

GOD'S CALL

Major themes in the Scriptures

The Holy Spirit (13)

Fellowship in the Spirit: higher levels

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The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject, “The Holy Spirit”, the thirteenth message, in seeking to appreciate major themes in the Scriptures. A short summary of today’s message:

God is deeply concerned about the quality and the level of fellowship in the Spirit that we develop with Him and with all who truly love Him. How can we effectively develop and nurture the higher levels of fellowship in the Spirit?

We will seek the Lord to appreciate more of what this means.

We have seen that fellowship in the Spirit has to do primarily with what is in our heart: the quality of our worship of God, the meaningfulness of our prayer life and how we live each day. If there is a genuine response to God and we truly love Him, then we enter into the body of Christ as a member of the body of Christ and we have fellowship with all those who belong to Christ.

However, there are different levels of quality in our being a member of the body of Christ. God wants each one of us to function well but we may not do so.

First, let us appreciate that although there may be various failures and deficiencies in our lives, we can still have fellowship in the Spirit if there is a certain quality in our commitment.

Luke 22: 28

"You are those who have stood by Me in My trials..."

These are the words of the Lord Jesus and He said these words to His disciples: "You are those who have stood by Me in My trials..." However, as we read the Scriptures, we are quite conscious that the disciples failed the Lord many a time. They were often preoccupied with what they desired in their own hearts; they were not very conscious of what the Lord desired, and there were wrong attitudes within them. Yet the Lord Jesus made this statement: "You are those who have stood by Me in My trials..." which means He could have fellowship with them in the Spirit. God still does appreciate us even though we are not yet pure, if we are sincere in seeking to honour Him.

John 17: 6

"I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word..."

This was a prayer of the Lord Jesus to God the Father and in referring to His disciples, He said, "...they have kept Your word." And yet we know that many a time, they did not keep His word, they did not obey Him; they did not do what was pleasing to Him.

But the Lord Jesus could still say overall, on the whole, there was a sufficient quality in their faith in Him, in their commitment to Him for Him to appreciate them and to be able to say this before God: "...they have kept Your word."

So there can be a significant degree of fellowship in the midst of failures and deficiencies in our lives. However, we must never be satisfied with lower levels in our development.

There are higher levels to attain in terms of the quality of fellowship in the Spirit, and God wants us to rise to the highest levels.

There are many hindrances to this path and it is important for us to be conscious, to recognize the various hindrances that can be present. If we do not deal with them, then we will remain at a lower level in terms of our fellowship in the Spirit, with God and with those who love Him.

Let us consider some of these.

One area is the lack of spiritual strength. The lack of spiritual strength hinders us from a deep fellowship in the Spirit.

Matthew 26: 31-41

- 31 Then Jesus *said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.'
- 32 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."
- 33 But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away."
- 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."
- 35 Peter *said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the disciples said the same thing too.
- 36 Then Jesus *came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and *said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."
- 37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.
- 38 Then He *said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."
- 39 And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."
- 40 And He *came to the disciples and *found them sleeping, and *said to Peter, "So, you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour?"
- 41 "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

The Lord Jesus was proceeding to the cross: the most severe and difficult time for Him, the most painful, and the time of the greatest anguish. He would have very much desired fellowship with His disciples, but He could not. In the time of greatest need, anguish and pain in His heart, when He asked His disciples to keep watch with Him, they fell asleep. They could not keep watch with Him.

He said: "So, you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour?"

So there was not that depth of fellowship in the Spirit at such a time. Yes, generally they loved Him, generally they supported Him; they were willing to go with Him, work with Him, do things that were meaningful in the eyes of God. But in times of greater distress, in times of greater spiritual battle, in times where the need was greater, the issues were more significant, they could not stand it, they could not keep watch with Him.

What was the reason?

The Lord Jesus said: "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." What did the Lord Jesus mean by that: "...the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"?

