

“Present with the Lord”

*“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

IN VERSES ONE TO FOUR

of the fifth chapter of II Corinthians, Paul contrasts the Christian's body of flesh with the future heavenly body received in the resurrection. He speaks of the fleshly body as a “tabernacle,” or temporary dwelling, in which a Christian lives. In this tabernacle, he says, “we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven.” “Not for that we would be unclothed,” he adds, “but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.”

Paul knew that in his day, and throughout the ensuing centuries, for a Christian's earthly tabernacle to be “dissolved,” as stated in verse one of our lesson, meant being “unclothed” in the sleep of death until the resurrection. He would be, to use the apostle's language in another place, a “bare grain”

sown in death, there to remain until given his new spiritual body in the resurrection.—I Cor. 15:37

To be clothed ultimately with a heavenly body has been the Christian's hope of future life. Paul says, "He that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit." (II Cor. 5:5) This "earnest," or pledge of the Spirit, is a token of the joy and blessing faithful followers of the Master will have when, in the resurrection, their hope is made a reality.

In several instances, Paul uses the promised future reward for such faithful Christians to illustrate the blessings which, in a small way, we enjoy even now by faith. He says that "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." By faith, we should endeavor to live as fully as possible apart from the world and from all the "old things" of fleshly life.—II Cor. 5:16,17

In Ephesians 1:3, Paul employs this same method of illustrating the new life of footstep followers of Jesus. Here he speaks of our being blessed "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." These "heavenly places" will ultimately be the high position of glory which, if faithful, we will share with Jesus in the resurrection. However, Paul indicates that by faith we are even now dwelling in these heavenly places as the result of our relationship with Christ.

Similarly, in the language of our opening verses, Paul is employing the same method of illustrating

our present standing with God through 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.” Thus, the apostle reminds us of the unsatisfactory conditions which we must now endure and holds before us that great prospect of joy which we will experience when, in the resurrection, we receive our new heavenly bodies.

Then, in the words of our theme text, the Apostle Paul explains that we now have a down payment, as it were, on this future reward. By faith we can be “present with the Lord” while actually dwelling in our earthly tabernacles. He continues, saying, “We labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted” of the Lord. (II Cor. 5:9) Here he is speaking symbolically, using our present sojourn in the flesh as well as our glorious future home in heaven as illustrations of that which we experience as followers of Christ while still in this fleshly tabernacle.

How apt this illustration is! Indeed, the one great hope of every faithful Christian is to be in the actual presence of the Lord and to experience the fullness of joy which this will mean. Now, too, while still in the flesh, we find our greatest joy in being “present” with the Lord. We experience this by faith. Through our study of God’s Word, meditation upon the truths contained therein, fellowship with his people, activity in his service, and prayer, we can even now be present with the Lord.

On the other hand, there is a certain amount of time in the life of every follower of Jesus which must be devoted to material things. It is necessary to earn 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 use them to the glory of God.—Rom. 12:17; I Tim. 5:8

While we are engaged in these needful earthly responsibilities, it is not always possible to be present with the Lord in the sense of meditating upon his Word, fellowshiping with his people, or working directly in his service. However, as Paul says, we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of the Lord. It should be the earnest desire of every Christian to be pleasing to the Lord in everything he does, whether it is working at a job, giving time to his family, 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. This should be such a true delight that we will earnestly endeavor to manage every hour of the day that is not rightfully devoted to other things in order that we may have more time to spend with our loving Heavenly Father.

Immediately after using this meaningful illustration of our present privileges, Paul adds, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body.” (II Cor. 5:10) This is a reference to our present trial period while in the flesh. It is what we do while still in this body of flesh, together with our heart’s

intentions regarding the same, that will determine our fitness for our home in heaven.

