

Labors of Love

***“God is not
unrighteous to
forget your work
and labour of love,
which ye have
shewed toward his
name, in that ye
have ministered to
the saints, and do
minister.”***

—Hebrews 6:10

DEVELOPING THE “MIND of Christ” most assuredly includes the thought of our title. It was love which prompted the labors of the Master on behalf of mankind in securing redemption for Adam and his race. It was also love which prompted many other works of our Lord during his earthly ministry. These “labors of love” were not only provided to show forth Jesus’ beautiful character, and that of his Heavenly Father, but also served as examples to the Lord’s footstep followers of the privileges we have toward one another as members of the “little flock.”

Ministering to the saints is one of the Christian’s most blessed privileges, as indicated in the words of our opening text given to us by the Apostle Paul. In I Thessalonians 1:3, he also writes of the “work of faith,” the “labour of love,” and “patience of hope.” The work of faith seems to refer to those activities of the Christian life which require faith to meet challenges, such as preaching the Gospel, and standing loyal for God, the Truth, and the

brethren in the face of opposition and persecution. Patience of hope implies the need for endurance and constancy as we view the hope set before us in the midst of trials and difficulties.

The expression “labour of love” is descriptive of those kindnesses which we extend to our brethren because they are fellow members of the body of Christ, and because we esteem it a great privilege to serve them—even to lay down our lives for them in rendering services which may tend to lighten their burden. All of the Lord’s people enjoy such opportunities. Many of us have had labors of love extended to us, and how much we have appreciated these. In many instances, our love for the brethren has thereby been increased.

THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN

These labors of love on behalf of the people of God have not been limited to the present Gospel Age. In the Jewish Age, we recall the Prophet Elisha as being the recipient of the labor of love from a man and woman of God totally unknown to him until he became the benefactor of their love. The account of this is found in II Kings 4:8-18.

It is the story of a Shunammite woman, otherwise not identified, except that she is referred to as “a great woman.” It seems that the Prophet Elisha, in his rounds of service, often passed through the town of Shunem. He apparently, in doing so, followed a road that was not far from the home of the “great woman” of the account. After noticing this, the woman used the first opportunity she had to assist, and “constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he

passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread.”—II Kings 4:8

After this occurred a number of times, the Shunammite woman said to her husband, “Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually. Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither. And it fell on a day, that he came thither, and he turned into the chamber, and lay there.”—vss. 9-11

This woman’s great labor of love must have meant much to the Prophet Elisha. It was a simple act of kindness—beginning with taking him into her home for lunch, and then, with the consent and cooperation of her husband, building an extra room on the home so this man of God might have a place to rest when he needed it, and perchance to stay overnight. The kindness to this man of God was not without expense, because the building of an extra room on one’s home is quite costly. However, this woman’s love was great. Her spirit of sacrifice abounded toward Elisha, and we are sure the Lord was pleased.

Certainly Elisha was pleased. He instructed his servant to learn from the woman what they could do for her in return for all her kindness. She wished for nothing in return, but the servant learned from her that she was childless, her husband was old and the probability of ever having a child was very slight. Elisha prayed to the Lord about this, and his prayer, coming from a righteous man, availed much. In due course, the woman gave birth to a son.—vss. 12-17

Later, while the lad was still young, he suffered what was possibly a sunstroke, and died. Elisha was sent for, and he returned to the home, and restored the boy's life. (vss. 18-37) Thus, while this "great woman" had not desired any favor from Elisha or from the Lord for her labor of love, she did receive a highly appreciated blessing, as is so often the case with those who unselfishly and wholeheartedly minister to the people of God.

MARY'S LABOR OF LOVE

Martha and Mary are two women of God who stand out prominently in the life of Jesus. Jesus loved them because of their devotion to God and to his Word, and they loved him for the same reason. Their brother Lazarus died, and Jesus returned from Galilee to Bethany, the home of these two devout women, and awakened him from the sleep of death. This was a genuine labor of love by Jesus, and they showed their appreciation in part by arranging for a special supper the next day, at which Lazarus and Jesus were present.

This was a remarkable setting for such a gathering. Lazarus, who had been dead four days, had been awakened, and was with the others to enjoy the meal and the fellowship. Martha served at this supper. While it was in progress, Mary arose from the table, and using "a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, . . . anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment."—John 12:3

This was a labor of love which was very costly. By it, Mary, as best she could, showed her appreciation to Jesus for the great kindness he had

bestowed upon their family by awakening her brother from the sleep of death. She had doubtless expressed her thanks to the Master before this. However, in many cases words seem inadequate, and this was so in the case of Mary. She wanted to back up her words with a pound of spikenard ointment with which she bathed the Master's feet, and she wanted to use her own hair to wipe his feet.

As is oftentimes the case, there was one at the supper who criticized this labor of love. It was Judas Iscariot, but the record reveals that he was not sincere in his criticism. The lesson is that Jesus appreciated what had been done for him. Replying to Judas, Jesus said, "Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this." (John 12:7) Jesus recognized Mary's labor of love as a real service that had been rendered to him. How wonderful that the Lord should cause the record of this to be preserved for us as a beautiful example.

In another account, Jesus said of Mary, "She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." (Mark 14:8,9) What a precious example this is—"She hath done what she could!" We today do not have the opportunity of anointing the feet of our Lord, but we do have the privilege, in various ways, of rendering service to the members of his body still in the flesh. Are we doing what we can to render this labor of love on their behalf?