I mentioned that this is an example of lack of spiritual strength but here the Lord Jesus said: "...the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak". So it seems to be more a reference of the flesh being weak.

In the spiritual realm, it is true in both senses. The flesh is weak in the sense that the flesh has no spiritual power: the flesh cannot accomplish spiritual things; the flesh cannot enable you to be faithful to God; the flesh cannot lead you in a path of deep fellowship with God. You cannot stand with the Lord Jesus by the flesh. You cannot combat the spiritual powers of darkness by the flesh.

The flesh is weak, totally weak. It has no power; it has no strength whatsoever.

But He says: “...the spirit is willing”.

The disciples, they wanted to be faithful to the Lord, they were willing and more than willing. They were eager; they wanted very much to be faithful to the Lord, but they failed. They could not keep watch with the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus said: “...Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation”. But they did not do that even after this event. They did not do that and that is why Peter denied the Lord three times.

Our lives may be lived contrary to what we profess, what we say we will do. Notice that Peter was very confident. He said: “*Even* though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” There was that confidence but what kind of confidence was it? It was confidence in the flesh. He was depending upon his own ability, his own commitment by himself to be able to stand with the Lord – he would not fall away. But the Lord Jesus told him: “You will fall away.”

The Lord Jesus saw that Peter’s spirit was not right. He was not depending on God; he was not trusting God. He was depending on himself and he would certainly fail.

Peter was experiencing what the apostle Paul described in **Romans 7**: “The good that I would, I do not; the evil that I would not, that I do.” How many of us would have experienced this: We want very much to be faithful to the Lord; the spirit is willing, eager, but the flesh is weak. We depend on the flesh: we have no spiritual power.

So in reality then we can say: the spirit has no strength.

The spirit may be eager but there is no strength in the spirit because we are depending on ourselves rather than on the Lord. The strength must come from the Lord.

It is the Spirit who will enable us to live a life that is effective, meaningful and overcoming in the spiritual realm.

If we want to develop a higher level of fellowship in the Spirit, we must learn to develop strength in our spirit.

And a primary aspect of that, the Lord Jesus tells us, is: **keep watching and praying.**

If we do not do that, if we are preoccupied with our own activities, our own ideas, our own inclinations, our own way of doing things and what others in the world may teach us or even other Christians may do, then we will remain weak in our spirit, we will be depending on the flesh.

Watching and praying speaks to us of our recognition of our need of God: We come to Him, we seek Him, we ask Him to help us.

But in order for God to help us, we must first want to be helped, we must first recognize the path that we ought to take: that which is good, and we want it.

So although the Lord Jesus said that His disciples stood by Him in His trials, we can see that that was at a lower level.

At a higher level, they could not take it; they could not stand when it came to the event of the cross, in the time that the Lord Jesus spent at Gethsemane.

So let us beware that in the spiritual realm, there is much for us to learn and develop and if we are slack, if we are not careful, not only will we be weak but we will continue to weaken and our spiritual lives can degenerate in time.

Another area that we can look at as to why the level of fellowship may not be so deep is the area of lack of obedience: Lack of obedience.

Luke 6: 46

"Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

Lack of obedience: The disciples were sincere, they were genuine; but they were still disobedient. The Lord Jesus said, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

We all know that it is easy to say, it is easy to call Him Lord but it is difficult to really obey. The Lord's commandments are not grievous; the Lord's commandments are not unreasonable; they are good for us and yet we do not obey. Why?

The underlying issue is self-life. We prefer our own way of doing things, we prefer what makes us feel better, what we enjoy, what we like. We live our lives that way. That is why we disobey Him.

Very often it is not because we deliberately want to disobey Him: We say, "I don't want to do Your will." It is not in this form. It is often that we do not listen carefully or we ignore, we do not pay sufficient attention, we do not nurture what we have heard of what the Lord has said. We continue in our own ways, we continue in our old ways, so we disobey Him.