It is a most reasonable test to which the Lord is putting us. If we are genuinely longing to be 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 how genuinely we are longing to be in the actual presence of the Lord. If we are content now to be “at home” in the body, 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.—vs. 6; Col. 3:1,2

HEAVENLY PROSPECTS

If we prove faithful and are exalted to heavenly glory, it will mean not only being ushered into the actual presence of our Heavenly Father, but meeting also, face to face, all the faithful saints of the entire age since Pentecost. There we will see Paul, John, Peter, James and all the other apostles. We will also meet those other faithful brethren mentioned in the Bible in connection with the experiences of the Early Church.

There, too, we will meet the holy angels, and become acquainted with those who were our “ministering spirits” while we walked during our earthly sojourn. (Heb. 1:14) What a joy that will be, and how wonderful it will be to learn of the many times they providentially overruled and protected us, keeping us from falling.

From our heavenly home we will also have contact with the "Ancient Worthies." They will be the earthly representatives of God's coming kingdom, which will bring blessings of health, peace and life to all the willing and obedient of the remainder of mankind. The faithful overcomers who make up the church in glory will have full knowledge of the Ancient Worthies and will be directing their ministry.

Speaking of this coming kingdom arrangement, God's prophets state, "Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." (Isa. 2:3; Mic. 4:2) "Zion" is a reference to the heavenly phase of that kingdom, under Christ and his church, who will give forth God's righteous laws at that time. "Jerusalem" refers to the earthly part of the kingdom, under the supervision of the Ancient Worthies, who will disseminate the "word of the LORD" to the people.

In harmony with the foregoing statements, Paul says that we are approaching Mount Zion, "The city of the living God, ... 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, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant." (Heb. 12:22-24) These "just men made perfect" are the Ancient Worthies, those faithful servants of God who lived and died prior to Jesus' offering himself as a ransom sacrifice.—Heb. 11:39,40

Let us remember the down payment which is ours to enjoy even now. Do we earnestly look forward to cooperation with Abraham, Moses, David, and with all the prophets, in the work of the kingdom? Do

we anticipate the joy of meeting Jesus, the apostles, and other faithful ones portrayed in the New Testament? Surely we do! Even now we can meet them in the Bible, for it is through the Scriptures that God's Holy Spirit provides us the pledge of our future inheritance.

The Word of God is a place where we can meet and come to know, not only our Heavenly Father, but his faithful servants of both the Old and New Testaments. Every hour we spend in its pages, in addition to learning of God's glorious plan, we can enjoy 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 life 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 Isaac, the seed promised to him. We can then hear the angel telling Abraham not to slay his beloved son. 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, worthy 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 faith,” and “turned to flight the armies of the aliens.” (Heb. 11:33,34) We can rejoice, too, in their future position in the plan of God as “princes in all the earth.”—Ps. 45:16

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the same manner we can enjoy the fellowship of Jesus, the apostles, and all of the Early Church whose names are mentioned in the New Testament. We can spend moments with the Master, or with any of his faithful apostles, in their many experiences. 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, who spoke as never a man had spoken before. (Matt. 11:5; Luke 4:22; John 7:46) We can be with Mary as she anointed the Master with the precious ointment, demonstrating the outpouring of her heart devotion upon him whom she loved. (John 12:3) We can seat ourselves with Jesus and his disciples at the table in the “upper room” on that last night before he was crucified. (Luke 22:12) We can hear him impart those wonderful words of life recorded in John, chapters 13 to 17. Then we can go with him to Gethsemane, to the judgment hall, to Pilate, and then to Golgotha. We can hear our precious Lord in his dying moments summon sufficient strength to say, “It is finished,” and pray to his Father, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit.”—John 19:30; Luke 23:46

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 a knowledge of what the Lord now wanted them to do. Throughout the pages of the Book of Acts, we have recorded many of the wonderful and noteworthy experiences of the Lord's people during the period of the Early Church. These 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 foregleam 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. They wrote those letters to us also. How much closer it brings us to them, and to our Lord, to think of it in this personal way. The next time we feel that we would very much like to receive an encouraging letter from a fellow Christian in the narrow way, let us go to the Scriptures and read the letters which are there recorded for our admonition, joy and encouragement.

