

THE NEW COVENANT NEWS



No. 164

February 2024

The Process of Spiritual Growth

C.D.

Love, Joy, Peace

Linton Roe

The Gift of Righteousness

Russell Collins

**Notes from a Group Study
of the Epistle to the Hebrews**

News

THE PROCESS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

(All quotes from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.)
C.D.

In Galatians 5:19–21 Paul wrote a list of what he called the works of the flesh. He finished the list declaring *“that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God”*. However, in verses 22–24 he followed on with a very positive list, stating: *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”*

These verses imply that if we *“have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”* our outlook, attitude and behaviour will no longer exhibit the works of the flesh. The process of getting from the first list to the second list involves a process of growth, as we learn to be totally obedient to God.

In the scriptures, God uses the word ‘perfect’ many times in relation to obedience. For instance, Abraham, like most of us (including myself), when it came to listening closely to God, tended to drag his heels. Eventually at the age of ninety-nine, the Lord took him aside and challenged him with these words: *“I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect”* (Genesis 17:1; KJV). And when Abraham listened to God, God was able to fulfil His amazing promises made to him earlier in his life, especially, that through Isaac his son would come the saviour of the world.

Following on from Abraham:

- In the Law of Moses God also commanded Israel saying: *“Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God”* (Deuteronomy 18:13; KJV).
- In 2 Chronicles 16:9 (KJV) we are told that: *“the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.”*
- Job was described by God as *“a perfect and an upright man, one that fears God, and turns away from evil”* (Job 2:3). Whilst this was so, Job’s life was turned upside down and his faith tested in a very dramatic way. Through this experience, Job became aware of faults in his life of which he needed to repent, and in the process of recognising those things, he was made even more perfect in his relationship with God.

These Old Testament verses are equally relevant and true for each of us. They should not be regarded as a threat, but as a promise of what God hopes to achieve in each of us.

The meanings of the word 'perfect' (taw-meem) used in these Old Testament verses, according to Strong, include: 'complete, whole, entire, sound, innocent, and having integrity', and suggest one who is morally and ethically pure. The meanings of the Greek word for 'perfect' (tel'-i-os) used in the New Testament are not dissimilar. They include: 'brought to its end, finished, wanting nothing necessary to completeness, perfect, that which is perfect, consummate human integrity and virtue, full grown, adult, of full age, mature'. Some modern versions use the words 'blameless' or 'upright' instead of 'perfect'.

In the New Testament the word 'perfect' is also used in relation to the quality of our love for God. In 1 John 2:5 we read, *"whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected."* And in 1 John 4:12 *"if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."*

In Matthew 5:48 (KJV), Jesus, effectively quoting from Deuteronomy 18:13, said, in the context of love for each other, including our enemies: *"be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."* These words lie at the very heart of Jesus' teachings; in this verse, we are called to perfection by Jesus, measured by the standard of God's own perfection.

The standard of God's perfection is also illuminated by Jesus in John 3:16 in these words: *"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."* *"God is love"* (1 John 4:16). And before we even began to show any interest in God, He loved us! And it follows in 1 John 4:11 *"If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."* So, if we think about that, God wants nothing more than for us to have the same quality of love that both He and Jesus have shown us.

God has set the standard for his people, and that standard is perfection. How can a perfect God ask us to be anything other than perfect? His standard is perfect! And he is calling us to also become perfect.

Are we really meant to be perfect, like God? Is there not anything we are permitted to get away with? Paul answered in Romans 13:8–10: *"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour [friend or foe]; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."*

So, are we permitted to get away with anything? If we take these words of Paul seriously, the answer to our question is definitely no; there is nothing we are permitted to get away with!

And what is the pass rate for obedience? James stated that *“whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it”* (James 2:10). If we think about it, that statement sounds like the pass rate for obedience is meant to be 100%! Obedience to God is a choice and we cannot afford to be selective in our obedience, for Jesus tells us that *“whoever commits sin is a slave to sin”* (John 8:34).

So, with God’s help, we need to be positive, determined, and endeavour to *“cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God”* (2 Corinthians 7:1).

In Revelation 3:1–6 (NKJV) we find a letter to the church at Sardis, which is very relevant to the subject: *“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, and are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast, and repent.”*

So, what does it mean to ‘hold fast’ and ‘repent’? According to Strong’s definition, to ‘hold fast’ is ‘to attend to carefully, to take care of, to be on guard’. And the meaning of ‘repent’ is ‘to change one’s mind for the better’, and ‘to heartily amend, with abhorrence, one’s past sins’. Implied in the meaning of the words to ‘hold fast’ and ‘repent’ is the need to cease from sin. Not just our big sins, but all our little ones as well, for God sees no difference.

