

Waiting to Live and Reign with Christ

“I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads; . . . and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”
—*Revelation 20:4*

THE PROSPECT OF LIVING

and reigning with Christ is set before his followers in various ways and times. This great blessing is the “prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:14) It is also called the “heavenly calling.” (Heb. 3:1) It points to the spiritual reward for the faithful followers of our Lord Jesus, and an “inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.” (I Pet. 1:4) To receive this reward we must be totally consecrated to serve our loving Heavenly Father

even as the Apostle Paul wrote. “It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him.”—II Tim. 2:11,12

In our text, the revelator describes those whom he saw reigning with Christ and says that they were the ones who had been ‘beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God.’ This illustration is used in the Scriptures because there are certain aspects of the Christian life that are not pleasing to the flesh, experiences from which the flesh shrinks. These experiences must be borne with fortitude if we are to ‘live and reign with Christ.’

Under Roman law, crucifixion was also practiced, but some prisoners destined for the death penalty were beheaded. According to tradition, the Apostle Paul was one of these, but not many of the early Christians were literally beheaded. Certainly none in this end of the age have been subjected to this sort of punishment. The expression is used in a figurative sense, even as crucifixion was thus used by Paul when he wrote, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”—Gal. 2:20

ONE BODY: MANY MEMBERS

Beheading and crucifixion both describe the taking of life, but each from a different standpoint. In the crucifixion symbol we are represented as taking up our cross and dying daily with Christ until the death of the flesh is fully consummated. The beheading symbol highlights the fact that we

surrender our will to the Lord, and accept Christ as our head. Thus the ‘old man’ dies, while the ‘new man’ follows the directives of its head, endeavoring to be obedient to his every wish. In his letter to the brethren at Corinth, Paul reveals many of the things involved in our beheading. He uses the figure of a man to represent Christ and his church. In this illustration, Jesus is the head of the body, and the individual members of the church are represented by the other parts of the body.

This is a simple illustration, yet it has vital meaning for all those who aspire to live and reign with Christ. “As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.”—I Cor. 12:12-14

BAPTIZED INTO DEATH

We become part of the body by means of baptism unto death, or burial, that symbolizes the burial of our own will and the acceptance of the will of Christ, our new head. “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?” (Rom. 6:3) We thus know in advance that when we accept the headship of Jesus, by being baptized into his death, we place ourselves in a position to die.

We know that Christ’s will for us is the same as was the Father’s will for him. Paul explains, “I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man;

and the head of Christ is God.” (I Cor. 11:3) Jesus buried his will into the will of his Father—“Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.” (Ps. 40:7,8) Jesus knew that the Father’s will for him as outlined in the Scriptures, was that he must die. He may not have understood this clearly prior to his consecration but did soon thereafter, and the entire course of his ministry was one of daily ‘dying,’ until on the cross he cried, “It is finished.”—John 19:30

We are baptized into Jesus’ death as members of his body. It is not only the death of our own wills in the acceptance of the headship of Christ, but eventually the actual death of our fleshly bodies also, which are presented as living sacrifices and made acceptable through the merit of Christ. (Rom. 12:1) This is a serious step to take, and it is only by Divine grace that anyone is able to carry through victoriously to the end. But great is the reward for those who do, for they shall live and reign with Christ a thousand years.

ACCEPTING THE WILL OF GOD

The Apostle Paul reminds us of the unity and co-operation of the various parts of the body. He asks, “If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.”—I Cor. 12:15-18

Every consecrated follower of Jesus is presented with a heart-searching lesson in humility and the acceptance of the Lord's will. There is nothing in worldly associations to compare with this. It is contrary to the natural trends and desires of the fallen flesh. In the world, no one is condemned for ambitiously seeking a place of prominence and authority among his fellows. Having accepted Christ as our head and becoming members of his body, we leave the choice with the Heavenly Father as to just what place we will occupy in the body. Can we imagine the hands and feet of a natural body arguing as to which should become the eye? This may seem unusual, but Paul brings this to our attention to impress upon us the need of accepting the will of the Lord in this, as well as in all other matters relative to our living and reigning with Christ in his kingdom.

