

Accepted of God, Whether “Present or Absent”

*“We are confident,
I say, and willing
rather to be absent
from the body, and
to be present with
the Lord.*

*Wherefore we
labour, that,
whether present or
absent, we may be
accepted of him.”*

*—II Corinthians
5:8,9*

THE WORDS OF OUR TEXT

and its surrounding verses express the heart testimony of the Apostle Paul and all those striving to be of the body of Christ. Each of us realizes that our ultimate goal and desire is to be “present” with the Lord and “absent” from this fallen body of flesh. Yet, it is needful for us to abide in this “earthly tabernacle” for a period of time in

order that we be tested and proven fully faithful to our vows of consecration, as well as to develop the necessary character to be part of the sympathetic high priest—the Christ, head and body—in his kingdom.

Although we may not at first have fully realized it, our forerunner, Jesus, also faced this same set of

circumstances during his life on earth, particularly as his ministry drew to a close. He told his disciples, "I go to my Father, and ye [shall] see me no more." (John 16:10) It was his great desire to return to the presence of his Heavenly Father, with whom he had been for so long in his prehuman existence. He understood, however, the need for his earthly pilgrimage, and the many trials and testings which accompanied it. Making these circumstances even more challenging, perhaps, was the fact that while on earth he had come to greatly love and sympathize with the poor groaning creation which surrounded him.

Jesus also had a special love for his chosen disciples and others who had believed his message and grown very close to him. He had wept when seeing the sorrow of his friends at the death of Lazarus. (John 11:33,35) When gathered together in the upper room with his disciples for the last time, the Apostle John recalled, concerning Jesus, that "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end."—chap. 13:1

Later that evening, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to the Heavenly Father with regard to what at first seemed to be a mixture of sentiments. Yet, it was with clarity that he approached the matter. He said, concerning his earthly ministry, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me . . . with the glory which I had with thee before the world was." (John 17:4,5) He knew that it would soon be time for him to be "present" with the Father and "absent" from the flesh. Knowing that this meant he would then be physically apart

from the disciples whom he loved so much, and no longer with them in the flesh, he prayed on their behalf: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are."—vs. 11

IN THIS TABERNACLE, WE GROAN

We, likewise, are Jesus' disciples, seeking to follow in his footsteps and develop in ourselves the "mind of Christ." To us, the same conditions as described in our text apply. We must be "accepted" in order to be "present with the Lord" and "absent from the body." In the first four verses of this chapter, Paul contrasts our body of flesh with our future heavenly body to be received in the resurrection. He speaks of the fleshly body as a "tabernacle" in which we live. In this tabernacle, he says, "We groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven." "Not . . . that we would be unclothed," he adds, "but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life."—II Cor. 5:2,4

Paul knew that in his day, and throughout the Gospel Age, for a faithful Christian's earthly tabernacle to be "dissolved" (vs. 1) meant being "unclothed" or "naked" in the grave, until the resurrection. He would be, to use the language of another passage, a "bare grain" sown in death, there to remain until given his new spiritual body in the first resurrection.—I Cor. 15:37

To be clothed ultimately with a heavenly body has been the hope of Christ's footstep followers. Paul says, "He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit." (II Cor. 5:5) This "earnest of

the Spirit” is God’s pledge of the joy and blessing we, if faithful, will have when, in the first resurrection, our hope is changed into reality.

In several instances, Paul uses the reality of our future reward to illustrate the blessings which in a small way we now enjoy by faith. He says, “As Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4) This does not mean that our resurrection has actually taken place, but merely that we should walk as though it had—in “newness of life.” When Jesus was resurrected, all his former environment and experiences were left behind. By faith, we should endeavor to live as completely apart from the world and from all the “old things” of life as possible.—II Cor. 5:17

In Ephesians 1:3, Paul employs this same method of illustrating the new life of the Christian. Here he speaks of our being blessed “with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” These “heavenly places” indicate the high position of glory to which Jesus was exalted in his resurrection. (vs. 20) By faith, and in the spirit of our mind, we are now dwelling with him in these heavenly places.

