

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

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January 1, 2011

The apostle John seems to have thought that the highest expression of the Christian's privilege was found in the word fellowship. He declares his purpose in writing to his brethren to be that they might have fellowship with each other, adding "and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." 1 John 1:3. Perfect fellowship is realized when the parties to it are in the most perfect accord with each other in thought, feeling, and purpose.

Two boys were in the same class in school. They studied the same lessons, had the same ambitions, and found the same joys in their successes. But of these two it could be said that neither of them had any ambition for himself which he did not have quite as strong for his friend. When one of them gained a victory or suffered a defeat, the joy or the pain was shared equally by the other. There was fellowship. There was the same mind and the same heart in all things.

Somehow so, it is the highest privilege of the Christian to have the mind of Christ, and that is fellowship. It does not mean perfect knowledge of all Christ's thoughts and purposes concerning us, but it does mean our supremest pleasure in what we do know of his mind and will, and such love for him and such confidence in his love for us, that we are more than willing to leave all the unknown to him.

Theological phrases are very apt to become substitutes for ideas, instead of vehicles for their expression. Human nature is in constant danger of resting in the mere intellectual knowledge of God's will, approving the things that are excellent, making theory the substitute for the life. But the real knowledge of God is a life, and we can only know the doctrine of Jesus Christ as we accept His life and let Him live that life in us—confessing Christ in the flesh. How a simpleminded youth taught a church committee to respect the real doctrine of Christ is told as follows. He presented himself as a candidate, and was asked:—

"Do you understand the doctrine of the Trinity?"

"No, I can't say I do."

"Can you give the committee a definition of regeneration?"

"I don't think I can."

"Well, what do you understand by foreordination? Take plenty of time to answer," said a kind-hearted old deacon, thinking the candidate was confused.

"I don't know much about it."

"Can't you give us some opinion respecting God's decrees?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Well, then," said the minister, a little impatiently, "what do you know?" Promptly came the answer:—

"I know that I'm a sinner, and I know that Christ died to save me. And I want to join the fellowship to get more help from Christ and His people."

Every member of that committee felt rebuked, and one of them said afterwards: "I learned from that moment to respect the spiritual knowledge of the

humblest man or woman, and not to think so much of that knowledge which comes from the head alone.”

Have you ever wondered why you have so many troubles? Why do your prayers sometimes get answered with a “No!” when you begged the Lord for a “Yes!”? (I am assuming you have had that experience—I don’t know what to say to people who always get what they want—even a new car).

The really important people in the world are those who have troubles, whose prayers are sometimes not answered as they want, the people who suffer disappointments and pain, yes, even the poor people, yes even the persecuted people. There is something in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 that helps us understand.

Our heavenly Father permits us to have these painful experiences for two main reasons: (1) so we can learn compassion for others. We live in a world that is full of suffering, where people need sympathy and comfort. The Lord has no way to comfort those people and encourage them unless He can find some people who share His compassion, His feelings for them. So your heavenly Father permits you to feel a need for His comfort and encouragement precisely so you can give comfort and encouragement to someone else! “He helps us in all our troubles, so that we are able to help others who have all kinds of troubles, using the same help that we ourselves have received from God,” says Paul (GNB). (2) By knowing pain and suffering we discover that we have fellowship with the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. Verse

5 says: “We have a share in Christ’s many sufferings.” That’s how you and I get to know Him! As soon as you learn to believe this Good News, your sufferings and your pain are invested with a new meaning: you see that they are not in vain. They enable you to experience fellowship with Christ, and—do I dare say it?—something better, fellowship with His children who suffer. When you help them, you help Christ.

Someone is suffering the agony of being forsaken by his beloved wife of ten years. He has been faithful to her; his love is deep; she has betrayed it. The pain of the infidelity he feels is almost unbearable. He asks the question in the song, “Does Jesus Care When I’ve Said Goodbye to the Dearest on Earth to Me?” What can I say to help?

It may not do much good to say, “Oh, yes, He cares!” unless it is true that we also care. The Saviour manifests or demonstrates His care through flesh-and-blood people who feel with the one who suffers. It’s like the pain that we feel when one member of our body suffers; the entire body shares: “If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). But the Head is also a part of the Body, and for sure, He does care. But how and why? Was Jesus ever divorced? He never married even; how could He know and sympathize with those of us who suffer keen disappointment in love? It is more difficult than any physical suffering.

Jesus is described in Isa. 53:3 as “despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. And we hid our faces from Him; . . . We esteemed Him not.” Did He feel it? Yes, for He

knew “travail of soul,” the deep kind (vs. 11). But being “despised of men” is one thing; did He know what it is to be despised of the only woman whom He loved? Is that beyond Him?

