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## THE FIVE REFERENCES TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD

By Duane V. Maxey

5 Times in the King James Version of the Bible we find the phrase: "the people of God" -- twice in the Old Testament, and thrice in the New. I propose to present below each of those 5 references in the order in which they appear in the Scriptures and to draw 5 Truths therefrom.

**(1) THE PEOPLE OF GOD STAND AGAINST ALL EVIL**:-- "And the chief of all the people, even of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of **the people of God**, four hundred thousand footmen that drew sword" (Judges 20:2).

We might take from the above verse that "the people of God" are an ARMY that is ready for battle, made up of soldiers who will not only go on parade in an assembly, but who will also bravely go out onto the battlefield, draw the sword, and risk their all in holy, spiritual warfare against the Enemy, Satan. However, this is not the emphasis I would here make -- noble as it is.

We might also lay the emphasis here upon the fact that "the people of God" always stand against Sodomy and Perversion. This verse appears in a context wherein God's warriors were about to go out to battle against those who had become filthy and immoral perverts in their sexual behavior, and who had just committed one of the most shocking and repulsive acts ever recorded in the Bible!

Let me tell you something folks, "the people of God" -- "THE TRUE PEOPLE OF GOD" never condone either homosexual acts or immoral acts! You can mark it down: -- if a people profess to be Christians who condone and practice such, theirs is an utterly false profession! The people of God are "peculiar" -- in the sense of being distinctly different from the world, but there is not a one of them that is "queer" -- in the sense of

being a homosexual or a lesbian! The entire Bible condemns both immorality and homosexuality! You will not find one verse defending either of these, and you will not find even one of the true people of God who defends such -- to say nothing of practicing such wickedness!

Yes, the first reference in the Bible about "the people of God" is about a people who are going to war against Sodomy and Immorality! -- but even this true characteristic of God's people is not that which I would primarily emphasize here. What is the emphasis? This:

The story surrounding this reference to "the people of God" in Judges 20:2 shows that they were about to TAKE A STAND AGAINST EVIL IN THEIR OWN MIDST! The enemy they proposed to go out and destroy was not the Moabites, not the Midianites, not the Philistines -- not any of the various other enemies that surrounded them -- No! the enemy was those of the Tribe of Dan -- those who were a very integral part of Israel itself! The burning question was: "Shall I... go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease?" (Judges 20:28). And the burning question facing a Church that has sin in its midst is: "Shall we take a stand against the sin of those in our own Household?"

What was God's reply to that question? "The Lord said, Go up; for to morrow I will deliver them into thine hand." In obedience to that command, they went -- and eventually with God's help they executed judgment upon those of their own nation who were guilty of this awful Sodomy and Immorality.

This, my friends, -- and this alone -- is the God-prescribed method of dealing with sin when it rears its ugly head in the midst of the Church, Spiritual Israel -- "the people of God". A Pastor and a People who will not deal radically with sin in their own ranks, will soon cease themselves to be the true people of God. Noble as it is for the Church to fight against the devil and against the world, IT IS MOST NOBLE WHEN THE CHURCH STANDS AGAINST THOSE IN HER OWN RANKS WHO SULLY HER SOUL AND WHO TARNISH THE REPUTATION OF CHRIST.

How lacking this nobility is today! How prone Churches seem to be to show respect of persons in such matters -- quick to condemn the same in the world, but loathe to condemn it in their own midst. Yes, it is also noble to not needlessly spread such evil tidings far and wide, and the Bible does say that "Charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). There is a legitimate room for "telling it not in Gath" and for "publishing it not in Ashkelon" (2 Sam. 1:20), but there is no room whatsoever for knowingly tolerating sin in the ranks of the Church, or for pandering to position, and pampering fellow-members who, without repentance, are living in known immorality and/or perversion.

It is far more difficult for a father to stand against the wickedness of his own son or daughter than it is for him stand against that same wickedness in those outside of his

household -- but it is more noble for him to stand against his own children, showing no favoritism to them, making no excuses for them, and executing the same judgment upon them as he would upon all others guilty of the same. In like manner, it is more difficult for "the people of God" to go to war against the fallen Benjamins in their own ranks -- but such stands against evil are more noble, more praiseworthy -- and without a doubt, even MORE NECESSARY. This fact is borne out by the verse that says: "judgment must BEGIN AT THE HOUSE OF GOD" (1 Pet. 4:17).