In the context of our opening verses, Paul is employing this same method of illustrating our present heritage as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. As we have seen, he first speaks of our earthly tabernacle in which we “groan,” contrasting it with our “house which is from heaven.” (II Cor. 5:2) Thus he reminds us of the unsatisfactory conditions which we must now endure, and holds before us that great ecstasy of joy which we will experience when in the resurrection

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(Continued from page 31) we receive our new heavenly bodies.

BEING “PRESENT” WITH THE LORD

The apostle explains that even now, through the “earnest of the Spirit,” we can, by faith, be in the presence of the Lord while actually dwelling in our earthly tabernacles. In verse 9, he says, “We labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted.” Here, he is speaking symbolically, using our present sojourn in the flesh and also our glorious future home in heaven, to show that in either condition we can be “present with the Lord” and “absent from the body.” It is in view of both our present condition and our future hope that we thus “labour, that . . . we may be accepted.”

Just as our great future hope is to be in the actual presence of the Lord and to experience the fullness of joy which this will mean, so now, while still on this side of the veil, we find our greatest joy in being present with him in the Spirit, by faith. Through our study of his Word, meditation upon the Truth, fellowship with his people, activity in his service, and through prayer, we can even now be present with our Heavenly Father.

There is a certain amount of time, however, in the life of the follower of Christ, which must be devoted to temporal responsibilities. It is necessary to make a living, and to give a proper amount of time and consideration to those who are near and dear to us according to the flesh. The Scriptures enjoin this upon us, and we accept these privileges with thanksgiving, and endeavor to carry them out to the glory of God.

While we are engaged in these necessary earthly tasks, it is not always possible to be present with the Lord in the sense of directly meditating upon his Word, fellowshiping with his people, or working in his vineyard. However, here again, we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of the Lord. It should be our earnest desire to be pleasing to him in everything we do, whether it is carrying out temporal responsibilities, or enjoying more directly the spiritual blessings implied in the thought of being present with him.

THE JOY OF HIS PRESENCE

Great are the joys of faith which we now experience while in this symbolic manner we are “absent from the body” and “present with the Lord.” It is a true delight for the New Creature that we earnestly endeavor to manage every possible moment of the day that is not rightfully devoted to other things in order that we may have more time to spend with our Heavenly Father.

Immediately after using this meaningful illustration of our present privileges as New Creatures, Paul adds, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body.” (vs. 10) This is a reference to our present trial period while in the flesh. It is what we do, and our faithfulness, while still in the fleshly “body” that will determine our fitness for our home in heaven. This is a practical test to which the Lord is putting us. If we are genuinely longing to be actually with him in heavenly glory, where we will experience fullness of joy throughout eternity, it will be natural to seek

every possible opportunity we can to be near him now.

By using this as a guide, we can in large measure determine for ourselves how sincerely we are longing to be in the actual presence of God. If we are content now to be “at home in the body” (vs. 6), and do not experience a sense of great loss when we are not by faith “present with the Lord,” it might well indicate that we are not earnestly setting our affections on things above.

HEAVENLY PROSPECTS

If we prove faithful, and in the first resurrection are exalted to heavenly glory, it will mean being ushered into the actual presence of our Heavenly Father and his son Christ Jesus, our Head. There we will see Paul, John, Peter, James, Jude—in fact, all the apostles, face to face. We will also be united with all our faithful brethren who have lived throughout the age in a reunion indescribable by words.

There, too, we will meet the holy angels, and become acquainted with those who were our “ministering spirits” while we walked in the narrow way. (Heb. 1:14) What a joy that will be, and how wonderful it will be to learn of the many times they miraculously protected us from harm as New Creatures, keeping us from falling.

From beyond the veil we will also have contact with the Ancient Worthies, who will then be “princes in all the earth.” (Ps. 45:16) They will be human beings, while the church will be on the divine plane. Nevertheless, the faithful overcomers who make up the bride of Christ in glory will have

full knowledge of the Ancient Worthies, and will be directing their ministry.