Do we joyfully anticipate meeting those angels who have so faithfully served us from day to day? We can also enjoy a glimpse of this future experience by looking into the many revealing accounts of the services of these heavenly messengers recorded in the Word of God. If we go with the women to the tomb of Jesus, we will there see the angel that announced to them, "He is risen." (Matt. 28:6) Angels also served to release Apostle Peter from prison and save Paul from drowning. (Acts 12:6-11; 27:23,24) Through the lens of the Bible, we can gaze into the tomb, visit that prison, place ourselves in

the position of those who were endangered, and get some idea of what the ministry of the angels must have meant to them. We can turn almost anywhere in the Scriptures and come in contact with angels and their faithful ministry. While in this tabernacle we are approaching unto this “innumerable company of angels.”

Above all, we can enjoy sweet fellowship with our Heavenly Father by meeting him in his Word, for we are present with him when we are with his people of the past and present, and with his holy angels. We should not overlook, either, the many direct and personal messages God has provided for us in his Word. How reassuringly he talks to us when we meet him there: “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”—Exod. 33:14; Heb. 13:5

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 meet together, it is more than gathering with our brethren, for we are meeting also with Jesus. He said that where even “two or three” are gathered in his name he would be present. In spirit, the Heavenly Father is also present in our fellowship.—Matt. 18:20; I John 1:3

Through weariness or other difficulties, we might be tempted to give up meeting with our brethren. We might feel that we can afford to miss their fellowship, or that they do not particularly need us. However, would we feel this way if we remembered that by “forsaking the assembling of ourselves

together,” we lose an opportunity to be present with the Lord? (Heb. 10:25) 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 or other circumstances over which they have no control. Each child 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. Those in such circumstances can testify how wonderfully the Lord 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 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. Paul wrote that God, through Christ, is “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, as God used Christ to bring about the promised reconciliation of the world through his ransom sacrifice, we too have the privilege of engaging in that “ministry” by giving words of hope and comfort to the present groaning creation.

As co-laborers with God, it is essential, through his Word, to acquaint ourselves with his plans and purposes. As we view the grandeur and harmony of

his arrangements, our enthralled vision sees him “high and lifted up,” and we rejoice in his glory as we endeavor to tell others the blessed tidings of his kingdom. (Isa. 6:1) How wonderful it is 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 word of comfort we give a sacred, blessed experience. It should add dignity and importance to every booklet and tract we distribute. Let us 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.

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

Equally precious is the time we spend in God’s presence through meditation and prayer. In addition to our regular times for prayer, such as morning and evening, it is our privilege to lift our hearts in prayer to God no matter the time, place or circumstance. Through meditation on the Lord’s goodness, peace and joy well up within us. We can look up to him and thank him for taking us under his wing and giving us a glimpse of his glory.—Ps. 91:1-4; Exod. 33:18-22

Problems may arise and the difficulties of the day might often bear heavily upon us. The way ahead may not be clear, or some earthborn cloud may have hidden the Lord’s face. Whatever need we may have, we can go to him immediately for help. His ear is always open to the cries of our hearts. “The eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.”—II Chron. 16:9, *New American Standard Bible*

For all of us, there are times when it is necessary to be “at home in the body.” (II Cor. 5:6) However, in this, too, we can rejoice in the Lord. Even during the rush of everyday work, there are moments when thoughts of the Lord, his Word of truth, his people and his work can be enjoyed. Perhaps in such moments, a thought from one of our brethren, or a reassuring text of Scripture, will come to mind to help us remember that the Lord is near, and his presence continues with us.

Truly, the present heritage of the saints is rich and blessed! Let us have an ever-deepening realization of our privilege of being “present” with the Lord. By so doing, we will be given increased strength and courage to press forward toward the “fulness of joy” unto which we are now approaching. Such will be the joy of being in God’s actual presence, for at his “right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”
—Ps. 16:11 ■

*“Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous;
it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the LORD with the harp;
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy.”
—Psalm 33:1-3, New International Version*