No member of the body of Christ should undervalue in any manner the importance of all the other members. This is a lesson in humility and brotherly interest in all the body members. Those who are truly of the body regardless of the position they may occupy, will highly esteem every other member regardless of the lowly position some of them may seem to occupy.—Phil. 2:3,4

It is a special blessing to be called for a part in this body, and it came about by the grace of God through Christ Jesus. Since the Father has placed every member in the body as it has pleased him, how fitting that we recognize the importance of all our brethren in Christ regardless of their abilities or the place which God has assigned to them.

Paul suggests the proper viewpoint in this matter, saying, "Those members of the body, which we

think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.”—I Cor. 12:23-26

CHRIST OUR HEAD

How different this often is from the backbiting efforts seen in the world to attain positions of honor and authority among men. A tremendous change must take place in the human heart for one to be truly ‘beheaded’ and accept the true headship of Christ. This implies humbly submitting to the Divine will, and rejoicing to associate with those whom the Lord has called, regardless of their talents or how they may measure up to our particular ideals.

Even of Jesus it was asked, “Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?” (John 7:48) His disciples were plain people with the possible exception of the Apostle Paul who was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. We could name few among the Lord’s people who were not of the humbler walks of life. These lowly, unknown ones from the world’s standpoint are all of a royal line, and children of the loving Heavenly Father. They are in training, in the words of our featured scripture, to live and reign with Christ a thousand years.

BEARING WITNESS

In Paul's use of the body illustration, he makes it clear that every member in the body has a work to do. Looking to the head for guidance, we hear him say that we are to be his witnesses. The Truth is to be ministered to one another, and to the world. This important work of bearing witness to the Truth helps emphasize the need for the harmonious working together of all the members of the body. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."—John 17:17-21

The world will not understand that God sent Jesus to be their Redeemer and Savior until his righteous kingdom is set up. The members of the prospective church are now in training for that future work of enlightening the people. Our Lord is giving us practical lessons to test our enthusiasm for his cause, and by witnessing to his great plan and purpose. As beheaded followers of the Master, we must be members of his body, else we would have no head. Those who have been symbolically beheaded will labor together in the common work. As individuals, we bear witness to the Truth, but if we are to live and reign with Christ, we must learn to be subject one to another and especially to our new Head, Christ Jesus. In our beheading, we give up our own

plans and ways, and earnestly seek the plans and ways of the Lord that we may work in harmony with him and with fellow members of the body.

TESTS OF OBEDIENCE

The influence impelling us to faithfully carry out our consecration vows is love. The message we bear is so wonderful that it is a joy to tell others about it, but the results are not always joyful. The world is in darkness and hates the light. As we let our light shine, the world frowns upon us, and we are not accepted among our friends as we once were. Some may speak evil of us, and these experiences are not pleasing to the flesh. However, we continue to adhere as best we can to the righteous principles of the Truth.

Paul cautioned, "Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6:9,10) Witnessing for Jesus and for the Word of God is not an incidental thing in the beheaded Christian's consecrated life, but our chief vocation and chief business.

Jesus provided an important lesson in his Parable of the Sower. In his reference to the seed which fell among thorns, he said, "He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." (Matt. 13:22) Here is the case of one who has progressed to the extent of bearing Christian fruit, and then allowing other interests to enter in to the point of becoming unfruitful.

There is also the danger of discouragement. The cold indifference of the world to the Gospel of the kingdom does not inspire enthusiasm, but has a tendency to dampen zeal. We may labor for years, and see no tangible results from our witness work. Under these circumstances, the flesh would say, What's the use? Why should I continue to spend my time, strength and money when nothing is being accomplished? But the new mind, consulting the head, is reminded that the results of our witness work are not our responsibility, but that it is God who gives the increase.—I Cor. 3:6,7

We are not invited to witness for Jesus and the Word of God because our help is needed, but because we need the opportunity thereby to prove our zeal for the Truth. We joy in the fact that God intends to bless all the families of the earth, a joy that impels us even now to tell as many as we can about it. The only ones who will live and reign with Christ a thousand years are those who demonstrate their enthusiasm for the purpose of that reign.

