

Planted Together

***“If we have been
planted together in
the likeness of his
death, we shall be
also in the
likeness of his
resurrection.”
—Romans 6:5***

OUR OPENING TEXT

serves as a reminder of God’s purpose, that those called to be part of his divine family are to follow in the path laid out by his Son, Christ Jesus. The *New International Version* renders the wording as “united with him” in his death and in his resurrection. The thought of being “united” together as a planting of God calls to mind Jesus’ words, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.” (John 15:1) God is the owner and caretaker of his symbolic vineyard, and Jesus is the vine of his planting. The Heavenly Father not only plants, but also oversees the development and care for the true vine, and to his glory it yields its fruit. This picture denotes the fact that God is the author of the plan of the ages, a focal point of which is the call and development of a special class—“a people for his name.”—Acts 15:14

YE ARE THE BRANCHES

Jesus tells us of our privilege to be part of this planting of God, saying, “I am the vine, ye are the branches. (John 15:5) He also instructs us of the

necessity to “abide” in the vine, and to “bear much fruit.” (vss. 5-8) To abide in the vine—Jesus—means to walk in his footsteps and grow in the likeness of his character. It also signifies the privilege of suffering with him, and being “planted” with him “in the likeness of his death,” so that we might share “in the likeness of his resurrection.” Paul points out later in the Book of Romans that our hope of being “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ,” is conditional, based upon our fulfillment of the requirement, “if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.”—Rom. 8:17

The process of being “planted,” or “united,” together with our Lord begins when we make a full consecration to do the Heavenly Father’s will—giving up our own will to follow in the sacrificial footsteps of the Master. The symbol of water baptism is a beautiful illustration of this matter, showing that we have been “baptized into Jesus Christ,” and “buried with him by baptism into death.” (Rom. 6:3,4) Being accepted by God, we become a “branch,” and begin partaking of the life-giving nutrients supplied by Jesus, the root and stock of the vine, for the purpose of bearing “much fruit.” Being “planted together” in unity with our Lord also extends to the many other branches in the vine—our brethren. The “body of Christ”—one body with many members—is another Scriptural symbol used to show the unity of this arrangement. Indeed, those experiences which touch one “branch” of the vine, or one “member” of the body, are felt by all, and are to be used by all the branches as stepping stones in obtaining the proper growth in character likeness to our Lord and pattern.—I Cor. 12:12-14,18,27; Eph. 4:15,16

Proper growth as branches in the vine, walking “not after the flesh, but after the Spirit,” will lead us to maturity in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:1-4) There is no other method whereby we can attain to the new nature and be “planted together” in his resurrection. If, by the grace of our Heavenly Father, we are found faithful unto death in this endeavor, we will have fulfilled in us a further Scriptural symbol. Those in “Zion” who abide faithfully in the vine, under the anointing of the Master, will be called “trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.”—Isa. 61:3

IMPORTANCE OF TREES

There are many references to trees in the Scriptures. Sometimes they are referred to in a symbolic manner, denoting the wealth and power of leaders among nations. In one such instance, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a tree “in the midst of the earth” which was “strong,” and whose height “reached to heaven.” Interpreting his dream, Daniel said that the tree represented Nebuchadnezzar, as king over the Babylonian empire, which at that time was the most extensive and powerful nation on earth. (Dan. 4:10, 11,20-22) We also note these words from the psalmist: “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree.” (Ps. 37:35) The *New International Version* speaks of this tree as “flourishing . . . in its own soil.” This aptly describes the “soil” of pride and wickedness in which the leaders—or trees—of fallen mankind have been planted by Satan, the “god of this world.”—II Cor. 4:4; Gal. 1:4

Numerous kinds of trees are mentioned in the Scriptures. Trees such as the almond, apple, aloes,

and cedar, are cited in various passages. (Eccles. 12:5; Song of Sol. 2:3; Num. 24:6) “Cedars of Lebanon” were used in the building of Solomon’s temple and his house. (Ps. 104:16; I Kings 5:1-6; 7:1,2) The cedar tree is an evergreen, but also has the special quality of being resistant to insects and other sources of decay. In symbolic language, the psalmist says that “the righteous shall . . . grow like a cedar in Lebanon.” (Ps. 92:12) This is a fitting symbol of everlasting life, which will be given to all who ultimately attain righteousness.

