

FELLOWSHIP WITH CHRIST

By Paul Penno Jr.

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The newscaster came on with a special interruption just as the New York Stock Exchange closed for the day: the Dow-Jones was down 500 points—which meant that all that had been gained this year was “wiped out” yesterday. We don’t pretend to have any economics wisdom—whether you should “buy now” or sell what you have left. Any “recovery” or further loss again will depend on confidence or the lack of it. And the Bible is clear, “Put not your trust in princes nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help” (Ps. 146:3).

Suppose the Dow Jones drops 8000 points? The Bible says that could happen: “All hands shall be feeble, and all knees shall be weak as water. They shall gird themselves with sackcloth. . . They shall cast their silver in the streets, and their gold shall be removed: their silver and their gold shall not be able to deliver them . . .” (Ezek. 7:17-19).

Suppose we were to lose everything? Paul says some early Christians experienced what is now equivalent to zero net worth, and they were still happy: “Ye . . . took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance” (Heb. 10:34). Since money is useless except as it can buy happiness, if one were to discover a way to be happy even if all he has is wiped out, would that not be better than winning the lottery jackpot?

That “way” is fellowship with Christ! Get acquainted with the One who said that “the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but [I have] not where to lay [My] head” and still was happy (Mt. 8:20).

A woman looks for a husband who can “support” her; imagine marrying a man whose net worth is *less* than zero: Christ was crucified naked, and the soldiers even gambled His clothes. And He is going to have a Bride who makes the cool decision that having Him is worth everything. And that will be “right,” for it will be “righteousness by faith.” If the stock market crashes, don’t jump out of the hotel window; there’s life beyond economic ruin. And that is Good News!

You can spot them nearly every time: a special group of people who seem happy all the time, eyes sparkling, smiles at the ready, laughter comes easily. They were deeply loved in babyhood by father or mother (or both!). They are “endowed,” even probably enjoying a prenatal warmth when mother-to-be was happy and secure. It’s fairly easy for them to say, “Yes, I believe God loves me!” They go through life having a continual picnic; they don’t walk, they dance their way through. Solomon speaks of them in contrast with those not so endowed: “All the days of the afflicted are evil [wretched, NEB]: but he that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast” (Pr. 15:15). The “afflicted” are those who lacked that warm, cuddly love in babyhood or childhood. They may have been orphans, or raised by an alcoholic or drug-addicted parent, or in a home poisoned by infidelity and

divorce. It's no fault of their own that they are not richly endowed, and are "afflicted." Is it fair that the ticket to heaven seems to be a "faith" that comes naturally for lucky people? Or, forget heaven for a moment, that all their days here have to be "wretched"? Don't jump to a conclusion too soon:

While it is true that "faith" is the ticket to heaven, faith is not easier for some than for others because "God hath dealt to every person the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). There is no such thing as "natural" faith. It must always be learned, received, imported, and exercised in fellowship with Christ.

Let us assume that the Virgin Mary gave Him natural cuddly emotional warmth in His babyhood, still He was reared in an unbelieving family with all the liabilities anyone can have known in a hard childhood (compare Mt. 13:53-58; Jn. 7:2-8; Ps. 69:7-11). He says He was "afflicted . . . from My youth up" (Ps. 88:15). All the "natural" emotional warmth He may have had from childhood vanished as He hung on the cross; there He had to live entirely by faith based strictly on God's word.

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. "Of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men [and women], fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor."¹

Many in the Bible had to wrestle with that problem. One of the most prominent (he has a whole book) is

¹ *Desire of Ages*, p. 225.

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 extremely serious, 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).

Is the story of the “burning fiery furnace” in Daniel 3 pious fiction? or authentic history? Historical and archaeological research confirms supportive details: such as brick kilns that were common. Jeremiah 29:22 tells the history of how King Nebuchadnezzar “roasted in the fire” two seditious Jews; another Babylonian king boasted of burning some political enemies—evidence that this method of execution was actually practiced; Herodotus and Pliny tell of ancient kings who built huge statues covered with gold leaf. The deliverance from death by fire had been promised: “When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you” (Isa. 43:2). Doubtless the three Hebrew youth thrown in the fire had cherished this assurance. The

promise “I will be with you” was literally fulfilled (Isa. 43:2). “The Son of God’s shared the “furnace” with them, as even the pagan king confessed (Dan. 3:25).

This is the point of Daniel 3: will we believe that the Son of God shares our sufferings for His sake? Will He give divine courage to “stand up” when everybody else bows down? The apostle Peter collapsed when the test came to him (Matt. 26:69-75); in fact, all the eleven disciples ran away.