No woman on earth could ever be His Bride-to-be; but we read that the “woman” whom He loves is His church (Eph. 5:22-33). And the poem by Hosea telling of the broken-hearted husband whom Gomer forsook describes Christ’s agony of heart for the infidelity of His people. The Song of Solomon dramatizes it in chapter 5:1-8. It’s the story behind all stories of today. I told my friend that his sun will shine again; the reason is that the time is coming when Jesus’ Bride will return to Him in deep repentance, and He will say to all who have suffered in fellowship with Him, “Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.” Yes, pain is painful; but what makes it bearable is for us to share it with Him, never to endure it alone.

There is a phenomenon that it seems every sincere believer in Christ must experience. You must learn what to do when it seems that God is against you. Many in the Bible had to wrestle with that problem. One of the most prominent (he has a whole book) is Job. Everything went against him: lost his children, his possessions, his health, his friends, and even his dear wife turned against him and told him to “curse God and die.” He was an extremely serious “Charlie Brown,” so much so that he became a prototype of Christ, who also had to go through the experience of feeling forsaken by God. As He hung on His cross, everything was against Him: His friends had all forsaken Him, one

had betrayed Him, another had denied Him, and His own people were crucifying Him, and it appeared as though the Father in heaven had turned a deaf ear against Him. And there have been others, all through history: Abel served God faithfully, yet had to endure murder for it by his own brother; Noah had to endure 120 years of unrelenting sunshine without a cloud in the sky because he believed what God had said—a rain flood was coming. Finally in that last week as he and his family were inside the ark, his faith was severely tried as the people outside were laughing and ridiculing him—“where’s the rain, you fool?” Abraham waits 25 long years for the fulfillment of God’s promise to give him a son through whom “all families of the earth [shall] be blessed,” and then when the lad grows up a bit, he is told to offer him as a sacrifice. David, anointed by the prophet Samuel to be king of Israel, for ten years is driven into the wilderness by an insane king Saul, David apparently forsaken by God; on one occasion his own loyal followers threatened to stone him. Jeremiah has to endure 40+ years of continual rejection, only at the end to see his beloved Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed; more than once he was tempted to give up in despair. Paul has a “thorn in the flesh” that troubles him; three times he begs the Lord to deliver him from it, and He says “No, Paul; Don’t pray about it any more; ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor. 12:8, 9). And let’s not forget Stephen: realized the blessing of the Holy Spirit as he preached his last sermon only to have to kneel down and feel those

stones pelting him. And there are the Waldenses and other faithful Christians in the Dark Ages who served God and had to die as martyrs. What do you do when it seems God has forsaken you? You still believe Him, like Job, in the darkness: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (13:15).

"Fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust, the highest honor" a human can be blessed with. Don't turn away from it.

How many innocent people have suffered—either death or lifelong injustice? And what can an innocent person do who has thus to suffer? Six million suffered wrongly at the hands of the Nazis; many blacks suffered wrongly in lynchings in America; there are families torn apart by false accusations and husbands or wives living in exile and agony wrongfully. What can the innocent person do?

A large part of God's Word, the Bible, is devoted to that problem! All who suffer innocently can receive comfort from the divine Son of God who is the Prince of innocent sufferers. It's not an idle bit of counsel that tells such sufferers to "do" the impossible and perk up, but it is living truth that Peter gives us: "Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1 Pet. 4:13). To every innocent sufferer the Holy Spirit whispers these assurances of divine justice yet to decide in their favor. Or better still, has already decided in their favor. The "rejoicing" is not something the sufferer has to "do" or to initiate, but it is a gift bestowed. Is this empty

small comfort for the person languishing for life in some kind of unjust "prison"? No, it is big comfort. To be a "partaker of Christ's sufferings" is the most weighty trust and the highest honor that heaven can bestow upon one of us. It's not pie in the sky; it's a reward realized here and now—an intimate fellowship with the crucified One. And at the same time, a sense of fellowship with, of compassion for, all who suffer wrongfully. It's a deliverance from the common curse of arrogance and pride, which is a terrible way to be in. So, whoever you are, don't wait until after death to "rejoice." Accept being "happy" as a present gift for being "reproached for the name of Christ, . . . for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you" (vs. 14).

What does it mean, in practical day-by-day living, to follow Christ during this present, cosmic "day of atonement"? It is "the hour of [God's] judgment," indeed (Rev 14:6), and to the ancient Israelites it was "Yom Kippur," the annual solemn day of fearful preparation lest one be "cut off from among his people, . . . destroyed" (Lev 23:29, 30).

Many youth have today experienced an "antitypical" fear in this grand Day of Atonement. To them, the pre-Advent judgment has triggered nightmares. But all this fear, anciently and today, has been "old covenant."