The Heavenly Father told Noah to build an ark out of “gopher wood”—thought to have perhaps been wood of the cypress tree—and gave him the exact specifications as to its construction. (Gen. 6:14-16) Later, God gave instructions to Moses concerning the building of the Tabernacle. One of its most important furnishings was the “ark of the testimony,” or “covenant.” God told Moses to have it built out of “shittim wood,” which was from the acacia tree, and to overlay the wood entirely with “pure gold.” The ark was to then be covered with a “mercy seat,” also of pure gold, at the ends of which were to be formed “two cherubims.” God said concerning this simple wooden ark, with its various coverings of gold: “There I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.”—Exod. 25:10-22

In another of God’s instructions to Moses, he provides details of how the “holy anointing oil” was to be made. Aside from the various spices which were to be added, the primary ingredient was olive oil,

pressed from the fruit of the olive tree. (Exod. 30:22-31) This “holy anointing oil,” which was used to sanctify all the furnishings and vessels of the Tabernacle, is symbolic of God’s Holy Spirit. Jesus promised his disciples that when “the Spirit of truth” would come, it would “guide” them “into all truth,” and he prayed that the Truth would have its sanctifying effect upon them. (John 16:13; 17:17,19) In harmony with this, John the Revelator speaks of “two olive trees,” symbolic of the truths contained in the Old and New Testaments, which have been “witnesses” of God’s plan throughout the Gospel Age.—Rev. 11:3,4

We also recall the account of Zacchaeus who, because of his short stature, climbed a sycamore tree so that he might see Jesus. (Luke 19:1-9) His name in Hebrew signifies “pure.” Although he was a despised tax collector, and had evidently not always been honest in his dealings with the people, Zacchaeus showed his purity of heart by confessing his desire to give to the poor and to restore fourfold to anyone from whom he had taken anything unlawfully. Jesus abode at his house as a guest, and blessed him for his righteous desires, saying to him, “This day is salvation come to this house.” What a beautiful lesson we herein observe—that God can take something as ordinary as a tree and, in his providence, use it as a tool in the accomplishment of his righteous purposes.

PARABLE OF THE TREES

Jesus, on a number of occasions, spoke of trees symbolically or in parabolic language. We quote one such instance: “He spake unto them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot

forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. . . . This generation shall not pass away till all be fulfilled.” (Luke 21:29-32) The fig tree is used both in the Old and New Testament to represent the nation of Israel. (Jer. 24; Mark 11:11-21) Here, shortly before his death, the Lord prophesied of his Second Coming, or presence, during which he said the fig tree, and many other trees—or nations—would “shoot forth.”

Evident, indeed, is the fulfillment of this “sign” of our Lord’s presence. It has been during the past century that we have seen the rise of Israel to statehood and their prominence as a nation. We have also witnessed an increase in the total number of sovereign nations from a little more than fifty in 1914 to close to two hundred today—a nearly four-fold increase. How accurately the shooting forth of the “fig tree” and “all the trees” portrays the time in which we are living.

COMMANDMENTS GIVEN

Under the Mosaic law, there were commandments and instructions given to Israel concerning trees, particularly those which provided food. We quote: “When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof, ... for thou mayest eat of them, ... (for the tree of the field is man’s life) ... Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy.” (Deut. 20:19,20) In another instruction, we read, “When ye shall come into a land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, . . . three years shall [the fruit] be as uncircumcised unto you: . . . In the

fourth year all the fruit thereof shall be holy to praise the LORD . . . And in the fifth year shall ye eat of the fruit thereof.” (Lev. 19:23-25) How practical were these instructions. Certainly it would be reasonable to save trees that were used for food after the conquering of an enemy, and wise to refrain from eating of newly planted fruit-bearing trees until the fifth year, when they would be more mature, and the quality of the fruit much better.

God also commanded Israel against using trees as a setting for idol worship. We read, “Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the LORD thy God, which thou shalt make thee. Neither shalt thou set thee up any image; which the LORD thy God hateth.” (Deut. 16:21,22) This had to be said by God because nearly all the heathen nations which surrounded Israel engaged in the practice of planting groves of trees. They would then use the wood as fuel for making graven images and for offering abominable sacrifices in the worship of their false Gods. (Deut. 7:1-5; 12:1-3) Israel, however, did not heed this command, and often copied the practices of their heathen neighbors. “They set them up images and groves in every high hill, and under every green tree: And there they burnt incense in all the high places, as did the heathen.”—II Kings 17:10,11

