 Jn 3:2-3 RSV}

The theme that holds our attention through this section of John is that of maintaining righteousness, the problem of acting out of a love which is fair to everyone concerned -- that is righteousness. Human love is often very horribly unfair. It is often partial to favorites. It can be prejudiced against certain colors, other castes, or other levels of society. It can be smothering, so that the person loved feels deprived of individuality. It can be wholly unfair, and therefore is unrighteous love. But true love, God's love, as we have been learning, is righteous; it is thoughtful, it is courteous. It bears the cost of pain and heartache itself. It satisfies justice, it is careful to do the right thing. In the eyes of a stuffy, respectable, self-centered world, anyone who acts with that kind of love is always a little suspect. They appear to be slightly mad. Thus, John says, the world will not recognize us if we act this way, just as they did not recognize the Lord Jesus when he did. Because we act differently they regard us as rather foolish, ignorant, certainly slightly mad. This has been most evident this week at Berkeley where hundreds of students have been speaking to thousands of others there about their faith in Christ, in an open, fearless witness. The reaction of many has been that these Christian students are a bit off, they are not quite all there. As someone of the Campus Crusade group put it,

"We're all nuts, but the difference is, we Christians are screwed onto the right bolt."

That is a recognition that there is something mysterious about true Christians that makes them act differently. As Henry David Thoreau put it, about another matter, "If I do not seem to be keeping step with those about me it is because I am listening to another drum beat." That is what Christians are doing, walking to another drum beat. It is that which makes us act a bit different. That mystery is evident in these opening words of Verse 2, "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be..." The emphatic word in that sentence is the word *now*. It is the first word in the Greek structure, and that is always the most emphasized word in a sentence. "Now we are the children of God." Eternal life belongs to us now. We are not waiting until we die to get it, but we are born again right now. We have the life of Jesus Christ in us now. We are the heirs of all God's glory and promises now. This is his theme throughout the whole letter.

Now, he freely admits the world cannot see it. We do not look any different than others. I suppose it might be helpful if Christians had a red spot in the middle of their foreheads by which we could identify them, or some other kind of mark. But, the fact is, we do not look any different than others. It is still true today, as it was in the days of our Lord, that God's life is veiled in flesh and it is not always manifest within us.

Paul speaks of this in his great 8th chapter of Romans, where he says that "the whole creation is looking forward to the day when the sons of God will be manifested" {cf, Rom 8:19 KJV}, will be revealed. He uses two words that are very colorful there. He says the whole creation "waits expectantly," and the word, waits is a word that means "to stand on tiptoe" while expectantly means "to crane the neck with eagerness." The whole creation is standing on tiptoe, craning the neck with eager anticipation of the day that is coming when the great secret now hidden among mankind will be revealed, and the sons of God will become manifest. That is what the world unconsciously is looking forward to. When that day

arrives, the conditions it will bring about upon the earth are so remarkable, so transcendently glorious, that in that day we will think back to all the fine-sounding words that have been uttered about "the Great Society" and will find them puerile and pitiful alongside the conditions that will prevail then. This is always the hope of the believer in Jesus Christ. He is not living in a world that is heading to a blind end; it is going to an appointed meeting, and is right on schedule, exactly along the line of the predicted program. The day is coming when the sons of God will be manifest. But the mystery now deepens because John says that not only does the world not know who we are now, but we, now, do not know what we shall be. What is it like actually to be with the Lord? What is it like to have Christ return and to be with him, experiencing the program God has in mind for his own?

This year, as you know, some of our beloved friends have left us, have gone to be with the Lord. What is it like for them? What are they experiencing? What are they like now? Those questions are shrouded in mystery to us. "It does not yet appear what we shall be." I do not mean they are clouded by uncertainty; the general answers are very certain. But they are not clear as to the precise nature of the conditions which shall be. We do not know, for instance, what the actual experience of life beyond this life will be. It is interesting that the Scripture only uses negative expressions along this line. There is no positive description of what life beyond this world is like, it is all negative. There will be no tears, no more sorrow, no night there, no death, no separation, no weakness, no pain -- but that is all negative. What will it be like? Well, we can guess at the opposites to these negatives, but still we do not have clearly defined anywhere in Scripture what it will be like. "It does not yet appear what we shall be."

There is that strange passage in the closing chapter of Second Corinthians where the Apostle Paul speaks of the experience of being caught up into the third heaven with the Lord. He did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body, he could not tell. He heard things and saw things which, he said, were not lawful to utter. I think the real meaning of that phrase is, they were simply indescribable in terms of our present experience. It does not yet appear what we shall be -- as far as the positive understanding of the conditions of life beyond this.

