

God's Presence with His People

“My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.”

—Exodus 33:14

THE WORDS OF THIS

scripture were spoken by God to Moses, the great law-giver of Israel. Later, when Joshua became the divinely appointed leader of God's typical people, the Lord said to him, “Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.” (Josh. 1:9) At the beginning of the Christian era, Jesus, who is the divine Son of God, said to his disciples, “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world [age].”—Matt. 28:20

Symbolic of his favor and blessing, the presence of God has meant much to the Lord's faithful people in every age, for their course in life has generally been a difficult one. It was no easy task for Moses to lead the people of God through the wilderness. He needed the courage and guidance which God's presence assured him. The problems confronting Joshua, as he led the people of Israel across Jordan and undertook the task of driving

the Canaanites out of their strongholds and dividing the land among the various tribes of Israel, were insurmountable, but for the assurance that God's presence would go with him.

During the present Gospel Age, the people of God are called upon to walk in a narrow, difficult way. The world, the flesh, and the Devil are all their enemies. They are called upon to suffer, following Jesus into sacrificial death. Such a life contains many trials and hardships, but we have the assurance of the Lord's presence, even as did the faithful of the past. This gives us confidence, even joy, as we run for the "prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."—Phil. 3:14

FAITH'S VISION

It requires faith to be assured of the Lord's presence, a faith that enables us to "see" the invisible things of God. Paul wrote that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1) Again, we read, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."—II Cor. 4:17,18

To the brethren at Ephesus, Paul wrote, "I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted

and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.”—Eph. 3:14-19

The thought of God’s presence and of being “filled with all the fulness of God” is at first somewhat vague and indefinite. However, through the eye of faith, we can discover the manner in which God dwells with, and in, us. In his Word, the Lord has given us much help along this line. The Apostle Paul wrote, for example, that the invisible things of God “from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.”—Rom. 1:20

This explanation is given by Paul to show that even natural-minded persons should be able to see God as he manifests himself through his creative works. Most of mankind do not see in the works of nature any evidence of God’s personal presence with them as their special caretaker, although millions do thus recognize the existence of a supreme intelligent Creator.

In this statement by Paul, we see that at least a limited knowledge of God is revealed by the visible things of creation. We believe it is also true that he projects the reality of his presence with his people through the daily experiences of life, as we learn to read the meaning of these in the light of his written Word.

When the Lord promised Moses that his presence would go with him, the great lawgiver said to God, “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.” The Lord’s reply was, “I will make all my goodness pass

before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.”—Exod. 33:18-20

When the Lord said to Moses, “I will make all my goodness pass before thee,” it was that Moses would see the glory of the Lord and realize the fact of his presence with him. And so it is with us. We cannot see God in the literal sense, but with the eye of faith we can discern him in all the many ways he causes his goodness to pass before us.

We need the instructions of the Word in order to “see” the Lord’s goodness in all the experiences which he permits to come into our lives. The Lord said to Moses, “[I] will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.” (vs. 19) The suggestion is here given that the Lord’s ways may not always coincide with our judgment of what may be best or appropriate. Hence, we must keep close to his Word and trust him implicitly even though we do not always understand the meaning of the circumstances with which our lives are so vitally concerned.

OUR TRIAL OF FAITH

The Apostle Peter wrote to those “who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” We greatly rejoice in this hope of being with our Lord, “though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.” The divine purpose in permitting this “heaviness,” Peter explains,

is that "the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."—I Pet. 1:5-7

The prophet Job saw in his difficult experiences the crucible of God in which his faith and integrity were being tried. Few of the Lord's people have been called upon to endure such great hardship as the Lord permitted to come upon Job. The Lord did not explain to Job why he was being so severely tried, nor do we always understand the meaning of the storms which buffet us. While Job's understanding of the meaning of his experiences was quite limited, his faith did not waver. He said of the Lord, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."—Job 13:15

Job was sorely tried. While he believed that the Lord was with him, he could not see him in the perplexing circumstances through which he was passing. Job said, "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."—Job 23:8-10

Job's reference to going forward and backward, to the right and to the left, implies that he was making a careful analysis of all the circumstances of his life in an effort to fathom the meaning of the calamities which had come upon him. He knew in his heart that he had not willfully sinned against the Lord. So far as he could understand, he was not

being specially punished. Rather, Job had faith to believe that there was some very wise reason for his suffering, a reason known to God, but withheld from him.

While Job could not “see” God in what was happening to him, he had faith to believe that God’s presence was with him. “He knoweth the way that I take,” said Job. I do not know myself. I cannot understand, but God does and “when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”

Job’s understanding of the Lord was progressive, and that is true of all God’s people. What seems dark and difficult today may be clear and understandable tomorrow. Happy are we if we can learn to trust the Lord in the difficult hours and, like Job, be able to say, “He knoweth the way that I take.” God indeed knows just how “fiery” the trials should be, that the “gold” of our characters might be properly tried and purified.

The time came in Job’s experience when God revealed himself more clearly to him. Job testifies to this, saying, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee.” (Job 42:5) What a joy this must have been to Job! Previously, he had tried to “see” God, but in vain. He knew that God was leading him, but he could not understand how. He looked for God in all the directions of his life, yet could not see him, but now he could. He looked back upon his experiences and saw God in all of them. Every twinge of pain in bone and muscle, and every heartache, were now recognized as invaluable, for out of them all had come a clear vision of God whom he loved and wanted to serve.

