The Witness of the Spirit

"The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together."
—Romans 8:16,17

THE 'WITNESS' OF THE Spirit is vitally important to every disciple of Christ, for the Spirit witnesses that we are 'the children of God.' Nothing could be more important than to be assured of sonship, that God has accepted and begotten us through his Word to be one of his reigning house of sons, one of his heirs, and a joint-heir, with Christ. Strange to say, though, many who love the LORD and sincerely desire to serve and please him are often in doubt as to whether or not they have the Divine approval. These doubts are expressed in the lines: "Tis a point I long to know, oft it causes anxious thought; Do I love the Lord, or no, am I his, or am I not?"

There is no occasion for these doubts ever arising in the mind of one who is wholly devoted to the

LORD. Paul says the 'Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.' The doubts that do arise are due to a misunderstanding of the manner in which the Holy Spirit witnesses to the LORD's people concerning their sonship. The Spirit's witness is not a matter of feelings. Every consecrated child of God will have days of joy and also days of sorrow. One's physical condition, as well as the circumstances of life, has much to do with feelings, so they are most unreliable as a test of our relationship with the Heavenly Father.

The witness of the Holy Spirit reaches us through the Word of Truth, that Spirit-inspired Word which outlines all the terms and conditions of the narrow way of sacrifice, and reveals the sort of experiences the faithful followers of Jesus should expect. If we find that we are having the experiences which the Holy Spirit, through the written Word, has testified will come to all the children of God during the present Gospel Age, then we can be assured of our standing before the LORD and know that we are his children.

It is essential that we examine ourselves to make sure that we have taken the proper steps in order to have the LORD accept and bless us. Have we repented of our sin, and through faith in Christ presented ourselves in full consecration to do God's will? If we have, then a very important witness of the Spirit is already ours.

Jesus said that no one could come to him, unless drawn by the Father. (John 6:44) If we have been drawn to Christ we can, therefore, be assured that it was through the drawing power of the Heavenly

Father. This means that the Heavenly Father desired that we become his children. Jesus, speaking further under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said that he would not cast out those who came to him. (John 6:37) Thus the Spirit witnesses that the Heavenly Father wanted us, and that Jesus accepted us; that is, if we have truly surrendered ourselves to do the Divine will.

"IF SO BE"

In our text, Paul states that the Holy Spirit witnesses that we are the children of God 'if so be that we suffer with him [Christ], that we may be also glorified together.' This implies clearly that if we are not suffering with Christ, then the Holy Spirit is not witnessing to us that we are the children of God. Why is Paul so emphatic on this point? It would seem that he based this statement on a great truth set forth by the Apostle Peter. Whether he learned it from Peter, or by direct revelation from God, as to the meaning of the Old Testament scriptures is not important. Peter expressed it this way: he said that the Spirit of God in the prophets of the Old Testament testified concerning "the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow."—I Pet. 1:11

The Holy Spirit testified in advance concerning the 'sufferings of Christ.' In the following verse, he further explains that the prophets did not minister to themselves, but to "us" of the Gospel Age. The testimony of the Spirit concerning the sufferings of Christ was intended to outline the way in which we should walk, and the experiences we should expect to have as the disciples of Christ. If we are walking

in that way, and having the experiences foretold through the prophets by the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit is witnessing to us that we are in God's favor and are therefore his children.

The force of this presentation by Paul and Peter is largely lost unless we recognize that the true disciples of Jesus are a part of the Christ; that if we have been baptized into Christ, and have come under the baptism of the Spirit, it means that we are members of the body of Christ. If, then, we are a part of the body of Christ, the Spirit's testimony concerning the sufferings of Christ applies to us as well as it did to Jesus. How plain it is, then, that if we are suffering with Christ, the Spirit is witnessing to us concerning our position in the body of Christ, and that we have, through begetting, received the Spirit of sonship! If we are not suffering with Christ, the reverse is true. It means that we have not taken the necessary steps of repentance and consecration, or else have become lax in our devotion so that we are more pleasing to the world than to the LORD.