The apostle James tells us, "To him who knows what is right to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."

Sin is not just in times when we rebel and deliberately do things contrary to what God has said. Sin also takes place when we know what the Lord wants of us and we do not do it. Sometimes, it is just by neglect. Often it is because there are other things more interesting and important to us. So that is an area that we need to look at.

If we are not prepared to be obedient, we cannot expect to rise to a higher level of fellowship with the Lord.

Another area that is important is the area of lack of honesty.

Lack of honesty will hinder our development, will cause a break in our fellowship with the Lord as well as with all those who love Him.

Acts 5: 1-5

- 1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,
- 2 and kept back *some* of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.
- 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land?"
- 4 "While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."
- 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it.

The primary issue here that God shows His anger towards is the issue of dishonesty. Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" Why did Ananias lie to the Holy Spirit? In this context, we can see that the likely explanation is that he wanted to be recognized as someone spiritual, someone self-giving, someone generous: that he was prepared to sell his land and give all of the proceeds to the apostles for it to be used to help others, the brethren. But it was not true. Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, wanted that image; they wanted that recognition but it was not based on reality; their hearts were not pure.

Peter said, "While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?"

So the issue here is: If Ananias had acknowledged openly, honestly: "This is only a portion of what I received from the sale of the land", if he had acknowledged that - "I have sold this piece of property but I am not so prepared yet to give all" - it would have been accepted; there would not have been a judgment.

Peter said, "It was in your power. You could have done that. Just say it: 'Yes it is only a small portion but I want to give.' And God would have accepted that." But he wanted to project that he was giving everything. So Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land?" The price was kept back in order to lie, to project that image.

This principle is very important for our lives. It is very common, it is easy for us to be involved in such a situation but let us recognize that this approach will seriously hinder our fellowship with God and with the people of God.

Many a time, we may not be prepared to take a certain course of action perhaps because it is unpleasant, perhaps because we have to give up some things in order to do that, but we know it is the right thing to do. But we are not prepared to do it and so we pretend, or we find some other reasons, we give excuses so that we will not be regarded as having failed to live up to what we recognize. That is dishonesty. We are not prepared to face the reality.

If we have not yet come to that stage in our lives, it is good for us to acknowledge it: "Yes, I know this is good but I have not yet come to this stage. Pray for me. I want to develop to become what I ought to be."

If we do that, then God will help us because God is very compassionate, understanding. He knows we have our weaknesses, failures, deficiencies. He is prepared to help us but only if we are prepared to be honest, to face them.

But if we pretend, we say, "No, I am all right; I am doing the right thing" then this will affect our fellowship with God and with His people.

Underlying it, it is the self-life: We want our own way; we want to do our own things; we want to do the things that we like, we prefer, and so we become dishonest because we still want to be regarded as spiritual, as still doing what is right.

So God took action in this instance, both for Ananias as well as Sapphira. They died physically.

But God does not always do that. There are many, many of us who do something similar but God still allows us to carry on. Let us not assume that because He has left us alone, it means that is all right.

Another issue that we can consider is the lack of loyalty in fellowship.

Here when I refer to loyalty, I am talking about the right kind of loyalty: loyalty to something or to someone whom you recognize, you appreciate and it is right to be loyal to.

I am not referring to loyalty that arises from fear, from self-interest, from selfish gain and other reasons.

I am referring to loyalty in fellowship.

2 Timothy 4: 14-18

- 14 Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.
- 15 Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching.
- 16 At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them.
- 17 But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion's mouth.
- 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him *be* the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Here the apostle Paul was referring to an enemy, someone who opposed what the Lord was seeking to do: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm." And he said to Timothy: "Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching." And then he said, "At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me."

There was not that quality of loyalty to Paul. They knew that Paul was right, they could agree with him at other times, they would be prepared to associate with him but in this context, they were not prepared to do so: "...no one supported me... all deserted me." Why?

