

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Don't Be Surprised

By Steven Harper

Every so often, we are caught off guard by something we did not foresee, or by actions of others we did not expect. Sometimes, we are simply amazed at something we see or hear because it is far beyond expectations, greater than what we thought possible, or just amazing and awe-inspiring. Maybe it was an act of kindness by a complete stranger, or more surprising, someone who had made it clear they didn't like us; maybe it is something as mundane as getting 40 miles per gallon when we expected 25; maybe it is just an incredibly beautiful sunset after several days of cloudy skies.

But there are some things that should not surprise us, as Christians who are spiritually minded. Some things will happen that may be certainly undesirable, but the fact those things happen should not be what surprises us. In fact, we find within Scriptures several things that should not be surprising in this world. Let's consider a few.

Injustice in the World. The wise writer said, *“If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them”* (Eccl. 5:8). I know a lot of brethren like to think our political climate of greed, corruption, and oppression is something new, but it is not. We should not be amazed at this, for man has long been this way and, as the writer said, someone is always looking out for his selfish interests and will do what they can to make their personal life comfortable, with no thoughts for others.

The sad truth is, man is often evil, and it seems more and more that the evil ways of man are preferred over righteousness and godliness. But, again, this is not new. The psalmist wrote a long time ago of the wicked and *“the workers of iniquity, who speak peace to their neighbors, but evil is in their hearts”* (Psa. 28:3); he wrote of the wicked who has *“no fear of God before his eyes”* and *“words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit...devises wickedness on his bed;...sets himself in a way that is not good; [and] does not abhor evil”* (Psa. 36:1-4); and the wise writer described the wicked ways of a man who *“digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire...sows strife, and [as] a whisperer separates the best of friends. A violent man entices his neighbor, and leads him in a way that is not good. He winks his eye to devise perverse things; he purses his lips and brings about evil”* (Prov. 16:27-30). We see these things regularly, so we should not marvel at the injustice in this world!

Instead of being upset and surprised at the evil of men, it is better to trust in the Lord because man will always disappoint us. It is far better to trust in someone who is of vastly different – superior – character: the Lord! As the psalmist wrote, *“It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes”* (Psa. 118:6-9), and, *“Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish”* (Psa. 146:3,4).

Eating with Unwashed Hands. Once, Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee, and it was there that the man was said to have *“marveled that He had not first washed before dinner”* (Lk. 11:38). But Jesus pointed out his erroneous thinking and the habit of emphasizing the wrong things and reminded him, and us, *“Did not He who made the outside make the inside also?”* (Lk. 11:40). The point Jesus makes here is that it is not what goes into a man that defiles, but what comes out in a man's words and deeds (Matt. 15:11). The religious leaders of the first century were not following God's word, but their traditions, and were more concerned about outward appearances than they were about having the right attitudes and a sincere heart.

The lesson for the religious leaders of the first century [and for us, of course] is that we should not be putting undue emphasis on the things that don't matter while overlooking what Jesus called "*the weightier matters*" of justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:23). We should be more concerned about what is in our heart than how much money is in our pockets, how often others compliment our clothing, or how much attention we get when we go to the worship assembly.

If We're Hated by the World. When Jesus sent the disciples out on the limited commission, He told them, "*you will be hated by all for My name's sake*" (Matt. 10:22); not long before Jesus was to be taken away to be tried and then crucified, He told the apostles, "*If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you*" (Jn. 15:18). John would later write to all disciples, "*Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you*" (1 Jn. 3:13).

We should not marvel because, as Jesus said, He was hated first. But why did they hate Him? Jesus answered that, too: "*If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father*" (Jn. 15:24). Basically, they hated Jesus because He proved He was who He claimed to be, yet the religious leaders did not want, nor did they expect, a Messiah like Jesus, who exposed their hypocrisy and superficial service to God, and their emphasis on human traditions over the word of God. When He came and began teaching the truth, it exposed their errors and said what everyone else already knew: They were religious frauds and deceivers. Just know that when people hate us because of our faith, it is because they hated Jesus first; they hate the truth He taught and the truth of who He was and is.

So when the world does hate you, then is not the time to be surprised about it (cf. 1 Pet. 4:12, 13), but the time to rejoice because we can be assured our reward is great in heaven. As Jesus said it, "*Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven*" (Lk. 6:22, 23).

We Must Be Born Again. When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, one thing Jesus told him was, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (Jn. 3:3), and Nicodemus wondered, "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*" (Jn. 3:4). But Jesus then said to him, "*Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'*" (Jn. 3:7). Nicodemus did not understand the nature of this rebirth of which Jesus spoke, and he could not comprehend how it was even possible, yet Jesus said, "*Do not marvel*" at the necessity of being born again? Why not?

The answer is simple, but often difficult to accept: All of us have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Nicodemus did not see the fact of his own sin and the need to repent of them and start truly obeying the will of God in Christ. He was so focused on what he seemed to think was the impossible because he was thinking he had no need of a spiritual rebirth, so his conclusion was in error and he couldn't imagine how he could be physically born again. Many people today think, like Nicodemus, they have no need of a rebirth.

We must become that "*new creation*" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), and rejoice at what it brings to us! Prepare now so there are no surprises. – *The Words of Truth and Reason*, February 20, 2022. ■

"5 And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; 6 And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; 7 And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. 8 For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. {barren: Gr. idle} 9 But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. 10 Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: 11 For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:5-11, KJV).

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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