Paul says that we will join “the general assembly and church of the firstborn.” (Heb. 12:23) Indeed, in this same context, he mentions all those with whom it will be our privilege to be associated, saying that we are “come unto” or, in a better translation, “approaching unto” them. We are approaching unto “mount Sion,” he says, “and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect [the Ancient Worthies], And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant.”—Heb. 12:22-24

Let us remember the “down payment” which is ours to enjoy even now. We earnestly look forward to cooperation with Abraham, Moses, David, and with all the prophets, in the work of the kingdom. We anticipate the joy of meeting Jesus, the apostles, and other faithful ones portrayed in the New Testament. Even now we can meet them in God’s Holy Word, for it is through the Scriptures that the Spirit gives us the earnest of our future inheritance. The Bible is a place where we can gather, as it were, with not only the Lord, but his faithful servants of both the Old and New Testaments. Every hour we spend in its pages, in addition to learning the Truth, we can be enjoying the inspirational company of those faithful patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, as well as Jesus himself and our guardian angels.

We can stand beside Noah, for example, as he preached righteousness and prepared for the

coming flood. We can enter into the feelings of Abraham and be inspired by his faith. We can go with him on that three days' journey to the land of Moriah, ascend the mountain with him, and watch while he prepares an altar on which to sacrifice his beloved Isaac. We can hear the angel speaking to him not to slay Isaac. Through the Word, we can also enjoy a wonderful association with Moses—at the burning bush, before Pharaoh, leading the Israelites across the Red Sea, and receiving the Law from God. To quote Paul, "What shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets."—Heb. 11:32

In the Bible, we meet these faithful servants of God, these holy ones of old, "who through faith 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," and "turned to flight the armies of the aliens." (vss. 33,34) While through the Word we commune with various ones in this "cloud of witnesses," we can rejoice the more in the thought of their "better resurrection" and future high position in the plan of God as his earthly representatives in Christ's kingdom.—vs. 35; chap. 12:1

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the same manner, we can enjoy the fellowship of Jesus, the apostles, and all those of the Early Church whose names are mentioned in the New Testament. We can spend time with the Master, or

with any of his faithful apostles, or with all of them together. We can stand beside Jesus as he heals the sick and raises the dead. We can hear the gracious words which fell from his lips, the lips of him who spoke as never a man had spoken before, or has spoken since.

We can be with the Master as Mary anointed him with the precious ointment, and can smell the sweet odors that filled the room, betokening the outpouring of her heart devotion to him whom she loved. We can seat ourselves at the table in the “upper room” on that last night before he was crucified. (Luke 22:12) We can then hear him impart those wonderful words of life recorded in John, chapters 13 to 17. We can walk with him to Gethsemane, to the judgment hall, to Pilate, and to Golgotha. We can hear him in his dying moments summon sufficient strength to give a witness of the kingdom to the thief who was dying beside him.

We can read the opening chapters of the Book of Acts, and in our minds take our place with the disciples upon whom the power of God fell on the day of Pentecost, and in some measure experience with them the joys of a reaffirmed faith, and the certain knowledge of what the Lord now wanted them to do. Time fails to mention all the wonderful experiences of the Lord’s people which are recorded in the Book of Acts. Yet, they are all there for us to enter into, and from which to receive inspiration to continue our journey toward the heavenly Canaan. What a wonderful down payment of the future joys of fellowship with Jesus and the Early Church we can now enjoy if we will.

Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude wrote letters to churches and to individuals of their day, and some general epistles. Those letters were written to us also, and bring us much closer to the apostles who wrote them, and to our Lord, as we think of it in this personal way. The next time we feel that we would very much like to receive an encouraging letter from one of our fellow brethren in the narrow way, let us go to the epistles, and read the letters which are there recorded for our admonition and joy.

We also joyfully anticipate meeting those guardian angels who so faithfully serve us from day to day. We enjoy an earnest of this future experience because the Spirit of God has put in the Word many revealing accounts of the services of these angels. If we go with the women to the tomb of Jesus, we will there see the angel that announced to them that "he is risen."—Matt. 28:6

We recall that angels served to release the apostles from prison. We can visit those prisons, place ourselves in the position of those who were incarcerated, and get some idea of what the ministry of the angels must have meant to them. We can turn backward and forward almost anywhere in the Bible, and come in contact with angels and their faithful ministry. Indeed, in this earthly "tabernacle" we can approach unto this "innumerable company of angels."