The underlying implication is that they were not prepared to stay loyal to him because of various factors: It could be out of fear; it could be the consequences that could take place if they were to do that. There are various reasons possible but they were not good reasons. They deserted Paul; they did not support him when they ought to.

So if we want to develop deep fellowship in the Spirit, we need to be loyal to what and whom we recognize is good. We must not deviate from this: turn away because of fear, because of other attractions, because of what the evil one may do to us or what others may offer to us.

Then the apostle Paul said, "But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me." The Lord was always faithful. God is faithful if we truly love Him.

Paul was doing the right thing and the Lord stood with him, but others were not prepared to stand with him.

So this is an indicator of the quality, the depth of fellowship. Are we prepared to stand together when it comes to what really counts? In issues that are really important, that are right and good, will we stand together for the Lord, or will we desert one another because of what might happen to us which we may not like?

So then, how can we develop the true kind of fellowship that is really deep and of the highest level? We need to appreciate what is the basis: How do we move in that direction?

True fellowship takes place in the context of deep oneness of heart in the moral perfection of God, that is, purity of heart. If we want to develop true quality of fellowship, we must understand that is the only context whereby we can develop that kind of fellowship in the Spirit: deep oneness of heart in the moral perfection of God, or we can say, purity of heart in the eyes of God.

John 17:20-23

- 20 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word;
21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.
22 "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one;
23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

The Lord Jesus prayed for His disciples at that time and also for the disciples of the future: "...that they may be one, just as We are one." The kind of oneness within the Godhead is that of perfect unity in moral perfection: the most beautiful, wonderful kind of oneness and fellowship. And that is the kind of fellowship that God wants us to have: "...that they may be one, just as We are one."

The Lord Jesus said: "I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me..." This is the most powerful witness in the world, to bring the message of the gospel to the world: this kind of quality of heart, the reality of oneness with God and with those who love Him.

This is the message that will bring across a spiritual reality that people can recognize. It is not just by words that we say but it is by the spiritual meaning of our hearts that people will recognize.

Men have a spirit. Even non-Christians, they have a spirit that is functioning; they can recognize what is good. Their spirit may not be alive because they have not followed God's ways but their spirit is functioning and they can recognize what is good and what is right. If we live our lives well and there is that kind of quality in our hearts, non-Christians will be able to recognize it and to recognize that what you say about the Lord Jesus is true.

So this is the area that we have to concentrate on.

If we want to develop true quality of fellowship with God and the people of God, then it is important for us to ensure that we develop purity of heart. The Scriptures tell us again and again the centrality of this aspect of our development because purity of heart brings about deep fellowship with God.

Matthew 5: 8

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

They shall see God if they are pure in heart. Purity in heart will lead to seeing God. And the meaning of seeing God here has to do with the meaningfulness and quality of fellowship with God.

All of us will see God in the sense of beholding Him, recognizing Him. Even the powers of darkness, they see God, but not in this sense. This meaning of seeing God is something very precious, and meant for those who are pure in heart: the purer our heart, the deeper our fellowship with God.

Many people think, "If I see God, I will be pure in heart."

But that is not true. There are many people who behold God but remain self-centred, negative and evil. Satan beholds God but he remains evil. The Israelites saw God at work, leading them in the wilderness but they continued to rebel against Him.

The Lord Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God", not "Blessed are those who see God, for they shall be pure in heart."

That is because purity of heart comes about first and foremost from our moral choice. We choose whether we want to be pure in heart or not; that is our choice.

If we choose not to be, we will never be, even if we behold God, we see Him.

If we choose to be, and we ask God to help us, to teach us, and we are prepared to submit to Him and His ways, we call upon Him, we will be, and we will enter into a deep fellowship with God.

The Psalmist also recognized this in **Psalms 24: 3-4**:

Psalms 24: 3-4

- 3 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place?
- 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood And has not sworn deceitfully.