“If we say that we have no sin”, or to put it another way, if we attempt to fool ourselves by saying “we have done nothing wrong”, when we have, *“we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”* (1 John 1:8; KJV). But *“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9; KJV).

When God forgives us, in the words of Psalm 103:10,12 *“He does not deal with us according to our sins”* but, *“as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us”*. This means that when we ask God to forgive us, He forgets our past sin. Again, (as an aside) if we are to love like God, who has forgiven and forgotten the sins of others, we must also take care not to remind ourselves of what they may have done to us in the past, which takes much practice.

The process of becoming perfect, made complete, or thoroughly trained to be what we ought to be does not happen instantaneously. Paul is witness to this, and part-way toward the goal he confessed that he was not yet perfect. In Philippians 3:12–16 Paul wrote: *“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained”*. And whilst Paul said he was not yet perfect, he was also able to say *“Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us”* (Philippians 3:17).

Our ‘goal’ is no different from Paul’s, and he also defined that goal in his letter to the Ephesians 4:11–14 (NKJV): our goal is to *“come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”*

Growing to perfection involves a battle (sometimes a very ferocious battle) against our human desires, that requires constant, prayerful, radical transformation of heart and mind, so we may be conformed to the image of His son (Romans 8:29). It also includes a heartfelt desire, *“to grow up ... into Christ”* (Ephesians 4:15) and to *“not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of [our minds], that [we] may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”* (Romans 12:2; NKJV).

In Ephesians 4:22–24 Paul reminded us that the process of Christian growth involves putting on the new nature and leaving *“no opportunity to the devil”* (Ephesians 4:27). It includes recognising our sin. It also involves heartfelt repentance and determination to put off the old nature and manner of behaviour; no longer telling lies, getting angry, being a thief, impatient, hateful, resentful, or speaking evil of others.

God’s commandments should never be viewed as a threat, but as a promise of the *“good work”* God hopes to achieve in us. To this effect, Paul wrote in Philippians 1:3–6 (KJV): *“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.”*

God is in the detail! And God is vitally interested in each of us, and like a true Father, He cares far more for us than we can ever imagine. And the good work He has commenced in us, He is eager to complete.

Whilst God is patient, kind and longsuffering as we learn to get this right, this does not mean that we can take our time or presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience.

It is the will of God for us to grow into the perfect character of His son Jesus, without flaws and imperfections. By his grace He gives us time to repent, and also incentive to *“grow up ... into Christ”* (Ephesians 4:15). And to help us along the way *“he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness”* (Hebrews 12:10).

As with Job, there will be times when God also allows us to experience suffering, so that our character, in the words of Peter, may be established, strengthened and settled (1 Peter 5:10; KJV).

Whilst the Bible says that *“all have sinned”* (Romans 3:23; KJV), we need to realise that the good news is that none of us need remain in that state. The Father does not want to save us from some of our sins; He wants to save us from all our sins.

Only by continually and consistently trusting in him will we learn to grow and become what God wants us to be. God wants us to be victorious overcomers, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:57: *“thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”*, and also in 1 Corinthians 10:13: *“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”*

Also, in John's epistle we have a similar passage: *“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith”* (1 John 5:4).

A final thought.

Because of our sin, Jesus paid the terrible price of suffering and death on the cross. It was our sin, my sin, your sin that put him there. And together we caused his shame!

Despite our actions, 1 John 2:2–6 tells us that Jesus became *“the atonement for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that said, I know him, and keeps not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, in him truly is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that said he stays in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.”*

By his grace God has reached out to us. He didn’t have to do it, but he did! Jesus was given to us by God, to show us how we can have victory over our sin and grow into the fullness of his likeness. It is at the cross that we see both the divine love of God that reconciles us to God, and the love of Jesus reaching out to us, taking our guilt, our judgement, and our suffering upon Himself, revealing the intense longing of God’s heart to save us from both the penalty and the continuing practice of sin.

Finally, in the words of Jude we read: *“Now to him who is able to keep us from falling and to present us without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen”* (Jude 24-25).

LOVE, JOY, PEACE

(All quotations are from the NIV)

Linton Roe

In the fifth chapter of the letter to the Galatian churches, the apostle Paul contrasted the sinful nature of man with that of a life led by the Spirit of God. *“For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law”* (Galatians 5:17–18). Paul then went on to outline the consequences of allowing the sinful nature to flourish and listed the qualities of those who live a life guided by the Spirit.

