

TESTS: Their Spiritual Value

By
MAMIE L. SETO

Soon will the present-day order
be rolled up, and a new one
spread out in its stead. Verily,
thy Lord speaketh the truth, and
is the Knower of things unseen.

—BAHÁ'U'LLÁH.

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THE BAHÁ'Í REVELATION

The Bahá'í revelation is the spirit of this age. It is the essence of all the highest ideals of this century. The Bahá'í cause is an inclusive movement; the teachings of all religions and societies are found here. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muhammadans, Zoroastrians, Theosophists, Freemasons, Spiritists, etc., find their highest aims in this cause. Socialists and philosophers find their theories fully developed in this revelation.

The Bahá'í message is a call to religious unity and not an invitation to a new religion, not a new path to immortality, God forbid! It is the ancient path cleared of the debris of imaginations and superstitions of men, of the debris of strife and misunderstanding and is again made a clear path to the sincere seeker, that he may enter therein in assurance, and find that the word of God is one word, though the speakers were many.

—*Words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*

THE new way of life for man in this coming "Golden Age" is dependent upon an entirely new attitude, not only toward God and his fellow-men, but also toward those trials, troubles and problems which beset his earthly path. These trials, troubles, sufferings and woes are known as "tests" in the Bahá'í Faith. They may be met in such a way as to be stepping stones in the path of man's spiritual progress and not as obstacles therein.

In the Bahá'í Faith, radiant acquiescence has been enjoyed upon man for life in this new era. 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only emphasized the great need for such a quality in the world today, but pointed out the beneficent results which would follow as the consequence of such an attitude toward life.

"The confirmations of the spirit," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "are all those powers and gifts with which some are born and which men sometimes call genius, but for which others have to strive with infinite pains. They come to that man or woman who accepts life with radiant acquiescence."¹

The Manifestations of God, despite the terrible persecutions, unspeakable cruelties, crucifixions, martyrdoms and incarcerations which have been their lot while proclaiming their message of knowledge, love and mercy to mankind, have always set the perfect example of the true spiritual life.

In this age the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, while suffering the persecutions that have befallen all of

¹Divine Philosophy, p. 23.

God's prophets, set us the examples of lives of radiant acquiescence. On one occasion Bahá'u'lláh penned the following words in a tablet to the Sháh of Persia:

"I am not impatient of calamities in His way, nor of afflictions for His love and at His good pleasure—God hath made afflictions as a morning shower to His green pasture, and as a wick for His lamp whereby earth and heaven are illumined."²

'Abdu'l-Bahá, who experienced persecutions similar to those of His father Bahá'u'lláh, still taught and practiced the same life of radiant joy, and accepted the vicissitudes of life uncomplainingly. Though imprisoned for over forty years in the terrible penal colony at 'Akká, Syria, He proved by His life the truth of the words He spoke: "There is no prison save the prison of self."³

The people of the world would generally agree that radiant acquiescence would be something easily accomplished and readily obtained were it not for the ever presence of troubles, trials, woes, hardships and suffering which stand like intervening clouds between them and their happiness. What then, is the wisdom of all this suffering?

Humanity is ever seeking happiness and is disappointed when it fails in its search for it, and this earth plane has not, in the past, been the goal for such a quest. Men have lived and died in a world of trouble. Yet this earth life is of utmost importance and of great spiritual value, for it affords the best environment for the soul development of the individual and the progress of the

race. It is not the place, however, for the full realization of men's highest wishes, as it is the first life and also the place of preparation for a higher and fuller life in the other world.

'Abdu'l-Bahá calls our attention to this truth in the following words:

"That of which he (man) is in need in the world of the Kingdom he must obtain here. Just as he prepared himself by acquiring the forces necessary in this world in the world of the matrix, so likewise it is necessary that all needful in the Kingdom, all the forces of the Kingdom—must be acquired in this world."⁴

"The wisdom of the appearance of the spirit in the body is this: The human spirit is a Divine Trust, and it must traverse all conditions; for its passage and movement through the conditions of existence will be the means of its acquiring perfections."⁵

Therefore, the development of the soul is the all important work, and this also includes the unfolding of the mental faculties. Soul qualities are not, however, developed by a life of ease, so the earth plane with its trials and troubles has been ordained as the best place for this noble purpose.

