

The fellowship of Christ's offering and forgiveness

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Yoked to Christ

Connection to Christ is always through communion. It is not a discipleship connection to the presbytery through a minister; it is a fellowship connection through a communion-worship expression with those whom Christ sends from house to house. When these firstfruits brethren bring communion to our houses, they are bringing the dimension of peace to a house of peace. Jesus instructed the seventy in this way when He sent them out before Him, saying, 'Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house." And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you.' Luk 10:5-6.

Regarding our connection to the fellowship of Christ, the apostle John wrote, 'That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ'. 1Jn 1:3. The coming of firstfruits brethren to our houses is not an expression of a 'pyramid structure'. This is not what John was establishing. Rather, it is an 'in the Spirit' dimension that belongs to *the yoke of Christ*. We are yoked to Christ through the communion fellowship. When we are yoked to Christ, we find rest for our souls. Mat 11:29. This is what we are learning in this present season.

The brethren who are bringing communion to our houses are not bringing a hierarchy; they are bringing a *fellowship*. However, the brethren who bring the communion must be connected to the hand of Christ as firstfruits Christians who belong to, and are following, the Lamb.

To learn of Christ, we must eat His flesh and drink His blood. This we do when we fellowship and abide in Him and He abides in us. Joh 6:56. This is what it means to 'take Christ's yoke upon us'. Mat 11:29.

Christ Himself was yoked to the will of the Father. He spoke of His redeeming death on the cross as a baptism that He must undergo. Luk 12:50. He then spoke of being straitened, or yoked, to this outcome. To be 'straitened' means 'to hold together with'. Christ was constrained to the will of the Father and enabled to accomplish our death through the power of Eternal Spirit. Heb 9:14. Christ, through His baptism, made our death, His death. Our sufferings are now His sufferings, and are part of His redeeming work that is delivering us from our sin.

Illumination that leads to mourning

At the point of pain in a wounding event, where Christ suffered because of our sin, how do we find forgiveness and cleansing? How do we find deliverance from the sin that so

easily besets us? Heb 12:1. Forgiveness and deliverance from sin are found only through *illumination* that leads to *mourning*.

Under the influence of grace and supplication, as the word of the cross is proclaimed to us, we are enabled to look and to see Christ who was wounded because of our sin. We are also illuminated to see that, as Christ died our death, He authored the pathway of our salvation. Zec 12:10. Heb 12:2. A person who is illuminated to see Christ in this way will begin to mourn for their sin and for the suffering that Christ endured because of God's judgement upon them.

Paul described this mourning as 'godly sorrow' that produces 'repentance leading to salvation'. 2Co 7:10. This is because, through godly sorrow, we receive understanding concerning the pathway of our salvation, which is our fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ. This pathway will involve walking in the light of the illumination that we have received with those we have sinned against, confessing our sins to them, seeking forgiveness and, where possible, making restitution to them. In this fellowship, the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin and from the death-producing works of an evil conscience. 1Jn 1:7. Heb 10:22. In this way, true illumination brings understanding, and enables us to see, and to testify to, God's will for our life.

The apostle Paul strongly exhorted us not to refuse the Lord who speaks to us from heaven through the messengers in His right hand. He warned that if we refuse to hear Christ when He speaks to us, we will not escape the judgement of God. Heb 12:25. This is because a person who refuses Christ's messengers, and their message, rejects the 'so great salvation' that is coming to them in the word of the cross. Heb 2:2-3.

In this present season, we must give even more earnest attention to the word of the cross and its implications for us as individuals, families and churches. If we do not mix the word with faith by obeying the Lord when He speaks to us through His messengers, we will drift away from Him and from His people, and will forfeit the salvation of God. Heb 2:1.

Paul's example of suffering

To understand our fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ, it is helpful to consider the example of the apostle Paul's Christian pilgrimage. Paul encouraged us to do this, saying, 'Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.' Php 3:17.

Paul's 'example' was his desire to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, as one who was conformed to Christ's death. By this means, Paul received and lived by the resurrection life of God in his mortal body. Php 3:10-11. This 'pattern' was the pathway of salvation that Christ had pioneered for him through His offering journey from Gethsemane to Calvary. We follow Paul's example by walking on the path of salvation that Christ pioneered for us when He tasted the sufferings of our death. Heb 2:9. Heb 5:8.

Causing Christ to suffer

The *first* aspect of suffering to which Paul testified was the suffering that he caused to Christ through his persecution of the early church. When the Lord made Himself known to Paul on the road to Damascus, He said, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? ... I am

Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' Act 9:4-5. Christ was suffering on the cross as Paul abused the members of Christ's body.

