

Church of God, The Eternal

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Dear Brethren,

As part of God's called and chosen people in the last days, we should recognize that salvation is not an easy goal to obtain. In contrast to the deceptive teachings of this world's churches, for many years we have been taught by God's true servants that the reward of eternal life requires much more than a shallow profession of belief. One of the most difficult challenges for any human being is to commit to a specific way of life without changing or recanting. Because we are each born with the proclivity to change our minds and value most things for only a short time, the idea of being steadfast and faithful to any particular code of conduct for an entire lifetime is daunting. So many circumstances seem to come up year after year that change our human priorities. What was incredibly important in our minds last year may become inconsequential to us ten years from now. When we really understand that God requires consistency of purpose and unwavering faithfulness to His way without change, in spite of our own natural impulses to the contrary, the gravity and scope of that calling becomes all the more sobering.

But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live? But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die (Ezekiel 18:21-24).

For most human beings, this concept in Ezekiel, chapter eighteen, is difficult to accept. If someone has lived an atrocious lifestyle for many years or made certain mistakes, we have the tendency to hold that over the individual's head, even if a legitimate change in orientation has taken place. Likewise, the very idea that someone might serve God faithfully

for many years but then lose the reward of salvation because of a wrong turn later in life seems unmerciful to us. However, if we recognize that the natural rationale of man is defective, we must then accept the need to evaluate from a spiritual orientation, using instead the mind of God through the Holy Spirit. If God really is the personification of perfect love, there is nothing in His plan that can be criticized as either weak and permissive, or cruel and unjust. What then is the basis for God's perfect plan and the correct way to evaluate His orientation toward our ultimate judgement?

It Matters Only How We Finish

We can all probably think of individuals who have shown initial interest in God's way of life, until they realized the price for being a true disciple. "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish" (Luke 14:28–30). Even so, one who recognizes early that he is not willing to pay the real price required may be better off than one who makes that initial vow in baptism and then falls away later down the road, leaving an unfinished spiritual building. "And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). We each make the most critical decision of life when we commit to that belief. There is no greater promise offered to man than the opportunity to become a beloved spiritual son in the God family for all eternity, but there is likewise no greater sacrifice required for anyone choosing to pursue that promise of royal sonship. Because God is offering each one of us so very much—a promise far beyond our mental capacity to fathom—He also requires legitimate proof that we really desire that promise more than any other fleshly pursuit. That proof will be made manifest to Him by our resolute faithfulness to His perfect law until either the end of our physical lives, or the return of Jesus Christ in power and glory, whichever comes first. No matter how well intentioned we may have been at any point during our lives, and no matter how well we may have done in living that way of life for a time, it will all be for naught if we cannot maintain that consistent faithfulness until the passing of our last human breath. But why such a difficult requirement for salvation?

The most cruel and heinous act would be for God to give eternal life to a human being who subsequently manifested a character flaw and became an adversary to truth. Satan and the demons are writing that very lesson, for we know what awaits those beings who failed their test after already possessing immortality. "And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet [were cast], and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). This

terrible conclusion will never befall any human being. According to God's perfect mercy, He will verify before the end of our human existence whether any such flaw exists in us. Anyone who fails to demonstrate to Him a level of character sufficient to assure eternal faithfulness will be mercifully extinguished (Revelation 20:13–15). Is it any wonder then that the process of character building in this life's training ground must test us to the absolute limits? And if a serious and unsolvable character flaw ultimately surfaces, even in the eleventh hour of our life, can God possibly ignore that development? Because the stakes are so high, it would not be the act of a merciful God to look past a character defect that would ultimately cause one of us to inherit a comparable penalty to that of Satan. Therefore, it is indeed part of God's perfect love and mercy to judge each one of us according to our final accomplishments and state of character, regardless of what good or bad may have occurred along the way. This principle is also confirmed by one of Jesus Christ's parables:

But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him (Matthew 21:28–32).