The soul qualities are justice, mercy, love, patience, sympathy, forgiveness, and all the other virtues.

Man is not born with his mental faculties and soul qualities in evidence, yet they are innate in his soul, as the seed contains the tree, and are first brought forth through life on this plane.

Just as the beauty of the tree, with its branches, leaves, blossoms and fruit, is not visible in the

²Bahá'í Scriptures, p. 76.
³Divine Philosophy, p. 24.

⁴Bahá'í Scriptures, par. 645.
⁵Some Answered Questions, p. 233.

seed, but becomes so by placing the seed in the darkness of the earth, and when it is watered by rain and expanded by the heat of the sun it puts forth roots, branches, leaves, flowers and fruit, so man in the same way reveals his soul qualities by experiencing life on this dark earth, that is dark only in comparison with the other world, which is a world of Light.

Trials and troubles which accompany man all through life may be likened to the rain and the heat of the sun which cause the seed to sprout, grow and bloom.

No one will dispute the fact that the qualities of the mind and spirit are evolved through difficulties and sufferings. Many ideas, inventions and discoveries are conceived and brought forth through necessity and when men find themselves hemmed in by limitations and surrounded by hardships.

Who will deny the truth that sorrows soften the heart, suffering develops sympathy, patience and fortitude come to those who must stand severe trials and strong temptations? Service is learned by being forced into conditions where service is required, hence it follows that all trials and suffering bring a harvest of spiritual virtues. Thus are the very severe and much dreaded sufferings the means by which those keen mental faculties are revealed and priceless soul qualities brought into being. It is these spiritual qualities that constitute the real worth of man.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked, "What is true greatness in man?" He answered: "His spiritual attributes. No one can destroy his spiritual qualities; they are from God."⁶

Therefore "Tests are benefits from God, for which we should thank Him. Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our own perfecting.

"While a man is happy he may forget his God; but when grief comes and sorrows overwhelm him, then will he remember his Father who is in heaven and who is able to deliver him from his humiliations.

"Men who suffer not, attain no perfection. The plant most pruned by the gardeners is that one which, when the summer comes, will have the most beautiful blossoms and the most abundant fruit."⁷

When asked, "Does the soul progress more through sorrow or through joy in this world?" 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered:

"The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulations free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness. Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him. Look back to the times past and you will find that the greatest men have suffered most."

"He who through suffering has attained development, should he fear happiness?"

'Abdu'l-Bahá—"through suffering he will attain to an eternal happiness which nothing can

⁶Ten Days in the Light of Acca, p. 13.

⁷The Wisdom of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 45.

take from him. The Apostles of Christ suffered: they attained eternal happiness."

"Then it is impossible to attain happiness without suffering?"

'Abdu'l-Bahá—"to attain eternal happiness one must suffer. He who has reached the state of self-sacrifice has true joy. Temporal joy will vanish." 8

'Abdu'l-Bahá in the following assures us that all sorrow and suffering are connected with this material world:

"In this world we are influenced by two sentiments, Joy and Pain.

"Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness. But when sadness visits us we become weak, our strength leaves us, our comprehension is dim and our intelligence veiled. The actualities of life seem to elude our grasp, the eyes of our spirits fail to discover the sacred mysteries, and we become even as dead beings.

"There is no human being untouched by these two influences; but all sorrow and the grief that exist come from the world of matter—the Spiritual world bestows only the joy!

"If we suffer it is the outcome of material things, and all the trials and troubles come from this world of illusion.

"For instance, a merchant may lose his trade and depression ensues. A workman is dismissed and starvation stares him in the face. A farmer has a bad harvest, anxiety fills his mind. A man builds a house which is burnt to the ground and

⁸Ibid., pp. 166-7.

he is straight-way homeless, ruined, and in despair.

"All these are to show you that the trials which beset our every step, all our sorrow, pain, shame and grief, are born in the world of matter; whereas the Spiritual Kingdom never causes sadness. A man living with his thought in this Kingdom knows perpetual joy. The ills all flesh is heir to do not pass him by, but they only touch the surface of his life, the depths are calm and serene.