These words of Paul advise us to lead a spiritual life. Let us begin with Galatians 5:22–23: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law”*. The King James version renders some of these fruits slightly differently, but today we will look at only the first three, on which all versions agree.

Usage of the Word “Fruits”

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace ...” What does the apostle mean by ‘fruit’ in our text? Imagine a ripe cherry, a juicy melon or a golden apricot. The mouth waters in anticipation of the joys of eating the natural fruit which God provides so plentifully for us each year. Fruits are good for the health, appealing to the eye and satisfying to the stomach, and large, juicy fruits are a sign of a healthy plant. God originally instructed mankind to eat of *“every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it”* (Genesis 1:29). Shortly thereafter, Eve, the words of the deceiver fresh in her ears, looked at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and *“saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye”* (Genesis 3:6).

We can imagine that this description would have been applicable to all the fruits which were provided for man in the garden.

So “fruits” are the product of a plant which carry its seed, display its vitality and are desirable to the hungry. In a similar way to a tree displaying its fruit, a person may display fruits in a figurative sense. The fruits of a person are his or her personal qualities, the works that he or she performs and the characteristics and tendencies which are displayed. In other words, fruits are those outward, discernible aspects of a person which reflect his or her inner state.

Natural fruits are dependent on a variety of conditions for their growth. The amount of sunshine, the quality of the soil and air, and the quantity and frequency of rain are all factors which influence the health of the fruit. Climatic changes, pests, diseases and natural disasters can all affect a plant, such that its fruitage is damaged or its yield reduced. Likewise, the character growth of a person is dependent on upbringing, opportunity, environment and experience. Many factors can retard character development. This was evidently one of Paul’s chief concerns when he wrote, *“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you”* (Galatians 5:7–8).

Jesus instructed his disciples to examine the fruits of a prophet when assessing his sincerity and reliability. *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them”* (Matthew 7:15–20).

Christ the True Vine

Fruit is used extensively in the Bible as a metaphor for a person's actions. A good example of relevance to us is the picture Jesus used of himself as the vine. *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples"* (John 15:1–8).

Thus, we learn that we must remain *"in Christ"*, that is, faithful to Jesus, to bear fruit, and that without him we can do nothing worthwhile. This is consistent with Galatians because, as Jesus instructed his disciples, if we accept him as our saviour and are obedient to his commands, then God's Spirit is granted to us, to be with us forever (John 14:15–17). Only with this spiritual outlook and Jesus' leadership will we be able to develop the fruits that God desires of us.

Love

The first fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22 is love. It is important to note that this word is *agape*, which Strong's Concordance translates as 'affection, benevolence'; not romantic love, but rather the love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

This is the love that today's world seems to have forgotten. It is the ability to put others before yourself without seeking compensation or thanks. It is the quality that enables us to care for those who hate us. It is unconditional and does not say 'I'll do this for you because of the things that you do for me'.

Love is listed first perhaps because, as Paul told us elsewhere, it is the greatest: *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love"* (1 Corinthians 13:13). If love is developed first, then all the other fruits will naturally follow. Love is the emotional influence that bonds all the other characteristics together, as explained in Colossians 3:12–15:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

There is a saying, that love is blind. However, as the November–December 2022 issue of the ‘New Creation’ points out, *agape* love is not blind to the faults of others, but rather it chooses to focus on the good that is there. Doing this helps those characteristics to grow and the flaws to lessen’ (sic).

The great challenge to us is to actually practise love in our lives. It is easy to love those that love us but if we truly seek to develop *agape* love, then we must learn to be able to do good to our enemies, as Jesus explained in Luke 6:32–36: *“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”*

These words of our Lord are a challenge to us. How are we to even attempt to give unconditional love to our enemies? We must first learn from the flawless example which God set, as John outlined in John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* So the great example, and thus the great challenge, is set for us by our Creator and his son; because they loved us, we must learn to love, as John elsewhere told us in 1 John 4:19: *“We love him, because he first loved us.”* Indeed, if we truly believe that God did this for us, and if we believe that Jesus died for us personally and for the whole world, then we must surely feel obliged to strive to do as God has asked. Paul and Timothy explained this obligation to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 5:14: *“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all ...”*.

While acknowledging that we are all likely to suffer constant failure in this endeavour, I would like to offer a few practical suggestions which might be of benefit to us.

Love is Commanded

Before we can change any aspect of our lives, we need to be aware that a change is necessary. This is the case when we choose to become followers of Jesus; we must first recognise that we are all sinners and in need of reconciliation. In learning to love, we should first be aware that love is commanded. *“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord”* (Leviticus 19:18).