Thus, one of the most outstanding characteristics of "the people of God" is that THEY STAND AGAINST EVIL -- ALL EVIL -- YEA, ALL EVIL AMONG ALL PEOPLE, AND FIRST AND FOREMOST, AGAINST ALL EVIL AMONG THEMSELVES. Any group of professed Christians who will not do this mark themselves as NOT the true people of God.

**(2) THE PEOPLE OF GOD CAN ERR IN JUDGMENT:**-- "And the woman said, Wherefore then hast thou thought such a thing against **the people of God?** for the king doth speak this thing as one which is faulty, in that the king doth not fetch home again his banished" (2 Samuel 14:13).

The context of the above verse is the story surrounding the self-banishment of Absalom into Geshur after he slew his brother Amnon, and three years later the persuasive manner in which Joab, through a "wise woman" of Tekoah, coaxed King David into bringing Absalom home again.

Following the coaching of Joab, the "wise woman" of Tekoah declared that David's willingness to have Absalom remain in banishment without inviting him back was "a thing against the people of God." The sentiments behind the argument followed a line of reasoning similar to the following: "King David, you are being too hard on your son. He has suffered remorse and loneliness for 3 years now. Absalom is no doubt very sorry for what he has done. It is time to forgive and forget! It is time to bring him home again, throw your arms about him, and restore him to his former place in the King's household!"

Well, let me just say this: I think that David probably made a huge mistake by listening to this counsel. It played on his own heart strings, and it sounded quite plausible. Then, just like Joshua failed to take counsel from God when he was fooled by the men of Gibeon, David apparently made a human decision -- but one that nearly cost him both his kingdom and his life! He erred in judgment, and paid an awful price for that mistake -- and before it was all over, Absalom was more than banished -- HE WAS DEAD!

You know the story. Here was a son who was actually not the slightest bit penitent for having murdered his brother. Here instead, was a son who upon his return soon set out to steal the throne from his forgiving father, and even sought to kill him!

When "the people of God" are too quick to make decisions, when they are too naive, when they fail to go slowly and omit asking God for His counsel, they sometimes pay dearly for the errors they make!

Far better had it been that Absalom remain in Geshur! Had he been banished from David's presence until he manifested real remorse for his murderous deeds, David might never have had to groan, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 8:33).

In a similar manner, when "the people of God" are too quick to take their young people into their membership -- before they are truly penitent, truly sorry for their evil deeds -- then often there is tragic trouble in the Church, just as there was appalling sin and trouble in Israel after Absalom was brought back. Like father David, some parents and some pastors and people are "old softies" -- more ready to forgive an erring son, daughter, or young person THAN GOD HIMSELF IS READY!

God never forgives a young person -- or anyone -- (a) Before they are really penitent, and (b) Before they humbly ask for that forgiveness. Absalom had neither manifested one iota of penitence, nor had he humbly asked for forgiveness. He was still, in fact, a carnal rebel anxious to overthrow the powers above him, even though that meant slaying his own father!

A church greatly errs that coddles and coaxes people back into their fellowship and membership who have not shown the slightest modicum of remorse and Godly sorrow for sin -- and who, though they may have made a trip to the altar and stiffly bowed there, have never humbly repented and implored God and others for forgiveness! Sometimes such rebels are even made to feel that they are doing God and the Church a favor by returning. Oh, folks are so happy to have them back! -- so ready to hug them, so ready to believe that in that cold, stiff-kneed session at the altar they must have really repented and gotten saved -- so ready to re-extend the right hand of fellowship, and then within days to place them back into positions in the Church!

Haven't you seen just what I am describing? -- the parent, the pastor, the people who desperately want to believe the best about that returned Absalom! -- when there is not one ounce of real repentance in his heart -- and he has been placed back into a position "in the kingdom" -- i. e., in the congregation where within a short while he nearly wrecks the entire Church!

There is enough preaching right here on this point to fill a book -- but I forbear. I will just conclude it with this observation: "The people of God" can humanly err in many ways, but one of the most grievous mistakes that they sometimes make is placing too much confidence too quickly in those brought back into their midst. This is not to say that "the people of God" should not be just as quick to forgive as is God. However, those filled with Perfect Love are sometimes too prone to think the best of even the worst who visit or revisit their services and their altars, and this very tendency can sometimes be the

ground of grievous errors in judgment that put impenitent rebels in a position to greatly harm the work of God. The reminder here is not "Remember Lot's wife," but rather, "Remember Absalom." Selah.