Within this parable, we see not only a commentary on human religious hypocrisy, but also confirmation of God's focus on the ultimate result of our lives, more than the initial response. The first son could easily represent one who initially repudiated God's way but ultimately changed and developed lasting character. There is no telling how many sins may have been committed during his lifetime before that change of heart occurred. The second son could represent one who made the early commitment to obey God, but somewhere along the way became offended or deceived and allowed other influences to cause failure. This could very well be someone who practiced the law of God for many years, but ultimately demonstrated a serious, unresolved character flaw before the end of the lifelong test. In both cases, God cares most about the final results of our lives, whether for good or for evil. He must know for sure.

This principle also holds true within human endeavors. How many successful companies have come to value those employees who really know how to get results, more than those who make a good show but fail to deliver in the end? Business sages tell us we must focus on results, best measured by customer satisfaction, not by internal political

gamesmanship. If a company allows employees to be rewarded for the *appearance* of competency, without substantiation from the judge that matters most (the customer), it is only a matter of time before service, and then profitability is ultimately jeopardized. What matters most is consistently delivering a good product at a competitive price. The true worth of a company's policies and practices is measured by the ability to deliver the final goods, giving value to the public. No matter how good it may seem initially, or what occurs along the way, if the final result is not good, the company is a failure. Can we then fault God for requiring the same kind of proof of the real substance of our character before giving us an eternal and irrevocable reward?

And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons (Colossians 3:23–25).

The principle involved applies in every endeavor, both physical and spiritual. It is the final outcome that really matters.

Biblical Examples—Good and Bad Outcomes

Let us look at this principle from the experiences of some of God's historical servants. Solomon was a man raised from a child in the knowledge of God, and given every opportunity and blessing. He accepted that way of life and proved to be an incredibly effective servant. His attitude was right, proven by his request for God to grant him great wisdom, as opposed to something of vanity.

And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days. And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days (1 Kings 3:11–14).

Thereafter, and for the majority of his life, Solomon acted as an ambassador of God, not only as an example for the nation of Israel, but for the countries of the entire world.

"And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kings 4:34).

But in spite of all that he accomplished in God's service for so many years, Solomon wrote the lesson of one who forsook the truth, and turned to idolatry.

For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father (1 Kings 11:4–6).

We cannot know where Solomon will stand in the resurrection, but we do know his example is one that proves we can never relax or let up in fighting our carnal natures. How *truly* great would Solomon have been if he had maintained his faithfulness to the end of his life? But how tarnished is even his greatest accomplishment because of his ultimate departure in old age?

Again we see, it is how we finish that counts.

Next, let us look at the life of another ancient king—Manasseh.

Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem: But did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, like unto the abominations of the heathen, whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel. For he built again the high places which Hezekiah his father had broken down, and he reared up altars for Baalim, and made groves, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. . . . And he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom: also he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards: he wrought much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger (2 Chronicles 33:1–3, 6).

However, through great persecution Manasseh wrote the lesson of one who finally bent his knee to God and turned from his diabolical evil.

Wherefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he

besought the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, And prayed unto him: and he was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD he was God. . . . And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the LORD, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. And he repaired the altar of the LORD, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel (2 Chronicles 33:11–13, 15–16).

In spite of the horrific evil perpetuated by Manasseh for many years, might not this ultimate change of heart count him as one of those referenced in Ezekiel, chapter eighteen, whose past transgressions will not be mentioned? It is a concept that should give each one of us hope, that no matter how sinful and vain our pasts may have been, it is still not too late to turn and renew our relationship with the Eternal God.

Does God Guarantee Our Success?

One concept that surfaces periodically is the false notion that God is duty bound to assure our ultimate success. The idea is that God himself will be a failure if every human being He created does not ultimately gain salvation. The inference is that God will create whatever circumstances necessary before we die to force us into repentance. But is this consistent with God's plan and the true biblical teaching?