Purity of heart gives us the freedom to come into the presence of God. He who has clean hands and a pure heart can ascend into the hill of the LORD... and... may stand in His holy place.

That implies if we do not have clean hands and a pure heart, we will be hindered from entering into the holy presence of God.

So if we want to have deep fellowship with God, we must deal with our heart and with our hands. The heart speaks of what is our attitude, our values, our direction in life: what we are committed to. Our hands speak of what we do, how we live each day: the practical expression of what is in our hearts. We have to take care in terms of what is within our heart and then live it out according to God's enabling.

Then purity of heart also enables us to fulfil what God wants to accomplish. It is only as we develop that, that we can properly fulfil what God is seeking to do.

1 Timothy 1: 5

But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

The goal of our instruction: Paul's labours – he worked very hard – that Christ may be formed in the disciples.

Christ in you, the hope of glory: what is that? Love from a pure heart... a good conscience and a sincere faith: If Christ is formed in us, there will be love from a pure heart in association with a good conscience because our conscience will not condemn us; a sincere faith – we are honest before God, we are humble, we are contrite, we learn to obey Him, walk in His ways. These qualities will grow in us and we will fulfil what God desires: The goal of our instruction.

Fellowship with the brethren arises in the context of calling upon the Lord from a pure heart and pursuing what is truly good in His sight.

2 Timothy 2: 22

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

True fellowship must arise in such a context: all those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. That must be the basis upon which our fellowship can be developed and grow and in that context, we pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace. Whatever we may do, whatever we may seek for together, it must be in the context of calling on the Lord from a pure heart: We love Him, we seek to obey Him, we do not have ulterior motives; we are not self-centred, our values are based on what is meaningful to the Lord.

If we want to be spiritually fruitful then this requires the response of an honest and good heart. The Lord Jesus told this parable which we are familiar with:

Luke 8: 15

"But the *seed* in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.

An honest and good heart is essential if we want to bear fruit.

The word translated as "honest" basically means virtuous, good and positive: a virtuous, a good heart; a pure heart; a heart that seeks to be pure and good in the sight of God.

But it must be with perseverance. There are many people who want to be good, who want to develop quality and may do so for a period of time but with the passage of years, they slacken, they are no longer fresh in their faith in God, they lose their first love, their reverence for God diminishes, there is not the perseverance to follow the Lord.

If we want to bear fruit long term meaningfully, there must be an honest and good heart and we hold... fast what the Lord has said and we bear fruit with perseverance.

It is something sad to see many Christians starting out well when they are young – enthusiastic, eager, doing many things right – but with the passage of time, their love for God grows cold although the outward expressions may still be there. That should not be.

Our love for Him must grow richer and more fresh with the passing of days; our reverence for Him must deepen as we worship Him and recognize who He is.

So, development of deep fellowship with God requires paying close attention to all that He wants to tell us.

Luke 10: 38-42

- 38 Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home.
- 39 She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word.
- 40 But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up *to Him* and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me."
- 41 But the Lord answered and said to her, "**Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things;**
- 42 **but *only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.***"

What was the primary issue here?

In terms of its presentation, we can say basically it has to do with listening to the Lord or being distracted.

Mary was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word... Martha was distracted with all her preparations. That is the basic distinguishing feature. But associated with this was the spirit within.

Why was Martha distracted? It was because to her, these preparations, these things, seemed important. It was not that Martha had a bad attitude. She wanted to serve; she wanted to do things that could be useful. But because she was distracted with her preparations, her spirit was affected. She was not in deep fellowship with the Lord.

And so we see her saying, "Lord, do You not care..." "...do You not care" shows she did not properly appreciate the Lord correctly. "...do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone?" – So, the Lord was wrong and Mary was wrong.

But the reality was: she was wrong but she did not see it that way – so too for many Christians. We may have good intentions; we want to serve, we want to contribute, we want to help but are we first and foremost listening to the Lord before we do so, or are we distracted by many things?