**(3) THE PEOPLE OF GOD MUST ENTER THE REST THAT REMAINETH TO THEM -- often called "The Second Rest":-- "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9).**

It is very clear from the above verse that there is a rest of some sort into which souls are exhorted to enter. It is less clear to many exactly WHAT THAT REST IS. Let us pinpoint what this rest is through a process of Scriptural examination and deduction, making clear FOUR THINGS THAT THIS REST IS NOT, and thereby revealing its true essence.

**FIRST -- THIS REST IS NOT REGENERATION:**-- This is clear from the fact that it is offered "**TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD**" and **NOT TO THE WORLD**. Those who say that the rest spoken of in Hebrews 3 and 4 is nothing more than the peace that is received when one is reconciled with God do greatly err. Yes, Paul wrote in Romans 5:1: "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God," but he referred to something more in Romans 5:2: "By Whom also, we have access to **THIS GRACE WHEREIN WE STAND...**" (Romans 5:2).

There is something more for the people of God to inherit in this life after they become such -- it is **THE SECOND REST** of Hebrews 3 and 4, the Second Work of Grace which puts on the Christian "the whole armour of God" enabling him or her to "stand and rejoice in the glory of God," even amidst the fiercest onslaughts of hell.

The fact of a Second Work of Grace following regeneration is borne out by numerous Scriptures, and just as importantly, by a vast "cloud of witnesses" who have used their God-given "access into THIS GRACE" to obtain the experience! -- and, a person with the experience is never at the mercy of one who has nothing more than an empty argument to the contrary! The Bible declares the availability of The Second Rest, and the sanctified confirm it with their testimony to the same.

**SECOND -- THIS REST IS NOT EARTHLY CANAAN:**-- This is clearly shown in the meaning of Hebrews 4:8 -- For if **Jesus** [meaning Joshua] had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day." It is unfortunate that the KJV has the name here as "Jesus," for the reference is to "Joshua," Moses successor, as is reflected in the NIV translation of the verse: "For if **Joshua** had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day."

The meaning of Hebrews 4:8, properly understood, is quite simple: **IF THE ONLY REST URGED UPON THE PEOPLE OF GOD WAS ALREADY INHERITED BY ENTERING CANAAN UNDER JOSHUA, GOD WOULD NOT HAVE LATER, AGAIN**

**URGED HIS PEOPLE TO ENTER INTO HIS REST.** The writer to the Hebrews shows that long after Israel's entry into Canaan under Joshua, God "Again.. limiteth a certain day, saying in David, **To day**, after so long a time; as it is said, **To day** if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Hebrews 4:7).

Thus, we see two things: (a) God urged his people to Enter Rest in earthly Canaan, limiting the time in which the door into that land would remain open to them, and (b) Again, much later, through the prophet David, God urges His people -- Spiritual Israel -- to enter into another inheritance -- another Rest -- Spiritual Canaan, and they must not dally, for the time to enter that inheritance is TODAY!

It is extremely clear, therefore, that the rest mentioned in Hebrews 3 and 4 is NOT the inheritance of material Canaan -- a rest long ago inherited by flesh and blood Israel. It is, rather, "a rest that REMAINETH" yet "TODAY" which must be inherited by each one of the people of God -- individually. The NIV states Hebrews 4:1 thus:-- "Therefore, since **the promise of entering his rest still stands**, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it."

The inspired author is exhorting the flesh and blood Hebrew that he must not assume that his nation long ago entered into earthly Canaan, therefore he (as a part of that group) has already entered into the rest for the people of God. He must realize that it is a spiritual rest which remains yet today, and that it is **an inheritance which one must for himself personally and promptly enter**, after having become one of the spiritual people of God!

**THIRD -- THIS REST IS NOT HEAVEN --** Some have said that the rest under discussion is that eternal rest of Heaven. They equate it to the rest spoken of in Revelation 14:13 -- "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may **rest** from their labours; and their works do follow them."

At first blush, this sounds plausible. However, the fact that this rest is not heaven should be very apparent from a consideration of the context. One significant fact seen in the context is that Christians are urged to enter into this rest "Today," and while souls are urged by the gospel to prepare "Today" for Heaven, there is certainly no Scripture that urges Christians to endeavor to enter Heaven "Today". Again, in Hebrews 4:1 Christians are urged not "to come short of" this rest, but if a man remains a Christian until he dies, he will without question enter heaven and not come short of it. Therefore, both the "coming short" of it and the experiencing of this rest are obviously things that occur in this life.