The strength of this witness of the Spirit concerning our share in the sufferings of Christ is often lost through a wrong conception of what is meant by suffering with Christ. We think of the cruelties that were heaped upon Jesus, leading finally to his being nailed to a cross until he died. We think of the bitter experiences of Peter and Paul, and others in the Early Church. We compare these examples of suffering with the more or less tranquil lives which the LORD's people lead today and wonder, perhaps, whether or not we are doing very much suffering with Christ.

We believe that the answer to this problem lies in the fact that suffering does not always have to be of a physical nature. If the truth were known, we would probably find that only a small minority of the Gospel Age sons of God has had physical cruelties inflicted upon them. Jesus was despised and hated by the religious rulers of his time almost from the first day of his ministry, but they did not inflict bodily suffering upon him until the last twenty-four hours of his earthly life.

Up until the final day of Jesus' ministry any physical suffering he experienced was self-imposed in that he gave of his strength, his vitality, as he went about doing good. Herein we have one of the most vital and important aspects of his loving example to us. We should not become concerned as to whether or not we are suffering with Christ until we have plunged wholeheartedly into his service, and are so selfless in going about doing good, that we will feel at least some twinges of painful fatigue, some loss of vitality as a direct result of our membership in the body of Christ.

Suffering with Christ does not always involve persecution by enemies of the cross. We have a notable example of this brought to our attention by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:25-30. The facts are these: Paul was in prison in Rome. He was greatly loved by the brethren in Philippi. To express their love, and to render a service to him, they sent one of their number, Epaphroditus, to visit him and to take him a gift, perhaps of clothing, or of food, the record does not indicate. It was a difficult undertaking. Epaphroditus became ill, very ill, "nigh unto death." Paul explains that it was "for the

work of Christ" this zealous brother was "nigh unto death, not regarding his life."

Epaphroditus surely had the witness of the Holy Spirit, for he partook of the sufferings of Christ. He was not made a prisoner in Rome. So far as we know, the enemies of Christ did not inflict suffering upon him. But by his own intrepid zeal to serve a beloved brother in Christ, which lifted him above regarding his own life, he almost died. Paul did not caution Epaphroditus to be less zealous in the future, and to take better care of himself. He commended him to the brethren in Philippi, to "receive him . . . in the Lord with all gladness," and to "hold such in reputation."

Opportunities comparable to the one enjoyed by Epaphroditus do not come to many of the LORD's people, but we can all profit by his example of faithfulness. How are we facing up to the opportunities of service that, in the LORD's providence, are presented to us? Are we backing away from sacrifice when the only reason is that it appears to be too difficult, or too costly in terms of weariness or loss of earthly comforts and ease? If laying down our lives for the brethren, as Epaphroditus was doing in taking a gift to Paul, is suffering with Christ, let us not be concerned as to whether or not we have this witness of the Spirit. Let us, rather, bestir ourselves to greater diligence in manifesting our love for the LORD and for his people to the point where we will realize that it is really costing us something.

HEART SUFFERING

Physical suffering is not always the most difficult to bear. We knew a brother who, from a certain

ailment, suffered physical pain almost constantly. This brother's family was not Christian, and was very much opposed to him, ridiculing him on occasion, and making the atmosphere of the home very uncongenial for him. He testified that his physical suffering was as nothing compared with the heart pangs that were inflicted upon him by his family. This brother was suffering with Christ even though he was not imprisoned, not burned at the stake, and not thrown to the lions, nor crucified.

Many times, as Jesus foretold, the Christian's foes are principally those of his own household. The Truth turns one member of the family against another. This causes suffering where it hurts most. Yet those who are loyal to the LORD and to the Truth will not permit even those who are dearest to them according to the ties of the flesh to turn them aside from loyalty to the LORD and their vows of consecration. Because of their faithfulness under such adverse circumstances they surely are suffering with Christ, and therefore have this witness of the Spirit that they are the children of God.

SEPARATE FROM THE WORLD

Another witness, or testimony, of the Holy Spirit that we are the children of God is found in John 15:19. Jesus said, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." There are few indeed of the human race who do not esteem the goodwill and friendship of others. However small or large our 'world' may be, it is natural to desire its approbation. People like to be thought of as

accomplished and important. This is the normal viewpoint of the world. It is not in itself sinful, except as fraud and deceit are employed in order to gain a high position in the eyes of others.

