

## CO-LABORERS WITH CHRIST

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Most of you have shopped at one of his stores at some or another. J. C. Penney died in 1971 at the age of 95 and left a 1,660 store empire that he built without compromising the principles he had received from three generations of Baptist-preacher ancestors.

J. C. Penney didn't drink or smoke and for many years, demanded the same from his employees. Penney said, "I believe in adherence to the Golden Rule, faith in God and the country." He also said, "I would rather be known as a Christian than a merchant." Apparently, Penney thought that being a Christian was the most important thing in life.

If you had been living 2000 years ago, what kind of a life would you have chosen? The world was much like it is today—full of selfish people bent on pleasure and sensual delight and amusement. There were the Roman overlords living in luxury in their fancy villas on the Mediterranean, flocking to sports events in the amphitheaters, eating luxury food, employing poor people to work for them. These upper crust people got the most out of life—or did they?

And now here comes that Man from Galilee who had not where to lay His head (Matt. 8:20), and He says to you, "Take up your cross and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Will you do so gladly? Will you turn your back on the pleasures and wealth of the Roman world, and follow Jesus through a life of

self-denial and loving labor for others, spreading the news of justification by faith? Will you join His eleven surviving apostles and others?

Of the two ways of life anciently, which would be the more enjoyable to you? Well, that's exactly where you are today. You have exactly the same choice. Nothing has changed: (1) the same selfish mind-set has captured the world today, and (2) the same pure Gospel of righteousness by faith offers the same alternative to selfish living.

The Bible clearly teaches that we are today living in the antitypical Day of Atonement, the grand climax to the drama of the ages, the great controversy between Christ and Satan. It's the war of all wars. It's not a matter merely of personal survival or personal happiness: it's the honor of God Himself that is at stake. Unless He has a people on earth who "give glory to Him" in this final battle, He will be embarrassed. Every one on earth will be drawn into this conflict on one side or the other; I suggest that taking up that cross to follow Jesus is by far the more exciting, more joyous alternative. Do you agree?

We were reading the words of that wise author in *Ministry of Healing*, page 452, "If we should come to the close of life with our work undone, it would be an eternal loss." Sober thought!

"An eternal loss": it doesn't necessarily say a TOTAL eternal loss.

The apostle Paul can help us here:

It is true that each of us has a life work that we are called to do, and if we come to our end of life with that work neglected, it will be a tragedy: it will be

like planting a crop and reaping no harvest. “He who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. . . . If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, [or] wood hay, straw, each one’s work will become manifest: for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:8-15).

Do we have a right to say that if anyone’s life work is a total loss, he can still be saved?

Yes, says Paul; but he will be like someone in our recent California forest fires—he will escape with only the clothes on his back; everything else just ashes.

What the Lord wants your life work to be only He can tell you; what we know for sure is that He wants you to be happy when you meet Him face to face. When we come up to the One who sits on the Great White Throne before “whose face the earth and the heaven [flee] away” (Rev. 20:11; yes we must “all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,” 2 Cor. 5:10), we will see the cross of Christ looming high “above the throne.” Yes, the cross is higher than the throne! It’s something that even the Father bows to! In that moment, we will see our life as it should have been.

If you are still short of your death-bed, kneel and plead with Him to help you surrender to the “constraint” of that love (*agape*) of Christ. Don’t try to “earn” a reward, but truly “believe” in Him so the fountain of living water may flow out of your empty heart to bless others (cf. John 7:37, 38).

I think we’re all sick and tired of it—this unending litany of news horror and tragedy. It seems almost that some supernatural control mechanism spaces the disasters evenly so they come on us perversely each time just as a little healing has begun in recovering from the last earthquake, or train collision, or airliner crash, or multiple school murders, or savage ethnic cleansing. With up-to-the-minute radio or TV news coverage, we empathize or identify with the suffering victims. Their agony becomes ours. It’s hard not to feel guilty enjoying the peace and security we spectators temporarily possess.

It’s a morbid addiction that keeps us glued to the screen for the latest tragic details of these multiple horror stories. But can we do something to help? Invent something that will make travel safer? Solve the root causes of ethnic hatreds?

The only real solution is the setting up of the kingdom of God which will be at the personal, visible return of Jesus, the world’s rightful Ruler. This is “the stone cut out without hands” that strikes the image of Daniel on its “feet” of iron and clay, and becomes a “great mountain” to “fill the whole earth.” Every God-fearing heart cries out continually, “Even so, come Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

If we had the authority, we would tell Him, “Come today!” Revelation 14:15, 16 tells us that this authority resides alone in somebody else, “another angel [who] comes out of the temple” who finally tells Christ, “Thrust in Thy sickle and reap, for the time has come for Thee to reap.” But what “event” can move that “other angel” to decide when to give Him the signal to “come”?