Finally, Hebrews 4:3 declares that those who "have believed DO ENTER" into the promised rest, meaning that the people of God who NOW BELIEVE NOW ENTER this rest. While it is true that much of the essence of this promised rest will also be experienced in Heaven, it is also clear that it is a rest that is urged upon the people of

God RIGHT NOW and that it is to be EXPERIENCED IN THIS PRESENT WORLD. I assert that a careful and candid examination of the entire context of Hebrews 3 and 4 should convince any honest student of the Word that the rest promised therein is a rest which could not possibly be construed to mean the eternal rest which the saints shall experience only after they enter Heaven.

**FOURTH -- THIS REST IS NOT THE SABBATH DAY**:-- When in Hebrews 4:8 the writer declares that there remains a "Sabbatismos" for the people of God, He does not refer to the 7th Day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath. An elusion to the Sabbath is made in Hebrews 4:4, but it is obvious in the context of Hebrews 3 and 4, that the writer refers to something far more than a Day of Rest. This is clear for several reasons:

(a) He urges the people of God to enter this rest **NOW, TODAY!** They could not enter into it simply by living until the next Sabbath, and then observing it as God's rest. They must "go up at once" and possess it -- whether that day be Saturday, Monday, Thursday, or any other day of the week. It is a rest to be entered into, not by coming to the end of the week and therein ceasing from all labor, but by coming to the end of one's self, by coming to the end of one's unbelief, and then reposing in spiritual deliverance from all sin. Entering into the 7th Day Sabbath requires no faith, but only the passing of time; neither does it purge the observer from the "evil heart of unbelief" mentioned in Hebrews 3:12. Therefore, he who enters the Jewish Sabbath has not thereby entered into that glorious "rest that remaineth for the people of God."

(b) Repeatedly in chapters 3 and 4, the author of Hebrews uses the word "katapausis" as the "rest" being urged upon the people of God. This word means: "a reposing" -- something much more than merely ceasing from labor. It is one thing to stop working, but quite another to "repose". One who has ceased all work on the Sabbath Day, may yet be very nervous, anxious, and fretful about many things. He may be quite unable to "repose" even though he does not do one bit of work. But the "katapausis" rest for the people of God is much more even than "peace of mind". It is an inward tranquillity and calm, a rest in the inner man from all impurity and insecurity, a rest that is "better FELT THAN TELLT"! But make no mistake about it -- one cannot experience it without knowing it.

One who enters this rest knows it, and knows even better than he or she knows what day of the week it is! "In celestial-like streams, it unceasingly flows, o'er the soul with an infinite calm" that is at once indescribable, yet unmistakable! He who has entered therein knows it, above and beyond all doubt -- and he who doubts this fact shows that he has never entered spiritual Canaan. The one who has just entered this rest may think that today is Saturday when it is Sunday, but there will be absolute certainty, through the witness of the Holy Ghost, that he or she has entered into the Second Rest, God's Great Sabbath for the Soul!

**(4) THE PEOPLE OF GOD SUFFER AFFLICTION**-- Moses chose "rather to suffer **affliction with the people of God**, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Hebrews 11:25), and so must every man choose who purposes to be one of God's people. Indeed, there is not one of God's own who is totally exempt from bodily pain and suffering in this life. Away with this notion that God will always and immediately -- upon the exercise of enough faith -- heal and comfort His people from all afflictive diseases! It is at least a mistaken concept to think this -- and sometimes it is an outright distortion of the Truth by those anxious to get gain from their great healing campaigns.

Yes, the God "Who forgiveth all thine iniquities" is also the Great Physician "Who healeth all thy diseases" (Ps. 103:3), but He does not always do the latter "on demand" nor "at the time" His people may want it done. Probably more often, **THE WAY GOD HEALS ALL DISEASES IS BY REMOVING THE SUFFERING ONE INTO THAT WORLD WHERE THERE SHALL NOT BE "ANY MORE PAIN"** (Rev. 21:4).