"Today, Humanity is bowed down with trouble, sorrow and grief, no one escapes; the world is wet with tears, but, thank God, the remedy is at our doors. Let us turn our hearts away from the world of matter and live in the Spiritual World! It alone can give us freedom! If we are hemmed in by difficulties we have only to call upon God, and by His great Mercy we shall be helped.

"If sorrow and adversity visit us, let us turn our faces to the Kingdom and heavenly consolation will be outpoured.

"If we are sick and in distress let us implore God's healing and He will answer our prayer.

"When our thoughts are filled with the bitterness of this world, let us turn our eyes to the sweetness of God's compassion and He will send us Heavenly calm! If we are imprisoned in the material world, our Spirit can soar into the Heavens and we shall be free indeed!

"When our days are drawing to a close let us think of the eternal worlds, and we shall be full of joy!" 9

The trials and sorrows of this world are divided into two kinds:

⁹Ibid., pp. 100-1.

"If a man eats too much he ruins his digestion; if he takes poison he becomes ill or dies. If a person gambles he will lose his money; if he drinks too much he will lose his equilibrium. All those sufferings are caused by man himself, it is quite clear therefore that certain sorrows are the result of our own deeds.

"Other sufferings there are, which come upon the faithful of God. Consider the great sorrows endured by Christ, and by His Apostles."¹⁰

Since much of man's suffering is the consequence of his own actions, a great deal of this would decrease, if not entirely disappear, by man's strict adherence to the commandments of God as brought by His prophets.

"If men followed the Holy Counsels and the Teachings of the Prophets," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "if Divine Light shone in all hearts and men were really religious, we should soon see Peace on earth and the Kingdom of God among men. The Laws of God may be likened unto the soul and material progress unto the body. If the body was not animated by the soul, it would cease to exist. It is my earnest prayer that spirituality may ever grow and increase in the world so that customs may become enlightened and peace and concord may be established."¹¹

Regarding those trials which come from God, Bahá'u'lláh wrote the following:

"O Son of Man. Unto everything there is a sign. The sign of love is fortitude in My decree, and patience in My trials."

"O Son of Man. If adversity befall thee not in My path, how canst thou walk in the ways of them that are content with My pleasure? Were

¹⁰Ibid., p. 44.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 98-9.

not troubles to afflict thee in thy longing to meet Me, how wilt thou attain the light in thy love for My beauty?"¹²

In order to understand something of the new attitude toward the problems of this earth life, so they will be treated as stepping stones, some vital points should be remembered.

First: Man's life is a matter between him and his God. "In His hands is the destiny of all His servants,"¹³ Bahá'u'lláh revealed in one of his verses.

Second: God permits trials as a part of His plan for perfecting His children, and when they have learned these spiritual lessons they will be advanced by him. In the Tablet to the People of Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

"O Beloved! All of you are mentioned in the Books of God always. If some of the saints of God do not succeed in receiving each a special Tablet, they must know confessedly and certainly that their names, advancement and nearness, according to their stations, are mentioned and recorded in the Book from the Supreme Pen."¹⁴

Third: By refusing to get the spiritual value from the tests which come to us we leave ourselves open to the same test recurring with greater severity, and we have thereby increased our difficulties instead of decreasing them. God is thorough and perfect in all things, and man is not through with any problem until he has mastered it.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, in answer to a question put to him on this subject by a pilgrim visiting Him in 1915, replied in the following words: "The same

¹²Hidden Words.

¹³Words of Wisdom.

¹⁴Bahá'i Scriptures, par. 486.

test comes again in greater degree, until it is shown that a former weakness has become a strength, and the power to overcome evil has been established.”¹⁵

Fourth: There is no enemy save man's lower self (ignorance, hatred, greed, injustice). When men were primitive they believed in a power of evil outside of themselves; they thought this evil power was embodied in a creature called Satan who had power to defeat and crush them, and to wrest from them things which were rightfully theirs. In this more enlightened day we know that nothing can stand in the way of man's progress save himself.