The answer, “The harvest of the earth is ripe.” This simplest imaginable divinely-inspired illustration explains the delay in the return of Christ! But this special farm “harvest” depends on the volition of the “grain.” An entire “crop” can selfishly refuse to let the Lord’s warm sunshine of the gospel and refreshing showers of “the latter rain” perform the ripening process. It’s a “harvest” process God cannot force upon the “field of grain.”

So, after wearily processing another inexplicable horror story, we consecrate our all to the recovery and proclamation of that true Revelation 14 “everlasting gospel” which alone can ripen the grain for the blessed “harvest.” Something to live for? Oh, yes!

In Bible imagery, rain is usually a blessing. There is “the latter rain” which comes at just the right time to ripen a thirsty crop for harvest. But think of a farmer worried about his crop in Israel long ago. Early rain was a blessing that made the seed sprout. The barley matured to a certain place in plant growth that seemed to promise a rich harvest this year; but now the growth is stunted. Drought came at just the wrong time. An enormous crop that never matures for harvest is an agricultural disaster.

The farmer doesn’t have modern irrigation; he is dependent on rain from heaven.

You can imagine the distress in the family, the earnest prayers going up day by day for the Lord to send the long-awaited “latter rain.” It must come from Him!

In the Bible, this describes the condition of the Lord’s church in the last days. The enormity in the size of acreage that the farmer has planted in barley is not good news unless the crop gets that most precious latter rain at the right time. Diligent labor is effort wasted if it doesn’t result in a harvest of mature grain ripe for the sickle.

Jesus teaches that “the harvest is the end of the world” (Matt. 13:39). But there are two harvests—character develops in two kinds of people: those ready to meet the Lord at His return; and those whose rebellion against Him has also matured (Rev. 14:16-20). A “sickle” is used in both harvests, one by Jesus coming in glory, the other by some other “angel” whose “sharp sickle” reaps a harvest cast into the “great winepress of the wrath of God.” There must be two kinds of “latter rain.” Time to be alert. No time to sleep!

One of the most “Good News” chapters in the Bible is Psalm 139! It tells you that the infinite Lord and Creator took a direct, personal interest in your formation when you were an embryo in your mother’s womb. The Septuagint (that is, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Christ and the apostles used) renders the message of Psalm 139, “all men shall be written in Thy Book.”

That Book contains your page! The Infinite Father took a personal interest in your formation as though you were earth's only inhabitant.

Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit, in His infinitude, notices when a little sparrow falls in the forest (Matt. 10:29: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father [noticing it]" and caring. "Fear not, therefore." He assures us, "ye are of more value than many sparrows" (vs. 31).

The Father respects you highly; there are things that in particular you can do that no one else can do as well. The Father actually needs you!

Satan doesn't want us to understand this; he wants us to think of ourselves as mere digits in God's creation; but in fact we are divinely called to be co-workers with the Lord Himself. There is someone on earth who cannot be reached with a living witness of the Gospel except through you; the Lord needs you; He Himself alone cannot function in this case without you.

Oh yes, the Lord can turn the mountains upside down and drain the ocean without needing you to help Him; but those are "easy" things for Him to do! What He can't do is to reach an alienated human heart without your help.

When you tell what the Lord Jesus has done for you personally (if you can tell it in a humble way!), this reaches the alienated heart. This makes the Bible come alive; you can touch that secret, buried spot in someone's heart—and possibly you won't realize at the moment what you have done. But angels will rejoice at the accomplishment.

Hold your head high—unworthy as you are, you are important in God's plan of salvation for the world. Kneel, and wait before Him; "wait on the Lord, . . . and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord," says David (Psalm 27:14).

You kneel and you say not a word, maybe in the dark; you have "shut thy door" (Matt. 6:6), and you are shut in with the Lord of heaven and earth, your Creator and Savior. His Son has programmed this intimate appointment just for the two—the Father and you.

You may object—"but there's selfishness and sin in my heart!" Okay, but let Him cleanse it out. He will!

How near could the second coming of Christ be? Someone will say (rightly) that it is as near as our finishing the preaching the gospel in all the world. "This gospel shall be preached in all the world, . . . then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:14). But who knows how far it really has gone? Jesus told us to be careful how we estimate what's happening: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation" (Luke 17:20). He said it's like hiding "leaven" in flour for breadmaking. The leaven works silently, unobserved. Even so it will be with the work of God on the earth.

We are capable of wild guesswork. It's not always the work that looks the largest or most spectacularly successful. No one can know how rapidly the work of God is progressing on earth. Even those who seek to be doing the work are unconscious of the greater part of it. The kingdom of glory will be ushered in at a time when even Christ's most

faithful workers will think that much remains to be done. They cannot know what hidden agencies God has at work.