Furthermore, it does not yet appear how our present circumstances relate to what we shall be. Certainly we do not understand that. We do not understand how what we are going through right now is producing what is coming, yet that is what the Scriptures declare. In Second Corinthians the Apostle Paul cries, "For this slight momentary affliction [Is that not an amazing description, when you read the list of things he went through -- stoning, prison, shipwreck, hungering and thirsting and all the other things? But he groups it all together and labels it 'this light affliction'] is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison," {2 Cor 4:17 KJV}.

I confess I am forever fascinated by that phrase, "weight of glory." I would like to know what that means. We speak of a weight of responsibility, by which we mean a burden to be borne, but this is a weight of glory, a responsibility so tremendous, so vast in its implications and yet so glorious in its experience, that it is like a great weight which is fully met and answered by the strength we shall have. Paul describes it as something that is being produced by what we are going through right now.

Does that not cast a lot of light on our experience today? How many of us have questions about what is happening to us, especially when pain and suffering strikes? We know there is some lesson in them, we have learned that much about God. We know that they were sent to us to teach us, but we think all the lessons are intended to be put to use down here, right now. Sometimes when we go through sorrow, difficulty, or pain and suffering we say, "Lord, teach me a lesson from this." We learn certain lessons and think they are all learned, yet the pain goes on. That is when our faith is really put to the test. When the pain, the darkness, the strife, or the hardship still continues, and yet we have learned all the apparent lessons, that is when our hearts cry, "Why?" Well, that is exactly why John says it does not yet appear what we shall be, and Paul adds, this light affliction is producing something. It is all working out

something that will not be manifest now, in this life, but later. It is producing a weight of glory that is yet to appear.

Some years ago I heard of an artist who was painting a picture he felt would be his masterpiece. He was working away on it in his studio, painting the background color, when a friend came in. The artist stepped back and said, "Oh, look at it! It's my masterpiece. What do you think of it?" The friend said, "Well, it doesn't look like much to me, just a mass of color." And the artist said, "Oh, I forget. You're seeing it as it is, but I see it as it will be!" Surely God looks at us that way. He sees us as we will be, but it does not yet appear to us what we shall be.

We do not even understand how what is happening to us now affects someone else. Somebody said to me just this week, "I don't understand the purpose of prayer. What does prayer do, how does prayer work?" I had to confess that I do not understand fully how prayer works, but I know it works. It has tremendous power to influence the lives of others. Paul also says that the things that are happening to us affect others. He speaks of enduring travail on behalf of the Galatian Christians, going through the pains or birth again, until Christ be fully formed in them. He writes to the Corinthians, "Death is at work in us, but life in you" {2 Cor 4:12 RSV}, i.e., what is happening to me is doing something to you. He says, I delight in that. I am quite willing to bear the pain if you will get the blessing. But we do not understand that, do we? It does not yet appear what we shall be. Life is full of mystery, and even though we have the enlightenment of the Scriptures there is still much we do not understand. John frankly acknowledges this. But notice, he quickly moves on to a note of certainty:

...but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. {1 Jn 3:2b RSV}

We do not know everything, but we do know three definite things about the future:

Certainty #1: We know that he will appear. I wonder if there is anyone here who doubts that. This is the most certain fact of all history. You think death and taxes are sure -- they are nothing compared to this. This is an absolutely inescapable fact in God's program for mankind; he will appear. He appeared once, he will appear the second time. Of this there is no doubt. All history is moving to this goal. You who know your Bibles well know that even the apparent confusion that exists today is but creating the conditions predicted in the Scriptures, and are working out the great purposes of God. Remember, as we saw earlier in John's letter, all this as far as your experience is concerned is no further away than your own death, and you do not know how soon that will come. So this event, this change (we shall be like him when he appears) is no further away than your own death -- and may be much closer than that.

Certainty #2: "We know that we shall be like him. I urge you to read that very carefully now, and note the context out of which it comes. It is linked with our present limited knowledge. Note that it does not say, "when he appears we shall become like him." There is a misconception that has arisen in many Christian minds which seemingly regards this verse as teaching that when Jesus Christ appears, when we see him at death or when he comes into time, we shall all suddenly become like him, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye. Certainly as regards the body, this is so. Our bodies become like his. Paul speaks of it to the Philippians, "this vile body of our humiliation shall be made like unto his glorious body, his body of glory. All the groanings and weakness which we experience each day will be forgotten when our body is changed into a body like his. That happens, as Paul tells us in First Corinthians 15, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, when this mortal puts on immortality, and "Death is swallowed up in victory," {1 Cor 15:54}. But the body is but the shell of the inner life. We do not suddenly change our total character and personality when we see Jesus Christ, and there is no Scripture that says so. Rather, as John is saying here, and is brought out in other places as well, what we have been becoming, through the years of our life, will suddenly be revealed when he appears. And what we have been becoming is, little by little, stage by stage, like him. The full extent to which we have become like him will be

revealed when we see him, and not before. That is what he means.