BEWARE OF TEMPTATIONS

A temptation which may come upon some in connection with the witness work is the inclination to boast of the great works they are doing. We might feel a sense of great satisfaction that we have done so much for the Lord even though we may not have expressed our feelings to others. If we find ourselves being tempted along this line we should recall Jesus' parable in which we are represented as "unprofitable servants." (Luke 17:10) If we have spent much time and strength in the service of the Lord, it is only that which we agreed to do when we

made our consecration vows to him. We have nothing to boast about, for we are still ‘unprofitable servants.’ What marvelous grace is here shown, that the Lord has taken us into partnership with him, and is making us one of his coworkers.

On the night Jesus was born, God used the angels to make the announcement to the shepherds. First, one spoke proclaiming the glad tidings, and then a whole multitude of the angelic host sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:1-14) God could have arranged for the angels to daily proclaim the glad tidings of the kingdom, and with a display of glory that the world has never known. How insignificant and weak our efforts seem when we compare them with what God could do in other ways, but for the fact that he is giving us an opportunity to prove that we are worthy to live and reign with Christ a thousand years.

LIVING IN HARMONY

The Heavenly Father’s plan and purpose for blessing the world is prompted by his great love. To be in harmony with him, our efforts to cooperate in his plan must also be motivated by the same spirit of love. This is the vital lesson Paul so effectively set forth when he wrote to the Corinthian ecclesia. “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”—I Cor. 13:3

Paul understood this was one of the ways of expressing the terms of the narrow way in which he was faithfully walking. He knew that we cannot

lay up treasures in heaven except through the sacrifice of all that we have for the blessing of others and to the glory of God. Unless our giving and our sacrificing is prompted by the spirit of unselfishness and love, it will profit us nothing, and that no treasure will be laid up in heaven. The apostle pointed out that giving our bodies to be burned is what is involved in our being beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the Word of God. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."—Rom. 12:1

SACRIFICIAL LIVES

Presenting bodies in sacrifice is a thought which Paul learned from the services of the typical tabernacle, in which animal sacrifices were burned on the brazen altar in the court. In its antitypical sense, this represents those Christians who are also called to offer their bodies to be burned, not on literal altars and by literal fire, but on the altar of God's service. This is shown in the fiery trials of hardship and persecution which must inevitably accompany such sacrifices. There is no other way into the glories of the kingdom to live and reign with Christ a thousand years. There would be no profit in sacrifice, and no laying up of treasures in heaven if we do not have love.

The more fully we are filled and controlled by love, the greater will be our determination to give all that we have and are in sacrifice, knowing that it will be acceptable to God through our faith in the precious shed blood of Christ on our behalf.

Love not only prompts us to greater sacrifice, but it controls the way we sacrifice and serve. The Apostle Paul further stressed, “Charity [love] suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.”—I Cor. 13:4-7

As members of the body of Christ, we serve one another. Are we doing it kindly, and sympathetically? Are we patient with others’ weaknesses as we would like them to be patient with ours? Is the spirit of kindness manifest in our witnessing to the world? Love should enter into and control all of our activities and all of our associations. To the extent that it does, we will not be envious of others, will not be boastful and puffed up, our conduct will be such as becomes the children of God, we will not be easily provoked, nor insisting on our rights, nor will we think evil of others.

Love, filling our hearts and controlling our words and acts, is the single great principle and power which makes our feeble efforts in the Heavenly Father’s service acceptable to him because of our faith in the shed blood of Christ. If we are truly beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the Word of God, it is because we are motivated by the very spirit of love. This is why we may confidently hope for the glorious prospect of living and reigning with Christ a thousand years. ■