IN SUNSHINE AND STORM

It is with us as it has been with all the Lord's people in every age. God's presence was with Moses, but he had his dark, weary and dreary days, when it was necessary for faith to summon his courage to endure. It was the same with Job and with all the Ancient Worthies. There were times when God caused his goodness to pass before them. It was then that through faith they "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."—Heb. 11:33,34

These faithful ones of the past rejoiced in all of the wonderful ways in which the Lord demonstrated his presence with them. Just as important, their faith and loyalty were such that when the Lord did not show himself so visibly on their side, they still trusted him. We read that "others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented."—Heb. 11:36,37

GOD'S PRESENCE WITH PAUL

God's presence was continually with the great Apostle Paul. However, it was necessary for his faith to lay hold upon the promises in order to "see" God in many of the circumstances with which he was surrounded. It was no doubt easy to recognize God in the Macedonian call and in his experience

at the riverside near Philippi which came to him as a result of responding to that call. God's presence was with him and he recognized that God had touched the heart of Lydia, the seller of purple, so that she embraced the Truth and opened her home for the use of the brethren.

It was different, though, when shortly after that, Paul and Silas were locked in a prison dungeon. Yet, even here, Paul could look backward in his life and remember that he had been told from the beginning what great things he would be called upon to suffer in the name of the Lord. So, even in the prison, he could "see" God and, together with Silas, could sing hymns of praise to God at midnight, when an earthquake then broke open the doors of the prison.

So it is with us when we take to heart the Lord's promise, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." We rejoice in this assurance. We especially rejoice when our experiences in life are easily recognizable as being of the Lord and for our good. When we are privileged to fellowship with the Lord's people in our local ecclesia or at conventions, it is not difficult to "see" the Lord in the smiling faces of our brethren in Christ and in their sympathetic, loving handshakes.

We see God also in the testimonies of our brethren and in the discourses of those who serve. He reveals himself in the various comments at our study meetings because they help us to understand his plans and purposes more clearly. Surely, as God causes his goodness to pass before us in these wonderful ways, we rejoice in the reality of his presence and our rest in him is blessed and sweet.

Our rejoicing in the Lord delights to find ways and means of showing forth his praises to others. We can see the clear leadings of his providences as he opens up opportunities of service for us. We see the presence of the Lord in every precious doctrine of the Truth. These doctrines become more meaningful to us and bring the Lord closer into our hearts each time we have an opportunity to make them known to others. It is the general testimony of the Lord's people that he seems especially near to them when they are bearing witness to his wonderful plan of the ages.

IN DARKNESS ALSO

God's presence is also with us even when we do not see so many evidences of his goodness. Perhaps through illness, or other circumstances over which we have no control, we are cut off from fellowship with God's people. We may be hindered from bearing witness to the Truth. Our bodies may be wracked with pain. Those who were once our friends, may now be our enemies and condemn us with bitter words of falsehood. All the good things of life, pertaining to both mind and body in which we were able to see the presence of the Lord so plainly, may no longer be ours to enjoy.

For a while, the Lord may permit us to be surrounded by darkness so that, like Job, we look behind us and before us. We may turn to the right and to the left, but cannot see him. It is in such experiences that our faith needs particularly to lay hold upon God's promises. We must realize that while for the moment we cannot "see" him, he knoweth the way we take. He understands and is

sympathetic with our every heart throb. We should be assured that just as his presence was with us to share our joys, he is now also with us in our sorrows and difficulties.

The Prophet Habakkuk expressed this thought beautifully. He wrote from the standpoint of a farmer bereft of all those blessings which ordinarily he would look upon as evidences of God's blessings. He said, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation."—Hab. 3:17,18

From one standpoint, we cannot rejoice in being isolated from the brethren, or in being deprived of opportunities of serving the Lord and his people. Mental stress and physical pain do not bring joy to the heart. However, when all the good things which we have cherished are removed, we can still rejoice in the Lord. We can rejoice in him because we are confident that he knows. In fact, he knows far better than we do exactly what is best for us as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. He knows that the "light affliction" which he permits will work for us a "far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."—II Cor. 4:17

We can rejoice in the Lord under such trying circumstances if by faith we can rise above these experiences. This means looking beyond the things that are seen by the natural eye to the things which are not seen, the things which God has in reservation for those who love him. It is faith's vision of

the eternal things of God which helps us to discern his presence in the darkness. We then recognize that he is dealing with us, not from the standpoint of a few short years here in the flesh, but is developing and testing us for eternity. We should surely recognize that our limited understanding comes far short of knowing what experiences are best to accomplish in us and for us such a glorious and eternal purpose.

By faith, we can thus look beyond where we are walking at the moment and there “see” God, rejoicing to realize that the smile of his favor is upon us. When we look beyond our present light afflictions, which we know are but for a moment, we can see the eternal weight of glory to follow—the glory of God and the glory of joint-heirship with his beloved Son. This will be the joy of living in their actual presence throughout eternity.

It is this beautiful vision of the glory that is being worked out in us by the Father through the light afflictions which he is now permitting. Thus, we can see that even through our trials he is lifting up his countenance upon us, and this gives us peace and rest. While we might hesitate to pray for the experiences which try us, we can accept them with rejoicing and thank our Heavenly Father for permitting those circumstances to come into our lives which he sees best to prepare us for our eternal home with him.

When we began our journey in the narrow way, it may have been with us somewhat as it was with Job, that we had heard of God through the hearing of the ear. As we progress day by day, through his tender care and by the assurances of his grace to

help in every time of need, we become increasingly aware of his presence and can say with Job, “Now mine eye seeth thee.”

We are following in the footsteps of Jesus and should have the same viewpoint as he expressed. He said, prophetically in the words of David, “I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest [dwell confidently, *Marginal Translation*] in hope.” (Ps. 16:8,9) With the Lord always before us, we know that he will show us the path of life. We know also that in our Father’s actual presence there will be “fulness of joy” and “pleasures for evermore.”—vs. 11

Thus do we continue to rejoice in the wonderful promise of God, when we realize, “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.”—Exod. 33:14 ■