Mary... was listening to His word and this is what the Lord Jesus said: "Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." If Mary's attitude were not good – she was seated there because she was lazy – the Lord would never have commended her.

So the Lord saw her heart: that Mary sat there to listen because of the desire to obey. She wanted to hear what the Lord had to say.

If we do not pay close attention to what the Lord has to say, we cannot develop deep fellowship with the Lord. If we are easily distracted by people around us, by the things around us, by what we need to do, our fellowship with the Lord will suffer.

Now I want to come to the final part, which I regard as the most important. It is the most difficult but the most critical.

If we want to learn to attain to a higher level of fellowship in the Spirit, we must learn this. But this is an area that most Christians do not want to think about; they run away from it, they ignore it; they prefer to think about other more pleasant things.

The higher levels of fellowship in the Spirit must involve the fellowship of the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If our lives do not involve our fellowship of the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, then we have not really entered into deep fellowship with Him. Why do I say that?

The principle is quite simple. Depth of fellowship means the depth of oneness; that means we are deeply concerned about what the other person is concerned about.

And what is the Lord concerned about?

When the Lord came into this world, what was His purpose? It was the cross. When God sent the Lord Jesus into this world, what was the purpose? It was the cross: it was to save the world; it was to help us to become pure.

This is the greatest concern in the heart of the Lord.

If we do not enter into fellowship of His sufferings, how can we appreciate this? If all we want is a pleasant life, enjoying the blessings of God, if that is all we want, God may still grant to us a reasonably pleasant life, but let us not expect a really deep fellowship with Him.

If we want that easier way, we will not be able to deepen in the quality of our fellowship with the Lord.

If Paul had insisted, "Lord, please take away the thorn in the flesh, it is troubling me; it is too painful; it is difficult" he would not be able to enter into a deeper fellowship with the Lord.

The Lord saw that the thorn in the flesh was important for him to develop his life. Paul recognized it and he rejoiced. He said, "For the sake of Christ, I am willing to go through whatever difficulties, pain, suffering because when I am weak, then I am strong." In the midst of his weakness, in the midst of the suffering, he will know the Lord's presence; he will know the Lord's power; he will be able to testify of His glory and His goodness.

This is an area that is sadly very lacking in our lives and it is good for us to humbly come before God to ask Him to teach us how to identify with Him in this area.

The apostle Paul recognized this significantly when he wrote in

Philippians 3: 10

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;

We appreciate the apostle Paul, we recognize the quality of his life, but do we appreciate this aspect of what he said?

This we can say is a foundation, from which the quality of his life arose. It was his heart in oneness with God.

He said, "...that I may know Him" – a personal knowledge of the Lord is critical. We may know about Him, we may hear of Him, we may even praise Him but do we know Him personally? Have we come to Him, responded to Him, given our lives to Him, related with Him daily to walk with Him?

In the context of knowing Him, do we know the power of His resurrection or are we living by our own natural fleshly power?

The power of His resurrection: what is that? We know that God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. It is the power of God and this power of God comes to us through the Holy Spirit. **Romans 8: 11** puts it this way:

Romans 8: 11

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

So the power of His resurrection – the power of almighty God – will be imparted to us through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. It will give life to our mortal bodies so that we can live for God the way we ought to.

So Paul said: "...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings..."

Most people are very interested in the first two parts but not the last two. They want to know Him, they want to know the power of His resurrection, but they are not interested in the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death: It is unpleasant, it is painful; it is not desirable.

We have to pause and ponder: What do we want?

We want pleasantness or we want goodness? We want the world or we want the Lord?

If we want goodness and we want the Lord, then the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death is essential, is vital.

But what is the fellowship of His sufferings?

Is suffering something that we should seek for, that we should long for? Obviously not!

God does not want us to suffer for suffering's sake. God Himself would not undergo suffering for its own sake. Suffering has no value in itself.

Suffering is meaningful only when there is a direction, there is a goal, there is a purpose; there is an effect that is good.