But when we accept the Truth and faithfully bear witness to it within the circle of our acquaintances, our world begins to lose esteem for us. Not that all our friends distrust us. They may even admit that our ethical standards are higher than before. What they do not like is our religion, and we find that more and more they hold aloof from us. Depending on how deeply we were entrenched in the ways of the world, this estrangement will hurt. This, however, we can, and should, accept as part of the Spirit's witness. It is a part of our suffering with Christ.

The enmity of the world may not lead to physical persecution, especially in the free world. In some countries, however, loyalty to the Truth still leads to imprisonment and other forms of physical punishment. Our love for the LORD and for the Truth should be so great that we would not hesitate to let our light shine regardless of what the consequences may be in terms of mental or physical suffering. This is what is involved in overcoming the world. We cannot conquer the world while in the flesh, but we can refuse to permit the selfish spirit of the world, with its jeers and threats, to stand in the way of our full loyalty to the LORD. If this is our attitude, then we have a further witness of the Spirit that we are the children of God, for John wrote, "Whatsoever is born [begotten] of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."—I John 5:4

WILL NOT WILLFULLY SIN

John mentions another witness of the Spirit to confirm that we are among the Spirit-begotten children of God. He writes, "Whosoever is born [begotten] of God sinneth not." (I John 5:18) As New Creatures we still have a body of flesh, and a very imperfect body it is. John did not mean that our new minds would always be able to control the flesh and make it live up to the perfect standard of righteousness that the LORD sets before us in his Word. But the new mind will not consent to sin, and when, through weakness of the flesh a sin is committed, we "have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."—I John 2:1

John writes further on this point, saying, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:8,9) This explanation is no excuse for relaxing our efforts to keep the body "under." (I Cor. 9:27) It does mean, however, that if at heart we find that we are thoroughly out of harmony with all unrighteousness, we can claim the witness of the Spirit which John mentions; namely, that those who are begotten as the children of God do not willfully sin. Thus we have this further proof that we are the children of God.

ABOUNDING IN GRACE

Peter wrote, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." (II Pet. 1:4) It is the Spirit-begotten children of God to whom these 'exceeding great and precious promises'

belong. But in order to attain the Divine nature we must develop as New Creatures. Peter outlines what is involved in this, saying that we should give diligence to add to our faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance [self-control], patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.

Peter further explains that if these evidences of spiritual growth are in us and "abound," we will "neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."—II Pet. 1:5-11

Whether we have been the Lord's disciples for only a short time, or for many years, can we, upon looking back over the way, see some evidence of growth in the spiritual graces? Have we become better acquainted with the Lord through the precious truth of his Word, and thus increased in knowledge? Are we more patient, more kind, more self-sacrificing in our service for others? Are these evidences of the Spirit's power within us abounding, in the sense that holy things of the Lord are the most important consideration of our consecrated lives? If so, then we have this as another testimony that we are the children of God, members of his royal house of sons who are to live and reign with Christ in his kingdom, and as Peter affirms, we will have an 'abundant' entrance into that kingdom.

LED BY THE SPIRIT

Paul wrote, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." (Rom. 8:14) Are we being 'led' by the Holy Spirit of Truth? If so, then we have an additional witness that we are the children of God. What does Paul mean by being led by the Spirit? This is a most important consideration. Again, let us emphasize that God's Holy Spirit does not lead us by impressions or feelings. The leadings of the Spirit are by means of the Spirit-inspired directives of the written Word.

We have in Jesus a perfect example of a Spirit-led life, for he followed exactly the instructions contained for him in the 'volume of the book'—the Old Testament scriptures—and these same instructions are for our guidance. If ever in doubt as to how the Spirit might lead in certain circumstances, we need but ask what Jesus would have done in similar situations. Of course, we will not find in his experiences a criterion for every detail of our lives; but the principles that he followed should, and do, constitute a wonderfully accurate guide for all who are endeavoring to walk in his steps.