Many Israelites had been exiled to Babylon when Daniel and his three companions went, but none of them had the courage to obey God’s Ten Commandments except these four! Granted, the three who faced the fiery furnace were terrified at the prospect of death by fire; but they sensed that they were called to honor the truth of God before the assembled leaders of an empire. He gave them courage, even if God should choose not to deliver them from death (Dan. 3:16-18; this was a selfless motivation inspired by *agape*). A similar final test will come to us all in the “mark of the beast” crisis (Rev. 13:11-17).

The good news: right now worldwide the Holy Spirit is preparing, nerving, strengthening, and training willing people to endure the test. Fellowship with Christ in “fire” is precious, even today as we honor Him in school, in college, at work, at home.

Probably good sincere people have pounded into you a wrong idea of God (maybe even from the pulpit). God is not waiting for you to maintain a relationship with Him; He wants you to know He is maintaining a relationship with you. It all begins with

His initiative, not yours. He wants you saved more than you want to be.

When Jesus came, He changed our ideas about His Father. The Good Shepherd is not waiting for His lost sheep to find Him; He is seeking the sheep (Luke 15:3-32). The text about “seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near” (Isa. 55:6) needs a clearer translation. The Hebrew verb there for “seek” is not the common one, looking for a lost object; it means “pay attention to Me because I am near! I’m not far away, ever!”

This idea of working hard to maintain our relationship with the Lord is a subtle Old Covenant idea that has crept in. When you begin to grasp His seeking love, His cross, you will “hunger and thirst” for His “truth of the gospel.” It will expel your love for amusement; it will heal you of your Bible boredom.

Opponents of the Sabbath truth for decades have used Colossians 2:13-17 in an effort to overthrow the Christian observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. “The ten commandments were nailed to the cross,” they exult. “The seventh-day Sabbath was only ‘a shadow of things to come.’ Now that Christ has come, ‘let no man therefore judge you . . . in respect of . . . the Sabbath.’”

We know that the ten commandments were not nailed to the cross, and we know that the Sabbath is still the true Lord’s day.

But what was “contrary to us” that was “taken out of the way, nailing it to His cross”? Does Ellen White comment on this passage?

“There is a law which was abolished, which Christ ‘took out of the way, nailing it to His cross.’ Paul calls it ‘the law of commandments contained in ordinances.’ This ceremonial law, given by God through Moses, with its sacrifices and ordinances, was to be binding upon the Hebrews until type met antitype in the death of Christ as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world.”²

In another passage Ellen White goes deeper into the spiritual significance of Paul’s idea. It’s more than the Jew-Gentile alienation that was a local problem two thousand years ago. Ellen White sees that Paul is speaking of the spiritual problem in our own hearts today:

“The mercy seat upon which the glory of God rested in the holiest of all, is opened to all who accept Christ as the propitiation for sin, and through its medium they are brought into *fellowship with God*. The veil is rent, the partition walls broken down, the handwriting of ordinances cancelled. By virtue of His blood the *enmity is abolished*. Through faith in Christ Jew and Gentile may partake of the living bread.”³

While it is true that the ceremonial law with its provisions about “meat” and “drink” and the “new moon” was abolished by the sacrifice of Christ, obviously she saw that is not all that Paul intended to say. Why was it that abolishing the ceremonial law “disarmed principalities and powers, . . . triumphing over them in it” (vs. 15)? To say that the

² *Bible Echo*, April 16, 1894.

³ Letter 230, 1907; 5 BC 1109.

ceremonial law was nailed to the cross is correct; but what lies beneath the surface here?

The Gospel in Moonlight

Was the ceremonial law “against us, . . . contrary to us”? The Hellenistic Jews considered that at least one provision of it was circumcision. But we understand that the Levitical system in general was the gospel in moonlight, foreshadowing the ministry and sacrifice of Christ. In Old Testament times it pointed “our” faith forward to Him.

What were the evil “principalities and powers” that were “triumphed over” at the cross? According to Paul’s context, there was something fundamentally bad in what was “nailed” there, something “against us.”

The problem was “enmity” in human hearts, which Ellen White recognizes in her phrase, “The enmity is abolished” so that we “are brought into *fellowship with God*.” That enmity indeed was “against us”! The Greek word translated “handwriting” is *cheirographon*, which means “a document written by hand” In Paul’s day the word referred to a legal document or bond signed by a debtor—a mortgage, in our language. The “blotting out” was the washing of the water-soluble ink, thus erasing the handwritten evidence of the debt. Perhaps the clearest modern equivalent for us would be the burning of a mortgage with the resultant sense of exultation that no more debt hangs over us.