We can even enjoy sweet fellowship with our Heavenly Father by meeting him in his Word, for we are present with him when we are present with his son Jesus, his holy angels, the apostles, and the faithful brethren of the Early Church. We should not overlook, either, the many direct and personal

messages God has constantly waiting for us in his Word. How reassuringly he talks to us when we meet him there. He tells us: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,” and “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.”—Heb. 13:5; Exod. 33:14

WITH THE LORD’S PEOPLE

We can also be present with the Lord while still dwelling in our earthly tabernacle through fellowship with others of like precious faith. When we go to any of the meetings, when we attend a study or a testimony meeting, it is more than gathering with our brethren in Christ. We are meeting also with the Lord. Jesus said that where even two or three were gathered in his name he would be present, and in spirit the Heavenly Father is also present.

Through weariness or other difficulties we might be tempted to give up meetings which we could attend with a little greater effort. We might feel that we can afford to miss the fellowship of the brethren, or that they do not particularly need us. However, we would likely not feel this way if we remembered that by failing to attend a meeting we lose an opportunity to be in this special way present with the Lord.

There are many of the Lord’s people who are not situated so they can enjoy the fellowship of their brethren. This may be due to isolation through distance, sickness, or other circumstances over which they have no control. Each saint of God yearns for the fellowship of his brethren, and through them with the Lord, but if circumstances are such that this is frequently or always impossible, he can still

be present with the Heavenly Father through personal communion with him, and through the study of his Word. Every isolated brother or sister in the Truth can testify how wonderfully God has made up the great loss of not being able to meet with his people, when his Word and Spirit have been sought.

THROUGH SERVICE

When we are directly active in the service of the Lord, we are also enjoying the blessedness of being present with him. This is because we are coworkers with him, partners in his glorious plan for the reconciling of the world. It is a mistake to think that we are taking time away from fellowship with the Lord when we are serving in his vineyard.

Paul wrote, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." Now, he explained further, he has given this "ministry of reconciliation" to us, and thus we are made "ambassadors for Christ." (II Cor. 5:18-20) Surely Christ was very close to his Heavenly Father when Paul could say that God was "in" him. He is in us in the same manner and for the same purpose.

As co-laborers with the Lord it is essential, through his Word, to acquaint ourselves with his plans and purposes. This brings us into close contact and fellowship with the divine Architect. As we view the grandeur and harmony of his plan, our spiritual vision sees him "high and lifted up," and we rejoice in his glory as we endeavor to tell the whole world the blessed tidings of his kingdom.—Isa. 6:1

It is indeed wonderful that, in this way also, we can be present with the Lord, and have the assurance

that he is present with us. This should make every witness we give a sacred, blessed experience. It should add dignity and importance to every piece of truth literature we distribute. Let us try to realize that whatever we do in the Lord's service, or wherever he asks us to go, we are not alone, for we serve in his presence, and by his grace and strength.

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

Equally precious is the time we spend in the Lord's presence through meditation and prayer. We all have our regular time for prayer, such as morning and evening. In addition to these, however, it is our privilege to lift our hearts in prayer to God at any time, and under any circumstances. It may be in the factory, on the sidewalk, in the kitchen, or in the office—it matters not where—when, through meditation on God's goodness, peace and joy well up within us. Then and there we can look up to him, and say, Thank you, Lord, for taking me into your confidence and giving me a glimpse of your glory.

Problems may arise and the difficulties of the day might be bearing heavily upon us. The way ahead may not be clear, or some earthborn cloud may have momentarily hidden the Lord's face. Whatever need we may have, we can go to him for help right at the time. His ear is ever open to the cries of our hearts, and his eyes “run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.”—II Chron. 16:9

During the times when it is essential to be “at home” in the body, we can, in our hearts, rejoice in the Lord. There are usually moments with all of

us, even during the rush of our everyday work, when thoughts of the Heavenly Father, his Word, his people, and his work, can be enjoyed. Perhaps in a moment of great need a thought expressed in a testimony, or a reassuring text of scripture, will come to mind to help us remember that the Lord is near, that his “angel . . . encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.”—Ps. 34:7

Truly the present heritage of the saints is rich and blessed! May an ever deepening realization of our present privilege of being “present with the Lord” give us increasing strength and courage to press forward toward the “fulness of joy” unto which we are now approaching. There we will experience the joy of his actual presence—“pleasures for evermore”—as we dwell in our “house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”—Ps. 16:11;

II Cor. 5:1