Primarily, the Spirit led Jesus in the way of sacrifice—a sacrifice so all consuming and complete that it ended in death. Through the Prophet Isaiah, the Spirit testified that Jesus would be "brought as a lamb to the slaughter." (Isa. 53:7) He was 'brought,' not by the religious rulers of his time, not by Roman soldiers, but by the 'Spirit of God.' We, too, are being similarly led by the Spirit. "As it is written," Paul testified, concerning one of the Spirit-inspired instructions found in the the volume of the book, "For thy sake we are killed all the

day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."—Rom. 8:36

The slain lamb symbolism epitomizes one of the results of the Spirit's leadings in Jesus' life. It led him to death. In Revelation 14:1, we find the "Lamb" on Mount Sion, and "with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads." These are the children of God who had been led by his Holy Spirit. Verse four informs us that these followed the Lamb "whithersoever he goeth." As Jesus was led by the Spirit, so these were led by the Spirit. As we have seen, the Spirit led Jesus into death, and so it leads all who truly walk in his steps. There is no way to continue being the sons of God except by thus being led by the Spirit of God.

Here, then, is another important testimony of the Holy Spirit to assure us of our sonship. Are we allowing the Spirit of the Truth, through the written Word, to lead us in the way of self-sacrifice, contrary to the desires of the flesh, and in opposition to the spirit of the world? It is not a complex question to answer. However, if for any reason we have been resisting the Spirit's leadings, the decision to change our ways and live up to our consecration vows may be a difficult one. But it is an important decision, and blessed are all they whose hearts are responding in loyal obedience to the leading of God's Holy Spirit, for it means that they are indeed the children of God.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

The providence of God, under the direction of his Holy Spirit, supplements the directives of the

written Word. But we have the responsibility of interpreting his providence correctly. It should never be given meanings contrary to the testimony of the written Word. God's Word points out a certain definite course for all the consecrated to follow. It includes the development of the Christian graces, associating with the LORD's people whenever possible, bearing witness to the Truth, and laying down our lives for the brethren. The providence of God should never be interpreted contrary to this general course.

For example, we might make an effort to bear witness to the Truth and obtain no results. As far as we can determine all the "seed" which we "sowed" fell by the "way side." (Luke 8:5) We might be inclined to interpret this as meaning that the harvest work is all done, that the LORD does not want us to continue bearing witness to the Truth; otherwise he would bless our efforts. But this would be wrong, because it would be contrary to the written Word. The LORD has made it plain that he wants his people to continue to proclaim the Truth as long as they possibly can. Nothing is said in the Bible about ceasing to bear witness to the Truth when it appears there are few, or no, results.

The proper way to interpret such an experience would be to conclude that perhaps God wants us to examine our methods of witnessing, or our motive in serving him. Often he withholds the increase until our hearts are right before him. The LORD may withhold his blessing from the witness work of an ecclesia until the spiritual health of the ecclesia is better. There are many possible reasons why he might not bless our efforts to witness for the

Truth, but never does the lack of results mean that he does not want us to try again. If our love for the LORD is so great that we find ourselves interpreting our experiences in full harmony with his written Word, determined to continue in the way he has directed, regardless of the difficulties and discouragements that may be involved, then we have a further testimony of the Spirit that we are the children of God.

Interesting and revealing examples of the leadings of God's providence are given us in the Book of Acts, which records much of the activity of the Early Church. In those apostolic days, the gifts of the Spirit were operative, and in many instances the believers were blessed with miraculous demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's leadings in their experiences. Even so, the principles involved in those leadings are the same today as they were then.

In Acts 8:29 we read, "The Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot." This was the 'chariot' in which the Ethiopian eunuch was riding, and reading the prophecy of Isaiah. Previously, Philip had been directed to go into the territory where the Lord knew this eunuch would be traveling. "The angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert."—vs. 26

Just how the Holy Spirit directed Philip to approach the chariot and engage the eunuch in conversation the account does not indicate, nor is this important for us to know. The point is that circumstances were shaped in a manner to direct him to an opportunity of service. Philip knew he had been anointed to

proclaim the glad tidings, and he interpreted circumstances bearing upon his life from this standpoint. He knew that the Holy Spirit of Truth would not lead him contrary to the Word of Truth.