And we may misunderstand what the Lord will reckon as the attainment of His goal. The “144,000” of Revelation 14:4, 5 may be people that none of us recognizes as yet. Victories may be won day by day that we know nothing of, because the media (secular or religious) just aren’t tuned in to the work of Christ in the Most Holy Apartment.

This should serve to admonish us never to think that the coming of the Lord is far off, since we can see comparatively little being done. Let us be content to work in quietness and obscurity. Although some may think superficially that our work is effective, and even though we ourselves may think it is ineffective, we have the assurance that our “Father seeth in secret.”

All the warnings that Jesus gave us about His second coming, to “watch lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping,” are valid (Mark 13:36). They still are “present truth.”

Whenever someone spends his life simply believing in the Lord Jesus, the Lord is generous: He writes that person as having “labored” for the Lord.

This is evident from our comforting assurance in Rev. 14:13: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth; yes, says the [Holy] Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works follow them.”

The “henceforth” means from the time that the three angels’ messages go forth—which is our day

today. The NEB says, “the record of their deeds goes with them.”

The “blessed” is not an empty compliment: these people are the elite in God’s great universe. The word means something! They sleep now; but Jesus speaks of them as being in a special class who are being “accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, . . . Neither can they die any more: . . . being the children of the resurrection” (Luke 20:35, 36).

“Their works” may be only a word spoken to some child about the much more abounding grace of the Lord Jesus, to help that child come out of the Old Covenant into the New. The final judgment is not the Lord digging up all the negative things He can find against us: He has identified Himself with us; He has forever become one with us in humanity (as well as remaining for all eternity the Son of God). The final judgment is a time when He loves to say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:20, 21).

Do you feel that the best you are able to do in your whole lifetime is to be “faithful over a few things”?

Welcome to the fellowship of the happiest people in the world!

Rather than revel in dreams of walking the streets of gold and eating the fruit of the tree of life, why not revel in the thought of the Savior of the world saying to you, “Good and faithful servant”? Forget all the other joys; if some angel tries to give me a crown, I must say no thanks; lay it all at His feet.

He is looking forward to how much pleasure He will get in saying to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant”!

Now today, begin to “Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:21)!

The Lord Jesus Christ is generous in His thanks and even generous in His praise to those who have wanted to serve Him, but have felt very unworthy.

To some He says with great enthusiasm, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

But they are surprised; they turn around to see if He is not talking past them to other people behind them; they themselves feel very unworthy of such genuine thanks and praise. He responds, No, it’s you I mean.

They remonstrate with Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” There must be some mistake here; we are not worthy!

Then they hear the sweetest words anyone can ever hear from the lips of the world’s Savior, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these My brethren, you have done it to Me” (Matt. 25:35-40).

The generosity of the Lord Jesus shines brightly through all eternity. He speaks to us a positive word through a double negative: “God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love (yes, the word is *agape*, not *phileo*), which you have shown toward

His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Heb. 6:10).

He remembers every effort you have made to reflect His *agape* to others, weak and tremulous as it may be. That double negative is His assurance to you that He welcomes you as His co-laborer with Himself in His work for the world.

None of us is important enough for such a searching scrutiny by other humans, but we are that important to God and to the heavenly angels. In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul says that “the Lord . . . will bring to light what darkness hides, and disclose peoples’ inward motives; then will be the time for each to receive from God such praise as he deserves” (vs. 5, NEB). That’s why Paul says in the first part of the verse, “So pass no premature judgment; wait until the Lord comes.” We are neither to praise and flatter some, or to condemn others. All the deeds that darkness hides will be brought out in the open before the view of all the world. Jesus said, “There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light” (Mt. 10:26). “God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be bad” (Eccl. 12:14). Sounds like it’s Bad News, doesn’t it?

But there’s an upside: He will also bring every secret good work into judgment—every word that’s been helpful to someone, every unselfish deed. People may have despised you, as they did the prophet Jeremiah for his good works, but the Lord will say, “He/she has done what he/she could,”

“Well done good and faithful servant.” That’s Good News! And what about the bad deeds that are on the record books? The problem is more serious than merely pressing a “clear” button on a computer keyboard. The bad deeds and words can be cleared only by the washing of the blood of the Lamb. Pretty serious. A heart-melting appreciation of what it cost the Son of God to

save you, a realization that He died your death in hell, your second death. Once you have that faith you will ever afterwards HATE sin. And when that happens the sin is blotted out.

When He was among us personally, did Jesus praise anybody? In His parables, yes, He represented the Lord as saying “Well done, good and faithful servant” to some people, but do we have a record that He actually said that to any human among His contemporaries? He said something nice about the poor lady who gave her “two mites” to the offering in the Temple, that she had “cast in more than they all” because “she . . . hath cast in all the living that she had” (Luke 21:2). But He said this behind her back, as it were. He told Peter that he was “blessed” because he boldly confessed his faith that Jesus is the “Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16, 17). But He seemed very reticent to praise people lest they become vain. That was love!