This instruction to the Jews was reiterated and expanded by our Lord Jesus: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”* (Matthew 5:43–44).

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35).

Developing Love Benefits All

Having been assured that Christians are obliged to learn to love, it may also be helpful to realise that there is great benefit in becoming more loving. Solomon wrote that *“hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs”* (Proverbs 10:12). He further observed that *“He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends”* (Proverbs 17:9). It may be human nature to harp on past wrongs, yet Solomon advised us that little good will come of it. When someone does us a discourtesy, do we immediately go and tell all our friends about it, looking for reassurance that we were right, asking for them to side with us and say “yes, that was very poor of them, wasn’t it?” Surely we would not like others to do that to us. Paul reminded us that *“Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law”* (Romans 13:9–10). Can we look at our actions and say “that did no harm to my neighbour”? If we can, then we have benefited, as has our neighbour, and we have started down the path towards greater love.

Love Starts with the Heart

Jesus told us that *“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him”* (Matthew 12:35). In other words, we need to reform our attitudes before love will be seen to increase. We need to look honestly at the way we view people and situations and ask ourselves why we feel that way, and if God would be pleased with this attitude. In my experience, I often find that my motivation is selfish rather than selfless. This causes me to be ashamed but also to consider how I should behave next time.

Did you know that God loves people even when they do not believe in him? This is suggested by John 3:16. Are we able to love people who hold different beliefs and understandings from ours? It was something of a revelation to me to realise that one's ability to love should not be related to one's ability to agree on doctrines.

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:7–12).

Our world society is, as a generalisation, extremely selfish. “What’s in it for me?” is the general attitude. Here are some everyday ideas which may assist us to develop and show greater love for our neighbours: make a list of ‘things I could do for someone else’, stick it to your fridge and then do one of them when an opportunity arises; ring someone up to ask them how they are; do a task for someone else without telling them that you’ve done it; write down some encouraging things to say to someone that you often don’t get along with; offer to do something to help a busy person; write a card to an elderly person; ask a fellow Christian to explain how they see God’s word, without looking to offer criticism or convert them to your understanding; think of someone who lives alone and visit them; pray for God to give you further opportunities to develop your love.

Love Brings Joy and Peace

If the love of God is developing in us, then we should start to experience the next two fruits, joy and peace. Joy is defined by the Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary as a vivid emotion of pleasure or gladness. In this life, events do not always bring us pleasure or gladness because of the conflict between the spiritual and sinful natures, and the fact that we live in a disobedient and disrespectful generation. We need to view this joy as an inner state which cannot be shaken from the conviction that God is for us and that all will be well in the end, if we continue to try to do his will. With practice, this inner conviction should also lead to outward joy, as we attempt to share our hope with others and as we become more mature witnesses of God’s love.

As we seek to develop the love that God requires, we are bound to have some setbacks but we are assured that eventually we will experience great joy: *“Sing to the Lord, you saints of his; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning”* (Psalm 30:4–5). We need to realise that joy may not be a constant experience, except in prospect. Paul commended the Hebrews for their steadfast attitude in adversity: *“You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions”* (Hebrews 10:34). We too have that inner joy that comes from a knowledge that our hearts are set on things above and that our treasure is stored for us in heaven (Matthew 6:21).

Reasons for Joy

The Scriptures give us many reasons for this joy which I have been describing. Peter outlined for us the precious promises which God has given to us: *“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires”* (2 Peter 1:4).

It was the knowledge that God would rescue his children from the corruption of the world and permit them to participate in the divine nature that inspired Paul and Silas to sing and praise their heavenly Father, in spite of their sufferings, as recorded in Acts 16:23–25: *“After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”*

How many of us truly feel joy in times of distress? Can you imagine having been severely flogged and thrown into prison, only to be inspired to sing thanks to God? I find that I often allow myself to become caught up with the small difficulties of life and that these difficulties affect my attitudes and emotions. It is often helpful to me, when I have suffered a setback, to stop and look at the big picture; to realise that all the troubles of this world are really rather trivial and temporary and that they do not affect God’s ultimate plan of restitution, neither should I allow them to affect the inner joy that I have.

Peter, in his speech on the Day of Pentecost, related David's words in Psalm 16:8–11 about Jesus' joy and assurance of his Father's love during his time of trial: *"David said about him: 'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'"* (Acts 2:25–28).

If Jesus, who suffered so terribly, could experience joy, surely we can look past our own, comparatively trivial sufferings to the joy of the future kingdom, when the angel's message to the shepherds will finally be realised by all: *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people"* (Luke 2:10).