First, why does God's inspired Word in Revelation speak of a final resurrection unto destruction, if that result will not really occur?

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:12–15).

What about the many parables spoken by Jesus Christ, warning of the penalty to those who would not be faithful? Notice only a very few examples from among many:

As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:40–42).

But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; And shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 24:48–51).

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal (Matthew 25:41–46).

If these texts do not speak of real penalties to be reaped by at least one or more human beings, why are they written? Do we view God like a misguided parent, who tries to threaten his children into obedience, even though he does not really intend to execute the punishment? Do not the children of such parents learn to discount those empty threats? God does not issue idle warnings. No, God is not so defective in character. In His perfect righteousness, He would never teach us of the potential consequences of an unpardonable sin, if no such sin really existed. "For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:26–27). If God's plan were to ensure every human being ultimate success, there would have been no need to make provision for a resurrection unto destruction, or a second death. Such arguments reflect the same human rationale which tries to discount the true requirements for obtaining salvation. It is very similar in purpose to those who believe we can be automatically saved by making a cursory profession of faith. Such belief makes allowance for putting off overcoming. Even if we might have to endure greater trials and

persecution before the return of Christ, would not it be nice to know, in the end we cannot fail? But such assurance has never been given.

Make no mistake about it, God desires that every one of His called and chosen be found worthy of receiving an eternal crown in His family.

He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust (Psalm 103:10–14).

In His perfect love, there is probably no one who will regret the failure of any one of us more than the Father who created us all. But if it were a foregone conclusion that every human being would ultimately make the right decision, then it would be doubtful that we each really possess free moral agency. "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). God did not create us as robotic automatons. We *do* have the choice to obey or to rebel.

There is also no doubt that God will do everything possible to get the attention of those who have become offended at the truth, to return them again to a faithful relationship with Him. "If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands" (Job 14:14–15). Though some will make the wrong decision in the end, hardening their hearts against the truth, God's perfect plan is intended to bring every one to repentance, that He may reap a glorious harvest of eternal sons. But in the end, we will each make our own choice, either for obedience, or for defiance.

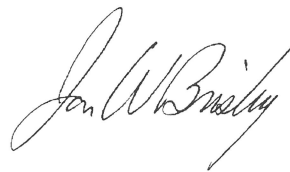
When we really understand the gravity of our calling, and the significance of the decisions we are each making day by day, our motivation to continue the battle of overcoming and character development should also intensify. The stakes are very high. The tests yet ahead will be even greater than the ones already past. Even if we feel we have successfully weathered the trials to this point, any sense of complacency now could become the breeding ground for weakness that puts us in jeopardy before the next onslaught. How many of our former brethren seemed very strong for years, only to give way to personal feelings and perceived offences that swept them away. "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9). We can never rest from spiritual service. If we are not continuing to develop ever-increasing faith, we are

automatically losing ground by default. Within this spiritual proving ground, we are never really standing still. It is only a matter of which direction we are moving; whether forward or backward. And even if this continual uphill climb seems overwhelming at times, we must recognize that everything we have invested and sacrificed to date can be made null and void if we cannot successfully complete the mission to its very end. We are those who have put our hands to the plow, and for us, there really is no turning back.

With those principles in mind, can we confidently say we are really making wise use of this time to prepare for the monumental tests yet ahead? Are we now acting daily with increased faith over that of any past time in our lives? Or are we responding to today's tests with the same incomplete fruits of past years? The things we are experiencing now are not accidental or coincidental. They are there for purpose. If we recognize that not a single one of us has attained any certified reward yet—but that our reward will only become vested by holding on till the end—it should prompt us to refortify our personal efforts in cultivating a closer relationship with God. Time is shorter than ever, but not too late for those of us willing to apply ourselves with increased determination and purpose. That which God has promised is certainly worth the required sacrifice.

My respect and sincere appreciation for all of those separated for that glorious eternal purpose.

Your servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jon W. Brisby