A notable exception seems to be Mary Magdalene. In her presence, He defended her before Simon and the disciples saying, “She has done a good work for Me,” the word in the original meaning “exquisite” (Mark 14:6). He also said, “She has

done what she could” (vs. 8). A classic understatement, for it meant that she had done all she could. He had declared that she had “faith,” for it had saved her (Luke 7:50); now He added this, that her faith had “worked” to the nth degree, being a picture for us of what Paul meant in Galatians 5:6 about “faith working through love.” Faith is not genuine unless it does “work.” A battery is dead unless it sparks.

The final judgment (that we have all dreaded) is not whether we have a “battery,” but whether it’s alive. God has given to every one “a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3); that’s not the last question—but, is that faith alive and working? Cross the poles of a live battery and it will almost knock you down, even though a dead battery looks exactly the same as a live one.

So let’s not waste good breath praying, “Lord, give me some faith!” because He already has given it. And it’s probably a waste of breath praying Him to charge our “battery” unless we “plug it in.” The Lord is a wonderful Savior, but we must cooperate with Him; there is something sensible we must do.

The Lord Jesus appreciates His servants. His favorite words to them are these: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matt. 25:21), even if they don’t really deserve those good words.

That’s because of His “much more abounding grace” (cf. Rom. 5:20). It “abounds” more than our fallen human wisdom can appreciate.

When the Lord was confronted with the problem of an entire planet gone into rebellion and sin, He

proceeded to solve the problem by an unthinkable way that shocked the entire unfallen universe: He frankly forgave all of planet earth's sinners.

What He did shocks good people even today: they ask, "If He frankly forgave the world through Christ's sacrifice on His cross, won't that encourage sinners to go on sinning more and more?"

The answer is very serious; it appears to be "yes": "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11).

Wouldn't God be wise to "execute" that "sentence" "speedily" so that sinners will fear more and more to go on sinning?

The Lord knows what He is doing: He doesn't want to fill His glorious earth made new with people whose motivation for being there is fear. The only righteousness that can enter that eternal realm is the "righteousness which is of faith" (Rom. 9:30) that appreciates "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love [*agape*] of Christ which passeth knowledge" (Eph. 3:18, 19).

We know that God is omniscient—that is, He knows everything; . . . but wait a moment, in His incarnation Jesus was God but He was not omniscient, for sometimes we read the phrase, "When Jesus knew it. . . ." (Matt. 12:15; Mark 8:17). And He tells us that He does not know the day nor the hour of His second coming, only the Father knows that (Mark 13:32).

We know also that God is omnipotent—, that is, He can do everything; . . . but wait a moment, He cannot barge through anyone's locked door (Rev.

3:20). He cannot (because He will not) interfere with anyone's choice to believe or to disbelieve His gospel truth.

We know that the Holy Spirit is the most powerful force in the universe; He can convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8), but He steps back and yields the sovereignty to every individual human will. (But thank God He can reveal a greater measure of the constraining love of Christ and can take away hindrances to faith; but there is a point beyond which He will not and cannot go.)

Christ cannot refuse to be crucified. We must have our way.

When there was "war in heaven" and one-third of the angels were "cast out into the earth," my friends suggest that He needed the help of the two-thirds who remained loyal to Him (Rev. 12:7-9).

Yes! And now as that same "war" is nearing its end, He desperately needs you and me to help Him. Hold your head high! You have an important place to fill in "the great controversy" that no one else can fill as well as you.

That divine cry of dereliction on Christ's cross, "My God. Why have You forsaken Me?" is the world's moment of truth. In becoming the Son of man, the Son of God became our second Adam, the new corporate Head of the human race. When the first Adam sinned in Eden, "we" sinned in him, because each of us is "adam"—that is our name. Each of us is his fallen descendant; he could do nothing other than pass on to us his fallen, sinful nature in alienation from his Creator, destined to "perish" eternally.

From Christ's birth in Bethlehem, He lived in the sunshine of oneness with God. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government [of the world and of the universe] shall be upon His shoulder" (Isa. 9:6, KJV). But He took on His sinless nature our sinful nature that He might meet the awful problem of sin in our flesh, sin's last lair; God sent Him "unto us" "in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, [He] condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). As our second Adam, Christ won the awful battle.

But now as Head of the human race He enters into the darkness of hell on His cross, dying our death, doing what in John 3:16 He says He doesn't want us to do—He tastes what it means to "perish." It's terrible beyond any words. We can't grasp it unless we understand Galatians 3:13: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written [quoting Moses], Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Deut. 21:22, 23, KJV). Thus He was "made to be sin for us who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). For you personally, intimately—not only instead of you but as you—He dies your second death. Now in thanks what will you do for Him?