Did Christ accomplish something like this for us on His cross? Paul’s vigorous thought says, yes. His immediate context is his exulting praise to God for “having forgiven you all trespasses” (vs. 13). Then

in the same sentence, using the participial form of the verb, he explains how Christ forgave us all our trespasses—it was by “blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (vs. 14, KJV). Knowing how Paul loves to glory in the cross of Christ, it becomes clear that he is speaking of the record of our trespasses being blotted out. It was a legal document which was indeed truly “against us, . . . contrary to us,” and which was erased and taken “out of the way” at the cross. Could this be Paul’s deeper understanding?

Several Bible Versions Take the Good News

View

Several versions of Colossians 2:14, 15 take this “good news” view:

“Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over His own head on the cross. And then, having drawn the sting of all the powers ranged against us, He exposed them, shattered, empty and defeated, in His final glorious triumphant act!” (Phillips).

Christ “canceled the note that stood against us, with its requirements” (Williams).

“He has . . . cancelled every record of the debt that we had to pay; He has done away with it by nailing it to the cross; and so He got rid of the sovereignties and the powers, and paraded them in public, behind Him in his triumphal procession” (Jerusalem Bible).

He “cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us, having nailed it to the cross” (NAS).

“Having forgiven us all our trespasses, having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this He set aside, nailing it to the cross” (RSV).

“Dealing graciously with all our offenses, erasing the handwriting of the decrees against us, which was hostile to us” (Concordant Literal).

No, Christ did not nail the ten commandments to the cross; but He abolished the record of our trespasses against them. This does not mean that now we are given permission to disobey the law; it means that “principalities and powers” formerly entrenched in our sinful nature, evil habits, and darkness of soul that rendered us incapable of obedience, have been “spoiled,” gotten “rid of,” defeated. Slaves of evil appetites, drugs, and darkness of soul are delivered from these demonic powers that held them captive, says Paul. You are free from all these “principalities” that dragged you down! Like captives conquered in a Roman war they are displayed “openly” as in a triumphal procession of victory.

Paul is again discussing the *heart “enmity”* imposed by a wrong understanding of the law—whether moral or ceremonial—not the essence of the law itself. What was “abolished in [Christ’s] flesh” was not the law itself but the *age-old enmity which was encouraged by a fear-motivated legalism*. Peter in Acts 15:10 referred to the “yoke . . . which neither our fathers nor we were able to

bear” as circumcision and “the law of Moses” Circumcision was instituted because of Abraham’s unbelief in taking Hagar (Gen. 16, 17). “The law of Moses” was imposed on the people because of their unbelief in bringing on themselves the old covenant at Sinai (Ex. 19:8). What was “abolished” at the cross was the *fear-laden enmity and guilt* generated by that *unbelief*. Thus circumcision and “the law of Moses” came to an end at the cross; but in principle something more fundamental also came to an end there, says Paul—sin itself was conquered, with its resultant alienation from God.

Christ indeed redeemed the entire human race by His sacrifice, “abolished [the second] death,” uprooted the fear that haunts mankind, has “drawn the sting of all the powers ranged against us,” chained Satan and his evil “principalities” to His triumphal chariot in His victory procession, cancelled the “handwritten” record of our trespasses which we ourselves had signed as our indebtedness to be paid for by our own second death, and reversed the “condemnation” that came on “all men” in Adam, pronouncing on “all men” a glorious “verdict of acquittal.”

Deliverance From The Yoke of Sin

The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, and prompts us to continual overcoming. But in view of the cross, we are to “let no man therefore judge you” or lay upon us a guilt trip for trespasses paid for by Christ’s sacrifice. We are to “let no man beguile” us of our “reward” through the false teachings of a “fleshly mind” (Col. 2:16-18). Paul’s meaning for the Colossians of his day included deliverance from the

regulations of the ceremonial law, but it also had reference to the infinitely greater good news of deliverance from every vestige of Satan's tyranny over our souls. That is the idea which is at the heart of the "third angel's message in verity"—deliverance from the galling yoke of sin. It is possible for a people to prepare for the second coming of Christ!

The apostle John 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.

The repentant sinner in a corporate sense does partake of the divine nature in that he identifies with Christ and in that sense does die the second death "in Christ." That is more than merely a vicarious, cold-hearted, legal provision in a purely corporate sense. "I am crucified with Christ," says Paul. The believer enters into a fellowship with Christ, to "watch with Me," as Jesus pleaded with the disciples in Gethsemane (but they went to sleep). As a bride sympathizes with her husband, enters into his feelings and experience, identifies with him, so the "bride of Christ" will "grow up" unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, leaving behind the childish egocentric motivations. There will be an identity with Christ, by faith.