Again, Paul exhorted us to remain steadfast in our hearts, even when we are outwardly troubled: *"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18), and *"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer"* (Romans 12:12). Elsewhere, Jesus urged us to be of good cheer since he has overcome the world (John 16:33).

If you sometimes have difficulty experiencing inner joy, here are a few practical suggestions which you might like to try: write down the number of blessings you have received in the past year; read your favourite prophecy of the kingdom; watch a young child at play; sing a favourite hymn; do as Hebrews 12:2 advises and *"look unto Jesus ..."*

The Peace of God

Peace is very topical at the moment with the powers of the world constantly sabre-rattling and flexing their military muscles. As a Christian, I believe that peace can be demonstrated or modelled by individuals but that it cannot be imposed by one party on another. History, it seems, has not taught world regimes that there is no such thing as a 'peace-keeping force'; where there are soldiers there also is the constant threat of conflict. Yet the peace which is a fruit of the spirit is a very different peace. It has, I suggest, nothing to do with the absence of war.

Strong's Concordance gives a number of meanings for the Greek word that is most often translated as 'peace' (*Eirene*, G1515), but I particularly like the fifth meaning: "the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of

whatsoever sort that is". I very much like this concept of a tranquil state. To me, this implies that nothing can disturb the love and joy which are in the heart of the believer, and it reminds me of the verse in Hebrews 13:6: *"So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"*

The peace of God is beyond the understanding of mankind and is only attainable through trusting in the Lord Jesus. *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God"* (Romans 5:1–2).

If peace is a state of the heart, then it should not be lost, even when we do not see eye to eye with those around us. In other words, although our outward lives might not be in a state of peace, our hearts should be, and we will therefore work towards creating greater peace with those around us. We know that it is not always possible to experience peace with all men in this age, but, as Paul told us, we should *"make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification"* (Romans 14:19). A little earlier in Romans, he also showed us the attitude we should have towards others: *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18).

Maintaining Peace

So how do we maintain this inner peace when things go wrong and the Lord's promises seem far away? As with love and joy, a realisation of our need precedes our plan for self-improvement. We must first remember that God calls us to peace and that there is great reward offered to those who do their best to keep it.

God assures us that He has taken the first step towards peace by offering His Son: *"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross"* (Colossians 1:19–20).

Because of God's plan to reconcile all things, we are exhorted to live peaceful lives: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God"* (Matthew 5:9). What a prospect, to be considered a son and therefore an heir of God, to be on a similar level to our Lord Jesus who is God's only begotten Son. Can we afford not to be peacemakers?

I suggest that trust in God is the first, essential step to developing and maintaining peace in our lives. *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”* (Romans 15:13). Jesus promised his disciples that they would have his peace: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”* (John 14:27).

If we learn to trust in Jesus and his love for us, we too will begin to experience peace, knowing that we are cared for and never forgotten.

Inner peace in our busy 21st century lives can be a significant challenge. When my life becomes very hectic, I like to remember the way in which God revealed himself to Elijah, in the *“still small voice”* (1 Kings 19:12; KJV) rather than in the tumult which had preceded it, and I try to listen to him, who said *“Be still and know that I am God”* (Psalm 46:10). In practical terms, this might mean planning some personal and private time into every day. It might mean going for a walk in order to meditate on the big picture rather than being swamped by everyday busy-ness. It might mean breathing deeply and asking for God’s guidance before beginning a difficult task or responding to a pointed question. It might mean a change of attitude; seeing yesterday’s ‘problems’ as today’s ‘character-building experiences’.

Summary

I would like to reflect briefly on some of the key points I have tried to raise.

Paul exhorted the Galatians, and us, to live lives led by the spirit, but noted that this is always in conflict with the sinful nature. We have seen that the fruits of a man are his qualities, works, characteristics and tendencies. These fruits can be developed or retarded through the influences of upbringing, opportunity, environment and experience. We have observed that we can only bear fruit if we remain faithful to Jesus, the true vine.

The first fruit, love, is not a fickle emotion but is a deep, abiding, selfless love which is demonstrated to us by our heavenly Father and by his son, our Lord Jesus. We are commanded to love our enemies, knowing that love benefits the giver and the receiver. Love is a reflection of our hearts and we should be certain as to our own motives and ask ourselves whether God would be pleased with our attitudes.

Joy, the second fruit, is the inner state of gladness which comes with knowing that God has a wonderful plan of redemption for the whole world that is certain of becoming reality. We can experience this joy through looking unto Jesus and knowing that he has already overcome the world and understands all our trials.