But the "affliction" mentioned in Hebrews 11:25 was an affliction at the hands of men -- not merely the suffering of this or that disease. Moses "chose rather to suffer the affliction of **PERSECUTION with the people of God**," and Paul later wrote: "Yea, and **ALL that will live godly in Christ Jesus SHALL suffer persecution"** (2 Timothy 3:12). Not all of God's people suffer from afflictive diseases, but sooner or later, all of them who live holy lives for any length of time **WILL SUFFER PERSECUTION**, or afflictions at the hands of the ungodly.

Moses weighed his choice carefully, saw the much greater "recompence of the reward" for being one of the despised and persecuted people of God, threw aside his chance to rule in splendor over Egypt, and threw in his lot with the despised Hebrew people of God! After becoming one of them, his expressed sentiments to "the people of God" could have been quite identical with those of Paul, who later asserted: "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," and "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us!" (2 Cor. 4:17 & Rom. 8:18). **Do I hear a LOUD HALLELUJAH!?**

**(5) THE PEOPLE OF GOD WERE ONCE NOT HIS PEOPLE**-- "Which in time past **were not a people, but are now the people of God**: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:10).

There is no such thing as being physically "born a Christian" or naturally born one of the people of God. There was a time when those fortunate enough to be born as Israelites were considered to be "the people of God," but with the coming of Christ that all changed. Before his dramatic conversion, Saul of Tarsus fancied that because he was born "of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Philip. 3:5) he was therefore, beyond all question, one of "the people of God." Then, after being struck down on that dusty Damascus road, he saw that his natural birth and



religious zeal had made him nothing more than a carnal persecutor of God's true people, -- those who had been "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

After his own marvelous and instantaneous new birth, Paul saw that "if any man" is truly one of the people of God, "he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17), and he clearly perceived that "he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Rom 2:28-29).

Thus, the proud Pharisee who had held the clothes of those who stoned Stephen, went far and wide proclaiming the truth that even the previously excluded Gentiles could be born again and thus become a part of "the people of God"! He declared boldly that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature, and as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:15-16).

As a consequence of his sudden new birth, Saul the Persecutor first became Paul the Preacher, and word soon spread "That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed" (Galatians 1:23). It was his spiritual birth, and not his natural birth, that made him a Christian -- and thus it always is. Those who fancy themselves to be born naturally into a Christian household and thus become Christians themselves are as mistaken of their true relationship with God as was Saul of Tarsus prior to his conversion -- and often these "supposedly natural-born Christians" persecute the true people of God with as much hatred for them as that of the enraged Saul of Tarsus.

Paul saw that his pre-conversion persecution of Christ's followers spiritually compared to the persecution of Isaac by Ishmael, and wrote: "As then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now" (Gal. 4:29). The persecution of the people of God often comes at the hands of professed Christians who have been born, but who have not been born again -- at the hands of those who fancy themselves to be the people of God, but who are in fact children of the devil (John 8:44).

If it is true that you are now one of "the people of God," it is also true that at one time you were not one of them. Further, you became one of them, not by virtue of your natural birth, but by reason of the fact that you have been gloriously transformed, "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1:23).

The anti-Christian world today speaks with disdain about "born-again Christians," as if they are the scum of the earth. But Jesus Himself said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3), and

"Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again" (John 3:7). There is no other kind of real Christian:-- you are either a "born again" Christian, or no Christian at all!

Yes, as a born again Christian you will be disdained. Paul described in the following words the lot of those who "once were not a people, but are now the people of God":-- "being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: being defamed, we entreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day" (1 Cor. 4:12-13). This quite accurately describes the state of things even now regarding the low esteem in which the world holds God's truly born again people.

But the time rapidly approaches when Christ's lowly and hated people shall be raptured to meet Him in the sky, and then "they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12:3)! When the people of God are thus displayed in glory before an awe-struck world, can we not hear Jesus say to those who on earth looked down on his people: JUST LOOK AT THEM NOW! "IS NOT THIS THE PEOPLE THAT THOU HAST DESPISED?" (Judges 9:38). SEE HOW THEY SHINE WITH MY GLORY! WHILE YOU ARE SHOCKED AND SHAMED!

Then, shall come the awful doom of those who ill-treated and persecuted the true people of God, as Christ pronounces to the wicked: "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!" and "these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matthew 25:40-41, 46).

In that solemn hour, it will pay eternal dividends to truly be one of those "Which in time past **were not a people, but are now the people of God**: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:10).

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**THE END**