By means of the Spirit, or power of God, there was a miraculous shaping of circumstances in connection with the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile accepted in the body of Christ. Cornelius was given a vision in which an angel of the Lord spoke to him, and Peter had that remarkable dream in which he saw a sheet let down from heaven filled with the unclean animals. This was on the roof of Simon the tanner's house. When Peter awoke from his dream, "the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee."—Acts 10:19

These 'three men' had been sent by Cornelius to seek Peter, as the angel of the Lord had directed. Again, we do not know how the Spirit informed Peter about the three men. Since it was in the days of miracles, perhaps an angel spoke to him, as an angel had spoken to Cornelius. The main point is that the Spirit, or power of God, directed in connection with another aspect of the Divine plan, not contrary to it. The time had come for the Gospel to go to the Gentiles. There was service to be rendered in connection with it, and the Spirit of God directed in harmony therewith.

We read in Acts 16:6 that Paul and Timothy were "forbidden of the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia." Taken by itself this statement might indicate that at times the Holy Spirit leads God's people away from service, but the context reveals otherwise. Here is a case where another field of service was opening in Macedonia. Circumstances were

such as to hinder the ministry in Asia so that Paul and Timothy would be alerted to the call, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us." (vs. 9) Sometimes the Lord's people have to decide as to where and how they will serve, and should watch carefully for the leadings of the Holy Spirit in all such cases, but never should our experiences be interpreted to mean that the Lord wants us to give up bearing witness to the Truth. So, if we are following the Spirit's leadings in keeping with the commission, "Ye are the light of the world," (Matt. 5:14) then we bore this witness that we are the children of God.

THE JOY OF THE LORD

Not all of the Spirit's witnessing is related to sacrifice and suffering. This was not the case with Jesus, nor will it be with us if we are enjoying the fullness of Divine favor. In the volume of the book, it is written prophetically of Jesus, "The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." (Ps. 16:5,6) The 'lines' here mentioned were those used to mark out a piece of land, or a field, for one who had inherited it. Thus, symbolically, Jesus received a 'goodly heritage;' the lines had fallen for him in 'pleasant places.'

There was a wonderful future joy set before Jesus that enabled him to endure the cross, and despise the shame that was heaped upon him. (Heb. 12:2) He knew that in his Father's actual presence there would be "fulness of joy." (Ps. 16:11) But, in addition to this, Jesus possessed a great

inward peace and joy of heart even while he was laying down his life as the world's Redeemer. This joy of the Lord was his strength. It stemmed from his full confidence in the victorious outcome of every feature of his Father's plan for the redemption and recovery of the fallen race from sin and death.

Near the close of his ministry Jesus bequeathed this peace and joy to his disciples. He said, "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." (John 15:10,11) Are we keeping the LORD's commandments, and experiencing the joy that Jesus said would be ours as a result? If so, then we have this most reassuring witness of the Spirit that we are the children of God, that we are abiding in Jesus' love and in the love of our Heavenly Father.

Jesus bequeathed to his disciples another blessed portion of the inheritance he enjoyed while laying down his life as the world's Redeemer. He said to them, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27) This is the "peace of God" (Phil. 4:7) which passeth all human comprehension, yet it is ours to enjoy if our faith can only lay hold firmly upon the promises of God.

Are we enjoying this peace? Daily there are situations in life that tend to distract, and to fill the heart with anxious forebodings. The world around us is disturbed and fearful, and their fears can easily become ours unless we keep in mind the precious

promises of God, our Heavenly Father, who is almighty in his power to help, too wise to err, and too good to be unkind. God knows the outcome of his plan, and Jesus had full confidence in it. That is why Jesus had the peace of God. If we have the same confidence, we will have the same peace, for we will know that God's design for us, and his plan for the world, will triumph gloriously. Do we have this peace of God? If so, it is another witness that we are the children of God.

Truly the present inheritance of the Spirit-begot-ten children of God is a blessed and a rich one! As with Jesus, so with us, we can testify that our 'lines are fallen unto us in pleasant places.' And the rejoicing in the LORD that is our happy lot while still in the flesh will expand into 'fulness of joy' as it did with Jesus, when, being faithful unto death, we enter into the promised glory to follow, and become associate kings and priests with Jesus for the blessing of all mankind with health and life. ■