Peace, the third fruit, is again an inner condition, not merely a lack of conflict. It is beyond the understanding of mankind and is only accessible through faith in Jesus. We are exhorted to do our best to maintain peace with all because God first sought to make peace with us through the sacrifice of his son. We need to make time to experience God's peace when our lives become busy.

It is appropriate to close these thoughts with the encouraging words of Paul: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:4–7).



THE GIFT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Russell Collins

Introduction

When a gift is mentioned, we usually think of something tangible or physical. We also may mean an ability or talent, such as musical ability, or a rare ability with understanding scientific subjects and mathematics.

And there is a heavenly gift, given by God to people as he desires or sees fit, the gift of righteousness. We sing in one of our hymns, 'Now righteous through thy grace I am; No condemnation now I dread'. So do we consider ourselves righteous, without faults or failings and never doing anything wrong?

Of course we do not think we are without faults. We err in thought, word and deed. We say things at times that we regret afterwards, we do things from time to time that we ought not, and we even think in ways that are not righteous. If we were to think that we are righteous and therefore without fault, we would be in the same position as the Jewish people who considered themselves righteous because they had exclusive right to God's Law and Covenant and therefore were exempt from God's judgment.

But, as the apostle Paul pointed out, the Jews were no better off than unbelieving Gentiles, because they (the Jews) could keep neither God's Law nor his Covenant with them, and were sinners just as the Gentiles were, and subject to God's judgment. Paul wrote that *"Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin"* (Romans 3:1).

So what are we to think about our situation? The Scripture tells us clearly and explicitly. The prophet Habakkuk wrote, *"The just shall live by faith"* (Habakkuk 2:4). The apostle Paul quoted these words in Galatians 3:11. But few understood their significance, and strove to serve God by observing the Law, which everyone failed to do.

The Jewish people were ignorant of the nature of the righteousness which God required and remained ignorant of the fact that God had arranged to give righteousness to people through Jesus Christ. The Jews were ignorant of God's mercy and grace, and closed their ears when the Lord Jesus and his chosen apostles attempted to explain God's gracious gift to them (Matthew 13:13–17; Acts 14:32–46; 26:20–21; 28:25–28).

The Jews persistently went about trying to establish a righteousness of their own, based on outward forms and traditions of men, and in so doing became law-breakers. They failed to understand the purpose of the Law, and killed the prophets God sent to them, including John the Baptist and even God's own son (Acts 7:51–52; Luke 20:9–16).

The purpose of the Law was, as Paul explained in Galatians 3:24, *"our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."* The same thought is expressed in Romans 10:4, which tells us that Jesus Christ has provided the goal towards which the Law pointed, namely the attainment of righteousness, for through Jesus righteousness is obtainable by everyone who believes.

The Situation of Christians

The righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ was explained by Paul in Romans 10:9–10: *"that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes to righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to salvation"* (NKJV).

This is the great truth that was lost and overlooked for centuries past during this Gospel Age, until revealed by Martin Luther, namely, justification by faith. In the biblical sense justification means 'making

just or right, declaring guiltless or blameless', being made perfect. Justification by faith means that the believing Christian is considered righteous by God because he or she believes in God through his son, Jesus Christ. Righteousness by imputation or reckoning is God's gracious gift to us.

This principle has appertained for ages past, before the Law was given to Israel, and before the Lord Jesus gave the atoning sacrifice for sin on the cross. For example, Abraham had righteousness imputed to him because of his faith. Paul made this clear in Romans 4:20–25: *"He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore it was accounted to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification"* (NKJV). The Revised Version simplifies the whole of Romans 4 by using the words *"reckon"* and *"reckoned"* throughout. The constant repetition of the same word gives force and clarity to the apostle's argument.

Had Abraham's works been of such a nature as to justify him or make him right with God, he would have been able to glory in himself but not towards God. Had the Jews been able to keep the Law perfectly, their reward would not have been a free gift from God, but would have been owing to them as something they had earned (Romans 2:2-4).

But not so the believer in Jesus Christ. God is not in his or her debt; the believer whose faith is counted or reckoned for righteousness receives that righteousness freely, as a gift. The believer acknowledges that there is nothing in himself or herself for commendation to God (Romans 3:9–18), and by faith thus places himself or herself in line to receive a blessing, as Paul wrote: *"Just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin"* (Romans 4:6–8; NKJV).