Hezekiah, one of only a few righteous kings of Israel and Judah, “removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, . . . He trusted in the LORD God of Israel.” (II Kings 18:4,5) How similar these conditions are to our day, when false gods and idols of every description and imagination are “worshipped” by mankind. God’s Word, however,

assures us that all such “wickedness shall be broken as a tree.” (Job 24:20) Everything that stands in the way of God’s plans and purposes being carried out will be shaken and will not stand, “that those things which cannot be shaken may remain: . . . For our God is a consuming fire.”—Heb. 12:26-29

BUILDING THE LORD’S HOUSE

When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem following their Babylonian captivity, it was for the purpose of rebuilding their Temple. However, they at first neglected this work, and were reproved by the Lord. Through the Prophet Haggai, God said, “Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it.” (Hag. 1:7,8) Although they had been gathering wood and other materials, they were using them to build their own houses, rather than the house of the Lord. Meanwhile, the Temple continued to lay waste. (vss. 4,9) After being chided severely by God, the people were finally stirred up to a sense of duty and of the wonderful privilege to serve him, “and they came and did work in the house of the LORD of hosts, their God.”—vs. 14

There is an important lesson here for us. Are we busily engaged in building the spiritual temple of our New Creature, or are we neglecting that effort and building fleshly, temporal dwelling places for the old, fallen nature? We must continually fulfill our vow of consecration, having presented our “bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God,” which is our “reasonable service,” striving not to be “conformed to this world: but . . . transformed by the renewing” of our mind.—Rom. 12:1,2

The building work we are engaged in at the present time is not based upon the use of materials such as literal wood or stone. Paul says we are “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.” Upon this sure foundation we are being “fitly framed together” under God’s supervision to be “an holy temple in the Lord: . . . builded together for an habitation of God.” (Eph. 2:20-22) Once complete, God will “fill this house with glory,” and “the desire of all nations shall come,” by means of the blessings of the kingdom which will flow to mankind from God’s spiritual temple.—Hag. 2:7

Just as the Israelites were stirred up to work on the house of the Lord, so we receive encouragement and spiritual strength to engage in the building of our Christian character, and to bring forth fruitage. This comes from God, through Christ Jesus, who is “made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption [deliverance].” (I Cor. 1:30) Therefore, we have nothing to glory in, as Paul continues, saying, “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.”—vs. 31

NOURISHMENT FROM GOD

To be properly “planted together” in the likeness of Christ Jesus requires that we receive spiritual nourishment. This comes to us from feeding on God’s Word, digesting it, and appropriating its principles to our daily life. Failure to feed on and assimilate these things will mean failure to grow, and without growth, we will not be able to produce fruitage. Such a condition would ultimately result in being “cast forth as a branch.” (John 15:6) If,

however, we feed upon and emulate the example that the Master has set for us to the best of our limited ability, by God's grace we will gradually grow in character likeness to him, so that we might become "trees of righteousness" in Zion.

When a young tree is planted, it sends out roots which can travel long distances, often growing through obstacles, to reach its goal of obtaining water and other vital nutrients. This has a twofold benefit. The water and nutrients soaked up by the roots bring vitality and health to the tree, so that it will continue to grow and produce the desired fruitage. At the same time, as the roots grow and spread out over long distances, the strength of the tree is greatly increased, giving it greater ability to withstand storms, wind, and other potentially damaging conditions.

It is to be the same with us. We should diligently seek the vital nutrients found in God's Word of truth, not allowing the obstacles of the fallen flesh or the spirit of the world to hinder us from that work. Our Lord said, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." (Matt. 5:6) That is, they will be "filled" with those principles of truth and righteousness necessary in order to "bear much fruit." This reaching out of the roots is reflected in our time spent in personal study and meditation, as well as in our fellowship with the brethren, as we reason together on the Scriptures. What a joy it is to "gather . . . together" with the "saints; . . . those that have made a covenant with [God] by sacrifice."—Ps. 50:5

As we seek the water of life, the roots of our faith become deeper and stronger, enabling us to withstand

the severe trials and testings of the narrow way of sacrifice. Often, this strengthening of our faith comes from meditation on the many precious promises of God's Word, such as these familiar words of the psalmist, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me: . . . thou anointest my head with oil; . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (Ps. 23:4-6) We also have the assurance that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28) These, and many other promises, are designed to strengthen our roots of faith to the point where we can have "full assurance" of "hope" and of "faith," and be able to say with Paul, "I have fought a good fight, . . . I have kept the faith."—Heb. 6:11; 10:22; II Tim. 4:7

In another psalm, we read, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: . . . Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand." (Ps. 37:23,24) These words point out the fact that, despite our greatest desires to grow stronger as the planting of the Lord, and to produce the desired fruitage, we will stumble and fall at times. Yet, God does not cast us down, but "upholdeth" us, just as a husbandman does all he can to support and buttress a tree that is weak due to damage from the elements or some other destructive source. Thus, when we see that we have stumbled and are in spiritual distress, we should continue to send out the roots of our faith to draw the necessary encouragement and correction from God's Word.