At Haifa in 1915 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave the following in answer to a question put to him on this subject:

“When God calls a soul to a high station, it is because that soul has capacity for that station as a gift of God, and because that soul has supplicated to be taken into His service. No envies, jealousies, calumnies, slanders, plots nor schemes, will ever move God to remove a soul from its intended place, for by the grace of God, such actions on the part of the people are the test of the servant, testing his strength, forbearance, endurance and sincerity under adversity. At the same time those who show forth envies, jealousies, etc., toward a servant, are depriving themselves of their own stations, and not another of his, for they prove by their own acts that they are not only unworthy of being called to any station awaiting them, but also prove that they cannot withstand the very first test—that of rejoicing over the success of their neighbor, at which God

rejoices. Only by such a sincere joy can the gift of God descend unto a pure heart.

“Envy closes the door of Bounty, and jealousy prevents one from ever attaining to the Kingdom of Abhá.

“No! Before God! No one can deprive another of his rightful station, that can only be lost by one's unwillingness or failure to do the will of God, or by seeking to use the Cause of God for one's own gratification or ambition.”¹⁶

On one occasion when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in America in 1912, a little Jewish girl came to Him seeking advice for the many problems and sorrows that had almost overwhelmed her. He advised her as follows:

“To pray is to trust in God and to be submissive in all things to Him. Be submissive, then things will change for you. Put your family in God's hands. Love God's will. Strong ships are not conquered by the sea; they ride the waves! Now be a strong ship, not a battered one.”¹⁷

With this fuller explanation of the wisdom and blessing of tests in the life of man as given in the Bahá'í Faith, life takes on a new meaning. Renewed by a fresh enthusiasm, man may go forth as the conqueror, intent upon defeating quickly and for all time those unseen and subtle enemies of the lower self, at the same time accepting radiantly any trials and difficulties which may befall him in his path of service to God.

Instead of, as formerly, decrying his lot and bemoaning his fate in life, whatever it be, man will seek to strengthen his mind and enrich his soul by the experience offered him in his earthly conditions.

¹⁵Star of the West, Vol. VI, p. 45.

¹⁶Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 44.

¹⁷'Abdu'l-Bahá's First Days in America, p. 28.

Those who are awakened by the teachings of the Prophets to the full meaning and purpose of life have had this radiant attitude toward trials, as we see by the words of Paul in Romans 5: 3, 4, 5:

“And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

“And patience, experience; and experience, hope:

“And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.”

“O Son of Man,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh, “The true lover yearneth for tribulation even as doth the rebellious for forgiveness and the sinful for mercy.”¹⁸

¹⁸Hidden Words

Exhortation

O People! The doors of the Kingdom are opened—the sun of truth is shining upon the world—the fountains of life are flowing—the daysprings of mercy have appeared—the greatest and most glorious light is now manifest to illuminate the hearts of men: wake up and hear the voice of God calling from all parts of the supreme world—“Come unto me, O ye children of men; come unto me, O ye who are thirsty, and drink from this sweet water which is descending in torrents upon all parts of the globe!”

Now is the time! Now is the accepted time!

Look ye at the time of Christ; had the people realized that the Holy Spirit of God was speaking to them through His divine mouth they would not have waited three centuries before accepting

Him. And now is it meet for you that ye are sleeping upon the beds of idleness and neglect, while the Father foretold by Christ has come amongst us and opened the greatest door of bounteous gifts and divine favors? Let us not be like those in past centuries who were deaf to His call and blind to His beauty; but let us try and open our eyes that we may see Him and open our ears that we may hear Him, and cleanse our hearts that He may come and abide in our temples.

These days are the days of faith and deeds—not the days of words and lip service. Let us arise from the sleep of negligence and realize what a great feast is prepared for us, first eating thereof ourselves, then giving unto others who are thirsting for the water of knowledge and hungering for the bread of life.

These great days are swiftly passing and once gone can never be recalled; so while the rays of the sun of truth are still shining, and the Center of the Covenant of God is manifest, let us go forth to work, for after a while the night will come and the way to the vineyard will not then be so easy to find.

The light of knowledge hath appeared before which the darkness of every superstitious fancy will be annihilated. The hosts of the supreme concourse are descending to assist all those who rise up to serve their Lord, to subdue and gain the victory over the city of the hearts, to proclaim the glad tidings of the coming of the Lord, and to unite the souls of his creatures.

—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