The simple Gospel truth is that God reckons the believer to be righteous because of his or her faith, not because of righteous works and conduct, because the believer is incapable of such. God accepts the believer, not because he or she is considered a good or kind person, or is very clever and capable, but simply because he or she sincerely believes. God

reckons righteousness to the believer apart from works. Good works that a believer may do are no doubt pleasing to God, but are not the grounds for acceptance by Him.

In the previous quotation from Psalm 32:1–2, the apostle showed that reckoned righteousness cannot be given without the forgiveness of sins. It is God who reckons a person either righteous or a sinner. If a person's sins are forgiven, they are not laid to his or her charge or allowed to accumulate against him or her, and righteousness is reckoned to that person.

As soon as a person believes and repents, God forgives all past sins, and the believer begins the Christian life with reckoned righteousness. The necessity of forgiveness in order for the believer to be reckoned righteous is shown by the stress laid upon it by the early evangelists (Matthew 26:28; Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38–39; 3:26; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38–39; 26:18).

Sin is a barrier between God and the sinner, and it made human beings God's enemies, both in the flesh and in heart and mind (Colossians 1:21; Ephesians 2:1–3). Holiness and continued life for human beings were not possible while that barrier remained.

Therefore, it was the first work of the New Covenant to show God's grace and mercy to believers: *"For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more"* (Hebrews 8:12; NKJV). Therefore, their sins having been forgiven, which they were when the sinner asked for that forgiveness, the repentant believer could receive the promise of eternal inheritance; and not before (Hebrews 9:13–15).

And so it is that the apostle continued his argument in Romans 5:1–2: *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God"* (NKJV).

Being counted or reckoned by God as righteous, the believer is at peace with God. He or she is reconciled and is no longer an enemy; he or she is forgiven and no longer under condemnation (Romans 8:1), and, being forgiven, he or she has received the holy spirit which was promised (Acts 2:39; 3:26; Galatians 3:14).

The believer has become a child of God, having received the spirit of adoption (Galatians 4:5–7; Romans 8:14–17), so that he or she may “*rejoice in hope of the glory of God*” (Romans 5:2).

Justification is not a temporary experience of the believer; it is a state of sincere faithfulness which must be continued until death. As long as the believer remains in the flesh, he or she will need to maintain his or her faith in order to live in that state of reckoned righteousness.

The believer must maintain his or her justification by continued believing, continually asking for forgiveness, and by works which will show the genuineness of his or her faith, as James told us “*that faith without works is dead*” (James 2:20–26).

The importance of this is shown by Paul’s exhortation to “*hold fast*” to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:21), to Timothy (2 Timothy 1:13) and to the Hebrews (Hebrews 4:14) and by Jesus (Revelation 2:25).



Notes from a Group Study of the Epistle to the HEBREWS

Hebrews 12:1–4

- 1. Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,***
- 2. Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.***
- 3. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.***
- 4. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.***

The “*witnesses*” of verse 1 are the faithful ones of chapter 11. The Greek word ‘*martus*’ (Strong 3144) has the prime meaning of ‘witness’ although it is the source of the English word ‘martyr’. In Romans 1:9 Paul claimed God as his witness, that is, the observer of Paul’s service to the Christian gospel; while in Acts 22:20 the death of Stephen was a witness, or testimony, to his faith. It also made him the first Christian martyr. In this first verse of Hebrews 12 they are witnesses, not as observers, but because of the testimonies of their lives of faith. They are not a crowd of spirit beings looking down on the present world, because they gave their lives to living the truth

and died in faithfulness (Hebrews 11:13). Their lives of faith are an example to us for encouragement, because through their faith they received a good report (11:2).

“Every weight” which we must lay aside includes all those things that are an impediment or an encumbrance to the exercise of faith. While sin besets every one, and sin must be overcome, there may be things that are not wrong in themselves but may be an impediment to living the Christian life. Paul wrote, *“Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive”*, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NIV), whether it be concerned with eating, with physical activities or with philosophical discussion as in Colossians 2:8.

Also in verse 1, the sense of *“the sin which doth so easily beset us”* is that sin lies in ambush to entangle anyone, and for the believer it is a trap to be avoided. Since sin is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4), sin, in the general sense, is everything that is against God’s law, or will. If there is a sin that defeats the Christian, it may be different for each individual. However, in Hebrews 12:1 the besetting sin is probably that sin which Paul had dealt with so thoroughly in previous chapters, the sin of disbelief (chapter 2 verse 1; 3:7,8,12,18,19; 4:6,11; 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 11:6). Peter gave a warning against entanglement with the world (2 Peter 2:19, 20), and Paul gave a similar warning in verse 3 of this chapter.