Significantly, Paul's persecution of Christ caused considerable injury to his own identity. Before the foundation of the world, the Father had set Paul apart to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Gal 1:15-16. This was his predestination as a son of God in Christ. Paul's severe psychological distress, which manifested as manic rage and murderous threats against the disciples, was the pain that resulted from kicking against the word of his sonship. Act 9:1. Act 26:11.

King Solomon described the word of the cross, which is the wisdom from above, as 'a goad given by one Shepherd'. Ecc 12:11. 1Co 2:6-8. Jesus identified Himself as the Shepherd who calls each sheep 'by name' by laying His life down for them through offering. Joh 10:2-3,11. This was His offering journey from the first communion meal to the cross. Christ was being publicly portrayed to Paul as crucified, through the testimony and conduct of those whom he was persecuting. Paul brought the suffering of judgement upon himself by rejecting his sonship through his self-defined and zealous works which were causing considerable injury to the members of Christ's body. If Paul had not received illumination from Christ, he most certainly would have died a tormented death under the judgement of God.

Suffering as a member of the body of Christ

After Paul was born again as a son of God, and baptised into Christ, he began to suffer with Christ as a member of His body. Concerning Paul's ministry, Jesus said to Ananias, 'I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.' Act 9:16. This is the *second* aspect of the sufferings that Paul experienced in his life. Through his sufferings as a messenger of God, Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified among those to whom he had been sent. Gal 3:1. By this means, grace and salvation were ministered to them.

When Paul's hearers received and believed the word of the cross, they were joined in fellowship with him. 1Jn 1:3. Because Christ had been portrayed as crucified by Paul, his hearers were joined to the cross of Christ and to the fellowship of His sufferings. They were to eat and drink the elements of the communion meal in faith for their daily fellowship in the offering and sufferings of Christ, as members of His body. 1Co 10:16-17.

Paul's sufferings for those to whom he had been sent ceased when they were joined, at a personal level, to the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. He said to those who were walking in this manner, as part of the corporate new creation, 'From now on let no-one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.' Gal 6:17. In some churches, however, Paul had to 'travail again' so that Christ would be formed in his hearers. Gal 4:19. 2Co 12:19-21.

Suffering as a righteous punishment

When Paul was abused under the hands of those to whom he was sent, he considered these sufferings to be a 'just implication' of his former persecution of the church. Act 9:16. To this end, he wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, 'For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, *because I persecuted the church of God*. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.' 1Co 15:9-10. Earlier in this letter, Paul described his labours, which were by the

grace of God, as the sufferings that he endured for the sake of the gospel. 1Co 4:11-13. This was the *third* aspect of suffering that Paul demonstrated.

Paul did not claim, or expect, that his conversion, and the forgiveness of his sins, relieved him of the consequences of his former actions. In this regard, he demonstrated the same spirit of faith as Jacob. Jacob wrestled with the Lord, and received a new name that was commensurate with his predestination as a son of God. He was no longer Jacob, the 'deceiver'. He had been blessed with the name Israel, meaning 'prince with God'. Gen 32:22-28. Nevertheless, he walked from that day forward with a painful limp. Moreover, as Esau came to meet him with four hundred men, Jacob sent all of his own possessions over the ford of Jabbok and into the land in front of him, acknowledging the restitution that was required of him because of his sin against his brother. Gen 33:1-2. He had to pay 'the last farthing' in the matter. Mat 5:25-26. This, he did willingly, considering the face of his profane brother to be the face of God toward him. Gen 33:10.

Suffering to be delivered from condemnation

The *fourth* aspect of suffering that Paul experienced was 'a thorn in his flesh'. 2Co 12:7. This suffering resulted because a messenger, or apostle, of Satan stirred up the crowds to whom he was preaching, so that they turned against him and physically set upon him with violence. Significantly, Paul understood that this suffering was given to him by God as a protection from pride. As this propensity of his flesh was removed from Paul's heart, he was preserved from falling under the same condemnation as Satan himself merited. In this way, Satan's buffeting of Paul, which he received as his participation in the circumcision of Christ, only served to preserve Paul's spirit from sin. 2Co 12:7.

Writing to the church in Smyrna, Jesus warned His followers of the suffering that they would endure under the oppression of those who were part of 'the synagogue of Satan' in the church. Rev 2:9. He said to them, 'Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.' Rev 2:10. However, Jesus said that the outcome of this form of suffering would not be the avoidance of sin only; it also would be *a crown of life* that belongs to those who continue faithfully in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, even unto death. Rev 2:10.

Notably, the Lord promised that if we keep His word and do not deny His name, He will make those of the synagogue of Satan to come and worship before our feet, and to know that He loves us. Rev 3:9.