We also, however, must go directly to the Lord—our husbandman—in prayer, and “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”—Heb. 4:16

IMPORTANCE OF LIGHT

In order for a tree to grow, it needs sunlight. Throughout the Bible, light is used as another important symbol of truth. The Scriptures tell us that “God is light,” and Jesus reminded his disciples, “I am the light of the world.” (I John 1:5; John 9:5) The Apostle Paul refers to “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God,” and told the brethren in Ephesus, “Christ shall give thee light.” (II Cor. 4:4; Eph. 5:14) We also have the assurance that the light of God’s favor shines especially to those striving to walk in righteousness. “Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart.”—Ps. 97:11

Because a tree needs light, it will tend to grow upward towards it. If there is not an abundance of light where it is planted, a tree will often bend and turn as it grows until its branches reach an area where there is more light, at which time it grows upward toward it. The only sources of the light of truth, as cited in the foregoing Scriptures, are God, his Son Christ Jesus, and the gospel of Christ found in the Scriptures. All of our spiritual growth must be directed to these sources of light, and, like the trees, we must bend every effort and fully turn our focus to the Lord in order to obtain the greatest abundance of light. Jesus exhorted his disciples, “While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light.” (John 12:36) Thus, to

“believe in the light” provided to us, means that we must reach for it and grow toward it each day of our earthly sojourn.

“God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (II Cor. 4:6) What a precious gem is here given by Paul! Although it is our desire to bend and grow toward the light of truth, it is God himself who has directed the light to shine so that we can come “out of darkness” and have its beams “shine in our hearts,” and it is God who has given us a knowledge of his glory as manifested in Jesus Christ.

TRIALS AND TESTINGS

An examination of growth rings in trees is often an indicator of the various conditions which have either promoted or hindered growth. Times of drought, fire, or other harsh conditions, in comparison to periods of abundant rain, sunlight, and nutrients will manifest themselves in the relative width of the rings, as well as the nature of their appearance. With us, in addition to the aforementioned obstacles and stumblings, which often come about from our own weaknesses and fleshly propensities, we also experience trials and testings from other sources—sometimes very severe. Like the trees, our growth may appear to be hindered for a time, but we have the assurance that the Lord will not allow any experience to come into our life which is greater than we can bear.—I Cor. 10:13

We also have the promised assurance given by the Apostle Peter, “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. 1:7) Paul adds that the training we receive through these experiences is not for the present “joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peacable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” (Heb. 12:11) Indeed, the yielding of the “fruit of righteousness” is the goal before us as the planting of the Lord.

BEARING FRUIT

Fruit-bearing, as noted in the passage just quoted, is the ultimate goal of being “planted together” with Christ. Certain conditions are requisite to our fruit-bearing. First, we must “abide in the vine,”—Christ Jesus—and he must abide in us, through the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. (John 15:4,5; 14:16-18) In addition, “my words,” Jesus said, must also abide in us so that we can properly “ask” for the needed assistance to bring forth much fruit. (chap. 15:7) Of no less importance also is the requirement that, as we bear fruit, we are pruned, that we “may bring forth more fruit.” (vs. 2) Thankfully, this pruning is done by the great husbandman, our all-wise Heavenly Father. He knows exactly the times in which our pruning should take place, and the extent to which we need it. He possesses the perfect skill to do so without harming us as a New Creature. It is, in fact, only God’s pruning, which will result in our bringing forth more fruit.

The Heavenly Father will be glorified more in proportion as our fruitage increases. As we mature and increase in fruitage, it will lead to a “sweetening”

of the various elements of Christian character in our hearts and minds, and to the fullest extent possible, in our words and actions. Jesus said, "Every tree is known by his own fruit. . . . A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; . . . for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh." (Luke 6:44,45) Let us, therefore, seek to develop the ripest of fruitage, as Peter exhorts us: "Add to your faith" the qualities of virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. "If these things be in you," he continues, "and abound, . . . ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Brethren, give diligence: . . . for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall."—II Pet. 1:5-10 ■