DORCAS

A member of the Early Church who was active in performing loving service for the brethren was Dorcas. Of her, we read, "Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did." Dorcas became ill, and died, and "they laid her in an upper chamber."—Acts 9:36,37

The disciples in the area heard that Peter was in the vicinity, so they sent for him. "Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them." Then, having them all leave the room, Peter through prayer restored Dorcas to life. This miracle soon became known throughout the area, and as a result of it many believed.—vss. 38-42

We have only this short account of the zeal of Dorcas in serving the widows by her sewing. Like Mary, she did what she could, and as a result of her labor she brought blessings to many. In addition, through God's grace in awakening her from the sleep of death, many became believers. Thus, through her labor of love, the Gospel effectively reached others. How encouraging this must have been to Dorcas!

LYDIA

Another of those whose labor of love is noted in Scripture is Lydia, a seller of purple dye, who maintained a home at

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(Continued from page 31) Philippi. It was in Philippi that the first European ecclesia was established. Lydia had an important part in connection with this—the first meetings of the brethren being held in her home. Paul and his companions were the first to take the Gospel to Philippi, going there in response to the call which he heard in a vision, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us.”—Acts 16:9

Arriving in Philippi, Luke writes that “on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither. And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.”—vss. 13-15

Here was a labor of love operating in the form of hospitality to the brethren. Evidently Lydia was not a poor woman. Although she is said to be of Thyatira, evidently she did business in Philippi and maintained a home there for convenience, and she invited Paul and his companions to be guests in her home.

The record states that God had opened Lydia’s heart. Now we see her opened heart reaching out to serve the brethren in the best way she was capable of doing. She was not long enough in the Truth, perhaps, to give a clear witness to the message, but

she could care for the material needs of those faithful servants who had greater ability. Throughout the age, the temporal assistance provided to those active in the service of the Truth has been a very important part of the total efforts of making known the glad tidings of the kingdom. Lydia is in the forefront of this little band of servants whose labors of love have meant so much to the brethren.

EPAPHRODITUS

Epaphroditus was a member of the ecclesia at Philippi. Paul was now a prisoner in Rome, and the brethren in Philippi decided to send him a gift to help supply some of his needs, and to comfort him. Epaphroditus was the brother chosen to take this gift to Rome, and to deliver it to Paul. This was evidently during the two years in which Paul was privileged to live in “his own hired house,” although in the custody of Roman guards.—Acts 28:30

It would seem that in addition to delivering this gift to Paul from the brethren at Philippi, Epaphroditus desired to remain with Paul to serve him in whatever way he could. Paul decided to let him remain for awhile—at least until he found out how things would go with him when his case came up for trial. He was hoping that then he would be set free and could visit the brethren at Philippi himself. Then he adds, “Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants. For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick.”—Phil. 2:25,26

It is evident that Epaphroditus had endeared himself to Paul by his faithful labor of love. The record shows also that this service had been rendered at great cost. Through his faithfulness, Epaphroditus had become ill. Paul wrote that “he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I sent him therefore the more carefully, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful.”—Phil. 2:27,28

We can understand Paul’s feelings in this matter. He was being held as prisoner, and while it was for the cause of Christ, it is not an easy matter to be a prisoner, for any reason. This dear brother from Philippi had come with a gift from the brethren, and was serving him and became seriously ill. Had he died, it would have indeed been a crushing blow to Paul—“sorrow upon sorrow.” However, the Lord spared him this sorrow. Epaphroditus had recovered and was now returning to his brethren in Philippi, and Paul wrote, “Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation: Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me.”—vss. 29,30

Notice Paul’s exhortation—“hold such in reputation.” Paul believed in giving honor where such recognition is due, and he was sure it was merited by Epaphroditus. He had gladly risked his life to serve the beloved apostle—a service which Paul describes as “the work of Christ.” We cannot visualize all the details involved in this service. However, we can enter into the spirit which prompted it, and we can understand to some small degree how it must have brought

comfort and joy into those weary days which Paul spent in the custody of Roman guards.

THROUGHOUT THE AGES

Beginning in ancient times, and continuing even to our day, there have been faithful ones who have seen and used their opportunities to bestow labors of love, and thereby helped to lighten the burden of many of God's people. The Heavenly Father has promised to give his people the necessary strength for their every time of need, but often he uses their fellow brethren to render this assistance.

We have noted a few of the instances of this labor of love mentioned in the Bible, but we are sure that there were many other faithful individuals whose labors are not recorded in the sacred Word. In many of our ecclesia gatherings today, we have "comfort" committees to serve and encourage those who are ill, or for other reasons need our help. Indeed, every brother and sister in Christ should think of himself or herself as a member of a comfort committee, made up of all the Lord's people. We all should be on the alert to render help as opportunity and ability affords.

It is not in the big things, as a rule, that we are able to serve, but a cordial greeting at the meeting, a message of love and encouragement to a distant brother or sister which may be dispatched by the ecclesia, and in which we have the privilege of having a part. Sometimes, however, these privileges may come in more definite form. We may learn of a brother or sister who is in need of much help along a specific line. Rendering such assistance may be costly to us. Let us not hold back in these cases either.

The Shunammite woman saw her privilege of building an extra room onto her home so that a prophet of God might enjoy periods of refreshment and rest. Dorcas sewed clothing for the widows in the church at Joppa. Not every woman is able to sew, but Dorcas was, and she used her ability to render a labor of love where it was needed. Epaphroditus did not hesitate to hazard his life in order to minister to the needs of the Apostle Paul.

All of us should emulate these faithful servants of the Lord and of his people to the greatest extent possible. Let us possess their spirit of sacrifice and devotion to God's purposes and plan. This is the true spirit of the Lord, the spirit with which we should seek to be filled as we lay down our lives in his service, developing the "mind of Christ,"—the mind which led our Master to labor and give his all.