(a) The word "atonement" means at-one-with, reconciliation. Simple. So today's Day of Atonement is joyous reconciliation with God. Heart-enmity (Rom 8:7) is cleansed away! Nightmares are gone when one thinks of the Day of Atonement in new covenant terms.

(b) For an ancient Israelite who believed the new covenant gospel (there were some!), the day of atonement was bliss on earth. It meant the same close fellowship with God that Moses experienced. The “one-ness” meant sharing God’s love for Israel and for the world; for Moses it even meant his willingness to die forever if only Israel could be saved (Ex 32:30-32).

(c) For those who “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” today, this cosmic Day of Atonement means just what Jesus says: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcome” (Rev. 3:21). That oneness of heart with Jesus is sharing His love for this lost world, cooperating with Him in saving people, sharing with Him executive authority in bringing to an end His great controversy with Satan.

Joy? There is none greater.

Someone says we over-emphasize the Good News in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come unto Me. . . . I will give you rest. . . . Take My yoke. . . . My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” We don’t give equal emphasis to what appears to be the opposite in Luke 13:24: “Strive [agonize] to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.”

(a) The NKJV mistranslates the parallel passage, “narrow,” in Matthew 7:14 as “difficult.” But the Greek word THLIBO has the essential meaning of “narrow,” not difficult. Jesus says you can’t carry your baggage of worldly selfishness with you into fellowship with Him. You’ve got to drop your

baggage. “Difficult”? No, a thousand times no—not if you are “yoked” by faith with Him.

(b) Paul makes plain the apparent contradiction. The answer is one-ness with Christ: “I am crucified WITH Christ,” he says (Gal. 2:20). You are never crucified alone (that would be “difficult”!). You sense your corporate fellowship WITH HIM (read 1 Cor. 12:12-27). Read Paul’s portrayal of all the “agonizing” sufferings he endured for Christ (2 Cor. 11:23-30). You’ll be ashamed of yourself if you read that passage; and then he ends up saying, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory, . . . take pleasure” in all these sufferings for Him (12:9, 10). “Difficult? Agonizing?”

(c) Does dropping your baggage bother you as being difficult? Paul is Christ’s best defender: he says that if you can understand how good is Christ’s Good News (in Matthew 11:28-30, for example) you’ll consider all this love of self, this love-of-the-world baggage that has so engrossed you, as being so much “garbage.” You’ll drop it in a moment when you see the “excellency” of being crucified WITH Christ (read Phil. 3:7, 8; that word “dung” in the KJV means literally “what is thrown to the dogs”). Yes, let yourself feel ashamed—it’s a healthy experience. Then you can learn to “glory” in Christ’s cross.

(d) Is “agonizing” effort “difficult”? Not if you’re running a race, says Paul (1 Cor. 9:22-27). Flying up steps two at a time is fun if you’re healthy.

(e) Join the happiest man who has ever lived and died in 6000 years of history: the repentant thief who was literally “crucified WITH Christ” (he had the

assurance, “You’ll be with Me” forever). As he waited in his physical agony, he rejoiced. “Crucified!?! Are you kidding?” No; I’m serious.

Feet-washing is a social custom we never do today. But it was common in ancient times. The people wore sandals, or went barefoot. Feet got dusty, muddy, How could you enjoy a cup of tea in the house of your host or eat at his table if your feet were uncomfortable? So he had a slave ready to wash them for you. Always it was an inferior who washed the feet of a superior. Never the other way around! Careful search reveals that there is absolutely no record in all the literature of antiquity where any superior washed the feet of an inferior, until we come to the story in John 13 where Jesus laid aside all His clothes except His underwear and washed the feet of His disciples. And He was the Son of God!

When Peter refused, He told him, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me” (vs. 8). That’s backwards from what we think is appropriate for Him to say! He did not say, “Unless you wash My feet or the feet of others, you have no part with Me.” No; unless you let ME, your Superior, wash YOUR feet, you the inferior, you have no fellowship or identity with Me. That has always puzzled me. Why must we let Jesus wash our feet? And what does it do to us when we let Him do it? He said to the disciples that now that they had let Him wash their feet, “ye are clean,” that is, all but Judas.

What was it about His washing their feet that made them “clean”? I’m way over my head in trying to reason this out, but I have an idea: your heart is

humbled when the Son of God lowers Himself to the plane of a slave and performs the most menial task for you. Gives you a bed-pan when you’re sick; you can never be the same afterwards, unless you steel your heart like Judas did against the overwhelming sense of wonder and humiliation that floods your selfish human heart. In a few hours the disciples were to watch transfixed as He hung naked on a cross. Please take a good long look, and let the miracle happen.