

Our Partnership in the Gospel

*“I thank my God
upon every
remembrance of
you, Always in
every prayer of
mine for you all
making request
with joy, For your
fellowship in the
gospel from the
first day until now;
Being confident of
this very thing,
that he which hath
begun a good work
in you will perform
it until the day of
Jesus Christ.”
—Philippians 1:3-6*

IN OUR TEXT THE WORD

fellowship is derived from a Greek word which includes the thought of partnership. The Apostle John used the same Greek word when he wrote, “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship [partnership] with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” —I John 1:3

This partnership with the Father and with his Son is very real, as evidenced by Jesus’ prayer which John recorded: “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. . . . 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. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one.”—John 17:17,18,21,22

To the brethren at Corinth Paul wrote: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, . . . and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.” (II Cor. 5:19,20) The “word of reconciliation” which has been given to the consecrated followers of the Master is the Gospel message, the good tidings of God’s plan for the reconciling of the world. We have a partnership in this plan, or, as Paul states it in our text, a “fellowship in the gospel.”

COMPANIONSHIP

There are various aspects to our partnership in the Gospel, and all of them important. One of these is a blessed companionship with the Father and with his Son, and with those of like precious faith. Cherished indeed is the privilege of communing with our Heavenly Father through our beloved Redeemer and Elder Brother, Christ Jesus. How meaningless our Christian walk would be without the consciousness that we are constantly overshadowed by divine love.

Second only in importance to the companionship we enjoy with the Father and his Son is the friendship of our brethren. Paul appreciated this very much, and how beautifully he expressed it to the brethren at Philippi in the words of our opening

text, “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, . . . For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.” Here is the outpouring of thanks to God for what the companionship and partnership of the Philippian brethren had meant to the great Apostle Paul. His every remembrance of them brought him comfort and encouragement.

“THE FIRST DAY”

Paul speaks of the first day of his fellowship with the brethren at Philippi. This is a reference to the time when this ecclesia was established, and it was indeed a day long to be remembered. It occurred during Paul’s second missionary journey, when Silas was his traveling companion and helper. Timothy joined them at Derbe and Lystra, and apparently, Luke also at Troas. Beginning at Troas, Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, included himself in the party through his use of the words “us” and “we.”—Acts 16:1-3,10,11

It was at Troas that Paul, in a vision, heard the call, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us.” (vs. 9) It was in response to this call that they went to Philippi, the chief city of that part of Macedonia. They remained in Philippi a few days, and then, as Luke records, “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.”—vs. 13

Evidently it was a very informal gathering, and the women assembled at this place of prayer were glad to hear what Paul had to say. Among them was “a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God.”

Luke says that the Lord opened her heart, and that “she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” (vs. 14) Lydia’s interest in the Gospel was more than a casual one, for she “attended”—that is, gave attention—to the things Paul spoke.

Lydia’s interest deepened, and she was baptized, along with those of her household. Her interest was further demonstrated by her invitation to Paul and his companions to be guests at her home. How beautifully she extended this invitation: “If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there.” To this Luke adds, “And she constrained us.”—vs. 15

TROUBLE ARISES

As was true in nearly every place Paul visited, trouble arose in Philippi. Here it came in connection with “a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination.” (Acts 16:16) For several days she kept announcing the presence of Paul and his companions, saying, “These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.” Paul knew that this was not a genuine recognition on her part, but a trick prompted by Satan through an evil spirit, for the purpose of bringing gain to her masters. Paul was grieved by this, and commanded the evil spirit to come out of her.—Acts 16:17,18

The spirit obeyed, which meant that the damsel was no longer of profit to her masters. They complained to the authorities, and Paul and Silas were imprisoned. At midnight, these two servants of God were singing and praying when suddenly an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, throwing

open the doors. The keeper of the prison was awakened, and seeing the doors open, supposed that all the prisoners had escaped. Paul reassured him that this was not the case. The prison keeper was so impressed that it led to his acceptance of the Gospel.—vss. 19-34