The question, of course, that comes shouting out at us from all this is, "How much of my life is becoming like him right now?" What percent of the time am I, as a Christian, like Jesus Christ? How much of my time now, am I projecting the image of his life in me, rather than the image of the flesh in me? That is the crucial question, because that is what will be revealed when we see him. Everything else will be burned, as Paul says in First Corinthians 3, since it is but wood, hay and stubble. The gold, the silver, the precious stones, are the aspects and parts of our lives in which we have consented to be like him. But those times when we resist him, those areas in which we shut him out and assume that we have what it takes to live as God wants us to live in our own strength and energy, are all wood, hay, and stubble, and will be burned, and we will suffer loss. We have seen all this before. But notice that the change into his likeness must happen now. We are becoming like him right now. Look at Second Corinthians 3:18:

And we all, with unveiled face [i.e., with the blindness taken from our eyes by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who teaches us all things], **beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness** [right now, as we see the Lord revealed to us from the word by the Spirit, and in the experience of fellowship with one another, we are being changed into his likeness] **from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.** {2 Cor 3:18 RSV}

Thus in the day when we see him, when he appears, then we will be like him only to the extent we have learned to be like him now. That is what makes this "light affliction" Paul speaks of so tremendously important, because it is producing this. This light affliction is working for us, Paul says, producing a likeness to him. As we see him in our circumstances, and we learn to accept them, prickly and thorny as they may be, as coming from him, sent by him to work in us that which he desires; as we learn to do this without grumbling, without complaint, or rejection, we discover that we are becoming like him. All these things are God's instruments to shape us and mold us to make us into his likeness. When we grumble and gripe, or complain and try to run away, we are rejecting the instruments God has sent to make us into his likeness. So we face the possibility of becoming much less like him than we could be.

Certainty #3 is mentioned in this verse, "we shall see him as he is." "But," you say, "according to what this verse says, this is the reason we become like him; when we see him as he is then we all become like him." That is exactly what has given rise to what I have previously called a misconception in the Christian life, this idea that everyone is suddenly to become fully like Jesus when we see him as he is. No, no. We are already becoming like him, even when we see him as in a mirror, faintly, darkly, as Paul puts it. It does not take a full-orbed view of Christ to make us like him, that is happening even now.

But this little word *for* in this verse, is a Greek participle that can also be translated *that*. The best commentators admit that it is ambiguous whether this should be translated, "we shall be like him *because* we shall see him as he is" or whether, as I think, it should be translated, "we shall be like him *that* we might see him as he is," i.e., in order to see him as he is. That is why we are being changed into his likeness now, in order that when we see him we shall see him as he is.

We shall be able to understand him, to enter into communion with him, to fellowship with him. As we well know from our own experience, you must be like something in order to understand it, to enjoy fellowship with it. That is the reason why your dog cannot enter into your sorrows or your joys. You come home brokenhearted and sit down. The dog senses something is wrong. He whines and sits looking up at you with his brown eyes expressive of concern, but he cannot understand, he is puzzled, he does not know what is wrong, he cannot enter in, he cannot comfort you. He does not and cannot understand what you are going through. Again, you are happy, and he knows you are happy. He wags his tail, but he does not know what it is all about. He cannot know because he is a dog and you are a

human; therefore, he cannot enter into what you are going through.

Christian friends, that is what the apostle says about us. No man can understand the things of God except the Spirit of God, he only can understand. No man can enter into fellowship with God by himself. We cannot possibly understand this mighty, wonderful, transcendent Being, this great fountain of love and grace and truth. We can never know him until we become like him. But that is what is happening now. Do you understand? That is what is happening to you, through your circumstances, now. If you see it that way, then you will see why John adds this third verse here.

And every one who thus hopes in him [i.e., Christ], purifies himself as he is pure. {1 Jn 3:3 RSV}

If the degree to which you become like him is the degree to which you will see him as he is, then what a powerful motivation this is to become like him now; to accept your circumstances, to stop quarreling with what God sends to you, and begin in everything to give thanks, allowing these strange instruments of God's grace to do their work in your life. Paul says, "tribulation works patience, and patience, experience," {cf, Rom 5:3 ff, KJV}. Tribulation works patience -- that means it makes you ready to wait and watch and pray for God to work things out. And patience works experience -- experience of what? The experience of seeing God work things out so that again and again you see that the situations which caused you to fear, or made you uncertain, as you patiently waited and looked to God, doing what he indicated you could do at the moment but otherwise resting quietly, began to work out in wonderful ways, time after time. And experience works hope. Not hope in the worldly sense of uncertainty, of chance, but hope in the biblical sense, of certainty, absolute assurance.