For an athlete in a race, to lay aside every weight is essentially physical, wearing only a minimum of clothing and reducing body mass through training exercises. The race is run as fast as possible and there is only one winner.

For the Christian these aspects of running do not apply, as Paul showed by his exhortation in verse 1 to run with patient endurance, not a race, but the course (Diaglott) marked out for us by the example of Jesus, who is described in verse 2 as the pioneer of the life of faith required of the believer. He was the author and the perfecter, or the first to complete, or bring to completion, that faith shown by the elders of Hebrews 11:2. His faith was perfect.

Our faith is not a system of belief, but our conviction of the efficacy of his sacrifice and of the resurrection. The course is not a sprint nor even a long-distance race but a life-long endeavour, sometimes a struggle, to follow his example. And while there is only one prize, there will be many who obtain it and share it with the Lord himself as the joint-heirs (Romans 8:17).

The essence of Paul’s message is to keep going with faithfulness, avoiding things that can slow, or even stop the believer, looking towards the finish line where Jesus will reward with a crown of life those who reach it (James 1:12).

The faithful ones of past ages looked forward to the promise of a resurrection to life and honour; whereas the faithful of the gospel age look back to the proof of resurrection and forward to the promise of salvation, eternal life in the kingdom.

In verse 2 the word “joy” means ‘calm delight’. It is an emotion giving a heart-felt uplifting of the spirit together with a sense of relief.

The Lord’s achievement of enabling God’s promises to be fulfilled in the future was because of the promise of joy to follow the suffering of pain on the cross and the state of death. That joy included being set down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2); the salvation of those who obey Him (Hebrews 5:9); entering into his glory (Luke 24:26 and John 17:5); the pleasure of doing his Father’s will (John 6:38); to be given life in himself (John 5:26); and to ask God for his disciples to share his joy (John 17:13), being granted all power and authority in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18) for the reconstitution of all things (Acts 3:21).

In Luke 10:17–20 the 70 disciples sent out by the Lord to preach, returned with joy that they had been able to do good things in Jesus’ name. But Jesus told them not to rejoice in their good works, but in the result, which was that because of their faith and obedience to him their names were “*written in heaven*”.

In John 3:29 John rejoiced that he had been able to hear Jesus’ voice, and in John 15:11 Jesus told his disciples that his joy in teaching them God’s will was the source of their joy. Furthermore, in John 14:28 he told them that his promise to return after going away should make them rejoice, because he would then complete the work that he had begun with them, making a contrast between the trouble ahead of them and the joy of the reunion to follow.

Also in verse 2 Paul noted the Lord’s endurance, suffering the actions of sinful men although sinless himself, even as far as death on the cross, as an example to believers to not be weakened in mind or in spirit. Because Jesus suffered (verse 3), the disciples can expect to suffer when resisting temptation to wrongdoing. The Lord resisted unto blood, and although the disciples had not done so until that time (verse 4), they should strive earnestly to resist, even to the extent of being injured.

This exhortation to patient resistance to spiritual challenges was to the Christian Hebrews, and comes to us through the examples of Jesus and the faithful men and women of the Old Testament.



NEWS

Vale Joan Rita Collins (née Fleming)

It is with much sadness that we report the death of Joan on 2 December 2023, aged 97 years. Joan was a faithful follower of Jesus and a tireless worker for the Lord, providing care and assistance in many forms to all around her. She was particularly devoted to the four generations of her family and recently celebrated 75 years of marriage to her beloved husband Russell. Joan took quiet delight in the wonderful promises of God. We also look forward to the time when those promises will be fulfilled and we shall meet her again in his Kingdom.

Memorial Supper

The memorial of the Lord's Supper will be on conducted Monday 22nd April 2024. The venue for this service is yet to be determined, so please see our website (www.newcovenantfellowship.org.au) or contact us (info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au) for more information.

Autumn Conference

We have a booking for our annual autumn conference at the Foothills Conference Centre in Mooroolbark for Thursday 4th to Saturday 6th April 2024. We look forward to exploring our theme of 'Promise Keeper'. The program will include talks, devotions, Bible studies and opportunities for informal fellowship.

Please contact us (info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au) for more information.



THE NEW COVENANT NEWS

The New Covenant News is compiled by an editor responsible to the New Covenant Fellowship. The thoughts expressed do not necessarily represent the understandings of all the members of the group, and readers are requested to heed the words: ***“Prove all things”*** (1 Thessalonians 5:21).



Email: info@newcovenantfellowship.org.au

Website: www.newcovenantfellowship.org.au