With the coming of morning the magistrates sent word that Paul and Silas should be released. Paul, claiming the rights which were his as a Roman citizen, demanded that those who had unjustly imprisoned him now appear and personally lead them out of prison, which they did. The authorities, now fearful due to their violation of Roman law, suggested that in the best interests of all concerned it would be well for Paul to leave the city. He agreed to this, but before departing, went to the home of Lydia for a farewell meeting with the brethren who had gathered there.—vss. 35-40

In a general way, it was doubtless this entire visit to Philippi which Paul refers to in our text as that “first day,” and what a blessed season it was. While it was only a brief visit, the first ecclesia in Europe had been established, and Paul had secured Lydia and the others, including the jailer, as friends and brethren in Christ for the rest of his life. No wonder he thanked God upon every remembrance of them!

CONFIDENT IN THE LORD

In our text, Paul expresses his confidence that the Lord, who had begun the good work in the hearts and lives of these faithful brethren at Philippi, would complete that work. When writing this epistle, Paul was not sure whether he would

have the opportunity of seeing the brethren at Philippi again. Thus, the tone of his words seemed to be that of a farewell message. In this light, how meaningful is his assurance that God would be abundantly able to complete in them the “good work” which had been started.

In this understandable manner, Paul set forth one of the very fundamental aspects of true Christian fellowship. We have the blessed privilege of being used of the Lord in various ways to assist one another in the narrow way. Our relationship with God, however, should be so vital, and our faith in him so strong, that we will be able to stand faithful without the direct and personal help of our brethren in Christ, if in God’s providence such circumstances might be ours.

It is true, indeed, that the Lord uses his people to assist and strengthen one another. While we are told, “work out your own salvation,” with confidence that God is working in us to “will and to do of his good pleasure,” we are to also recognize the many helps he provides to accomplish this work. (Phil. 2:12,13) He has provided apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers for this purpose. (Eph. 4:11) Indeed, God uses all his consecrated children, as opportunity affords, to comfort and strengthen their fellow brethren. We cannot deliberately isolate ourselves from the Lord’s people, expecting to grow strong spiritually, and to make our calling and election sure.

We are to accept these helps from our brethren as from God, but must lean upon him, as Peter states: “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” (I Pet. 5:7) Paul desired that the

brethren at Philippi realize that the Lord would help them even if he should be put to death in a Roman prison. We, too, should keep in mind that God is able to work in us by any means, and through whomsoever he may choose. This is one of the rich blessings which accrues to those in partnership with the Heavenly Father.

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

Our fellowship in the Gospel is motivated by love. Paul continues, "This I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God."—Phil. 1:9-11

Paul knew that the hearts of the Philippian brethren were filled with love for the Lord and his people. He knew that they held a special place in their hearts for him. Paul did not want them to make the mistake, however, of supposing that Christian love is without principle. Those who are truly motivated by Christian love also have discernment. They are able to "approve things that are excellent," and to stand against that which they know to be contrary to the divine will.

Paul wanted the Philippian brethren to abound in the kind of love he described to the church at Corinth. This is a love that "suffereth long, and is kind." It is a love that "envieth not." It "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

In his letter to the brethren at Philippi, Paul describes how the outworking of love should manifest itself in their fellowship with one another. “If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”—Phil. 2:1-4

Those who abound in true Christian love, and are able to “approve things which are excellent,” will be “of one accord, of one mind.” Their discernment will enable them to determine the truly essential things, and will not insist that the brethren all agree with them on matters of minor importance. With such mutual recognition, there can be true “fellowship in the gospel.”