A few experiences like this and you know absolutely that God is adequate, that he is able to work everything out. You know that every testing is another opportunity for God to demonstrate his great ability to work things out. Thus hope "makes not ashamed," it gives confidence, a sense of unbeatable confidence which keeps you poised and assured under any circumstance. All that is what happens now, as God begins to work through our circumstances to make us like him. That is why John says that every one who has this kind of hope, this certainty; and understands this process; purifies himself, even as Christ is pure.

But you say, "Purify myself! That's the one thing I can't do." Well, that is true. God knows that. He knows you cannot purify yourself, yet he says to purify yourself here. What does he mean? Well, you purify yourself when you use the means he has provided for purification. You mothers know how this works. Your little boy has been playing in the streets and is covered with dirt. He comes in, and you send him into the bathroom to purify himself. Like all boys, he turns on the water, runs his hands through it, turns the water off, wipes his hands on the towel and comes out. You look him over and say, "But you're not clean." "Well," he says, "I washed myself." "But look at the dirt on your hands and on your arms and on your face and behind your ears. You're not clean at all." Then every wise mother asks, "Did you use soap?" Of course, he hadn't, so she sends him back to use the soap. What is soap? It is a purifying agent, a cleansing agent. It will do the job if it is employed. So when he comes back the second time he has washed with soap and the soap has cleansed him, purified him. Now he says, "Look, mom, I've cleaned myself up." It is true, he did it, but he did it by using the provision provided.

The provision for our cleansing is the Word of God and the Spirit of God. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin," {cf, 1 Jn 1:7}. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," {1 Jn 1:9 KJV}. This means we must begin to take seriously this matter of a break of fellowship with Christ because of an impatient spirit, or an ugly word, or a lustful idea or thought which we have dwelt on. We must realize the stain of it does not disappear by the passage of time. It has interfered with our fellowship with the Son of God, and we must do something about it. We cannot simply forget it, we must do something about it. We must purify

ourselves, using the provision he has provided, that we might be clean.

What a wonderful practical tie there is between this truth of the coming of the Lord and our appearing before him, and the living of our daily life! "Every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Let me illustrate that by the life of a woman whose ministry is well known to you. Many of you know of Martha Snell Nicholson who, for more than thirty-five years was an invalid, bound to her bed, and yet whose spirit was so transcendently triumphant through those many weary years, that she wrote some of the finest Christian poetry in my opinion which has ever been written. A number of years before she died she wrote about her hope of the coming of the Lord. This is what she says:

"The best part is the blessed hope of his soon coming. How I ever lived before I grasped that wonderful truth, I do not know. How anyone lives without it these trying days I cannot imagine. Each morning I think, with a leap of the heart, 'He may come today.' And each evening, 'When I awake I may be in glory.' Each day must be lived as though it were to be my last, and there is so much to be done to purify myself and to set my house in order. I am on tiptoe with expectancy. There are no more grey days -- for the radiance of His coming is on the horizon; no more dull days, with glory just around the corner; and no more lonely days, with His footstep coming ever nearer, and the thought that soon, soon, I shall see His blessed face and be forever through with pain and tears."

That was written from a bed of pain and anguish. Yet, is it not significant that that very same person could write the following powerful expression of the desire she felt to purify herself in view of that transcendent event?

When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ
And He shows me His plan for me,
The Plan of my life as it might have been
Had He had His way, and I see

How I blocked Him here, and I checked Him there,
And I would not yield my will --
Will there be grief in my Saviour's eyes,
Grief, though He loves me still?

He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,
Stripped of all but His grace,
While memory runs like a hunted thing
Down the paths I cannot retrace.

Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break
With the tears that I cannot shed;
I shall cover my face with my empty hands,
I shall bow my uncrowned head...

Lord of the years that are left to me,
I give them to Thy hand;
Take me and break me, mould me to
The pattern Thou hast planned!

Prayer:

Our hearts are stirred, our Father, as we think of this mighty truth. We dwell on it all too infrequently -- this end that is coming, this fact that these days here on earth shall some day come to an end. Yet that is not the end of the story. We will be with you, and all that these days have meant, and all that they could have meant, will be revealed, unfolded to us. Lord, we thank you that you have told us that what we are going through now links up with what

is coming, and that we now have the right and privilege to be shaped and made and formed in Christ's likeness now, through the circumstances in which we live.

Lord of the years that are left to us,
We give them to Thy hand;
Take us and break us, mould us to
The pattern Thou hast planned!"

In Christ's name, Amen.

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