Why did the Lord Jesus suffer? He suffered for righteousness' sake; He suffered to save us; He suffered to rescue us from sin and death.

If we want to enter into the fellowship of His sufferings, we have to learn to give up ourselves, not to be preoccupied with ourselves: "What I want; what is pleasant to me; what will people think of me?" We have to discard these things.

Concentrate on: what is meaningful to God, what does God want to accomplish, what would truly help mankind, what can really help others I am concerned about, what is it that is really valuable.

Are we prepared to concentrate on that regardless of the consequence on our lives? This is something very difficult.

It is unpleasant – and it can be very unpleasant – but there is no other way. If we want to enter into deep fellowship with the Lord, we must understand some aspects of what He went through in the cross. We must learn to identify with Him, what He suffered – not for His own sins but for the sins of others. The sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ were never for His own sins but they were for the sins of others and to help them. The fellowship of His sufferings must mean that.

Many of us are suffering for our own sins.

We have rebelled against God, we have gone our own ways; there are consequences: we suffer. Well, we must repent, we can receive forgiveness.

But we must not remain there.

We must learn to be pure in our heart. From there we must learn to really suffer not for our own sins but for the sake of others, to help them genuinely, deeply, so that they can develop quality in their hearts, they can come to know the Lord, appreciate Him and love Him.

Being conformed to His death tells us it is not a superficial suffering, it is not temporary, it is not limited; it goes all the way: the fellowship of His sufferings to whatever extent necessary to fulfil the will of God.

We must be prepared to go all the way – not to withdraw, shrink back because it gets more and more difficult. So the path of the fellowship of His sufferings leads to being conformed to His death and that death leads to the resurrection: a life of great power and meaning; a life full of richness in the fellowship that we can have with God – a life of freedom in the Spirit.

So if we want to develop quality in fellowship in the Spirit at the higher levels, then we need to deal with whatever hindrances there are in our lives, deal with them thoroughly, fully and learn increasingly to enter into the fellowship of His sufferings and being conformed to His death.

There are higher and higher levels of fellowship that we can develop as we grow in our understanding of what the path means and as we move in the direction of obedience and commitment and living, together with the Lord.

We will appreciate more and more the wonder of this kind of fellowship: it is the most beautiful and wonderful kind of life that we can ever experience – God in His greatness and in goodness offers us such a life.

This is something which I marvel at year after year as I think about what God has offered to us, how wonderful it is!

The great, the almighty God, the Creator of the whole universe considered, took action, in the path of the cross. What does that mean?

It must mean that there is something very, very deep and very, very precious that He wants to accomplish. Otherwise, He would never have gone through the event of the cross. It is an event that is so painful to God that is beyond our imagination, and God was prepared to go through that – for what?

It is to help us to find that quality and that meaning, that we may enter into that kind of fellowship with Him as it is in the Godhead and we can have fellowship with those who love Him in like manner.

But it is up to us; it is our choice.

Purity of heart is within your power – whether you want it or you do not want it; whether you develop it or you do not.

God is prepared to help each one of us, but only if we want it. It has to do with what you want in life, what you are prepared to give yourself for. It has to do with your values, your direction, your goal: what you want to be absorbed in, what you want to be preoccupied with. And that is your choice.

Each one of us will have to choose.

So if we want to live our lives well and fulfil God's call in our lives, we must learn to develop and nurture purity of heart at the highest levels of fellowship in the Spirit, seeking always to identify with the Lord in all that He wants to do as we walk in the Spirit and seek to fulfil the perfect will of God.

Let us then come before the Lord and ask Him to help us understand what He wants to say to us.

And let us ask Him to help us to learn to come to Him that He may teach us His ways and that we may learn to live by His power, increasingly to develop quality in our hearts and the depth of fellowship in the Spirit.

Let us ponder over what the Lord Jesus has done for us and how we ought to respond to Him.