However, where there is strife, true fellowship is defeated. If in our association with the Lord’s people we are always seeking ways of forwarding our own interests, we lose the spirit of true partnership, for love “seeketh not her own.” If we would rather see others favored than ourselves, then we have the true spirit of Christian love, and when all in an ecclesia hold this viewpoint, the “fellowship of kindred minds” is indeed “like to that above.”—*Hymns of Dawn*, #23

WITNESSING

Another essential aspect of fellowship is to be active in bearing witness to the Gospel message, and Paul reminds the brethren at Philippi of this. He explains that because of his imprisonment "many of the brethren in the Lord . . . are much more bold to speak the word without fear." To this he added, "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will." Paul did not approve preaching the Gospel through envy and strife, but he did rejoice that the Gospel was preached, and wrote, "Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice."—Phil. 1:13-18

In the next chapter Paul writes, "Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain."—chap. 2:14-16

Paul rejoiced greatly that the Gospel was being preached. He was doing all he could to proclaim the message, even while in prison with his feet in the stocks. He told the brethren at Philippi that if they continued faithful in holding forth the Word, he would rejoice "in the day of Christ," for it would be evidence that his ministry had not been in vain. He would be assured that there were other brethren who had caught the real meaning of their fellowship in the Gospel. Hence these would continue faithfully to make known the glad tidings for the blessing of others.

“STRIVING TOGETHER”

Fellowship in the Gospel also involves the need for the Lord's people to work together, even “striving together for the faith of the gospel.” (Phil. 1:27) We are also to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” (Jude 3) It is a mistaken notion that to abound in love implies a lack of desire to stand for the great fundamental principles of the Truth. Love will not be contentious, but it will contend. Indeed, love will give life itself for the defense of the foundation principles of Truth. Those who are unwilling to strive together for “the faith” of the Gospel's message are lacking in the true spirit of our blessed fellowship.

How zealous Paul was in striving for the Gospel. Referring to some who were attempting to bring the brethren under the bondage of the Mosaic Law, he wrote, “We did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.” (Gal. 2:5, *New American Standard Bible*) When the Thessalonian brethren became somewhat confused concerning the second coming of Christ, he wrote a second epistle specifically to clarify the subject for them. He did not take the attitude that it made no difference what they believed.

In Paul's final epistle, he wrote: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.”—II Tim. 2:15-18

SUFFERING WITH CHRIST

Fellowship in the Gospel includes the privilege of suffering for and with Christ. Paul wrote, "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." (Phil. 1:29) Paul wrote from experience. He was informed at the beginning of his discipleship that he would be called upon to endure much suffering for the name of Christ, and how true it had been.—Acts 9:15,16

In presenting evidence to the brethren at Corinth that his ministry was approved by the Lord, Paul wrote concerning some of his suffering: "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness."—II Cor. 11:24-27

Although conditions in much of the world now are different than they were in Paul's day, some of the ways in which he suffered as part of his fellowship in the Gospel are still possible. For example, he mentions "journeyings" and "weariness and painfulness." Are we willing to journey for the Lord, even though it may be at great cost to ourselves? Are we willing to devote sufficient time and energy in the service of the Gospel that it results in "weariness," and which might, perchance, even be accompanied by some "painfulness?"

If outright persecution in the Lord's service does not come upon us, we may wonder just how we can suffer with Christ, and for his name's sake. However, we can each give up some of the comforts of life, and give ourselves so wholeheartedly to the carrying out of the terms of our consecration that we will experience some weariness and painfulness. Indeed, it is only such voluntary sacrifice and suffering that is acceptable to the Lord.

FAITHFULNESS—TODAY

It is our privilege to have fellowship in Christ's sufferings, not by waiting for some sinister form of government to come into power and inflict persecution, but by voluntarily carrying out daily the terms of our consecration in laying down our lives as witnesses for Jesus and for the Word of God. Conditions around us might change so that the Lord's people would be persecuted, but we can be assured that God would give us strength for whatever may come. (Ps. 28:7; Isa. 40:31) He will also give us strength today to continue faithfully laying down our lives in his service day by day.

Only those who are faithful in the use of all their opportunities today will be prepared for the experiences of tomorrow. To use our opportunities of fellowship in the Gospel, with all its blessed implications, involves the necessity of maintaining the viewpoint expressed by Paul when he wrote: "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."—Phil. 3:13,14 ■