

Separation and reunification

I'm a new grandfather! As I write, our daughter has just brought her first baby – and our first grandchild – into the world. As a result, I've been thinking a lot lately about the absolutely huge difference between a baby's nine months in the comparatively controlled environment of its mother's womb compared with its new existence in the big, wide world outside. What a vast transition it must be for a little baby at the violent separation from its beloved mother. Moses mentions this separation between mother and tiny baby in Genesis 25:23:

And the LORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body..."

The apostle Paul mentions it in Galatians 1:15:

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace...

A few weeks ago, my family and I were sitting out on our sundeck, eating dinner and talking about this concept of separation between mother and baby. We were wondering whether or not this separation might be a partial cause of post-partum depression, a condition that has become quite common. Do mothers and babies feel a unique sadness after their deliveries? Perhaps because the unique relationship they have shared for nine months has suddenly and irreversibly changed forever? Perhaps, more so on the mother's part, because she now must share her precious baby with the rest of the world?

Jesus also used this concept of birth separation as an illustration to His disciples, who were stricken with grief at His discussion of their approaching separation:

Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come... Therefore you now have sorrow... (John 16:20-22)

What Jesus foresaw soon came to pass. The disciples experienced sorrow to the point of weeping and lamenting because of their separation from Jesus, whom they had grown to dearly love.

Separation is one of the saddest aspects – perhaps it is *the* very saddest – of our human existence. But, if we study into the subject, we soon discover that there is good as well as bad separation, even in the human realm. American poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "Parting is all we know of heaven and all we need of hell." Some separation, although sad, is very necessary. What would have been the future for my little granddaughter, for example, if she could not have been separated from my daughter's womb? And what would have happened to my poor daughter if the little mite would have kept on growing in there?

On this very day, as I write, our youngest daughter is moving out of our family home and into her own rented apartment. We parents get teary-eyed when our children separate themselves from us at the time they leave the nest to get married or to go away to college or university. But we know in our hearts that this is the way it should be... that this is the way God planned it. Our Creator said:

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? (Matthew 19:5)

The first daughter I mentioned – the new mother – married five years ago and moved 2,200 miles away from our family home on Vancouver Island to live and work in Ontario. Our oldest daughter married a few years later and moved to Oregon and, from there, all the way over to North Carolina, 2,300 miles away. Then, last winter, our third daughter married and moved to Washington State. That wasn't too bad as it is only 100 miles away, and not 2,000! And how can my wife and I complain? Didn't we put 4,500 miles between our parents and ourselves back in 1974 when we emigrated from England to western Canada? Still, there's no getting away from the fact that it is a cause of sadness when beloved family members and friends separate and move far away. There is an old song entitled, "The leaving of Liverpool" the refrain of which laments, "It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me but, my darlin' when I think of thee." This past summer, my wife, my youngest daughter and I spent some time visiting family in Liverpool, England and although, after a month away, it was nice to be heading home to Canada, the parting from my brother, sister, and especially my Dad, who has been in very poor health, was hard to take. Such separations from our loved ones are understandably hard on us.

Often these days, when we hear the word "separation" we think of marital separation and divorce. Without going into this aspect in too much detail, marital separation, divorce or "putting away" (as the King James version has it) is something that God hates:

For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously. (Malachi 2:16)

At the latter end of the human life span, we all are very well aware of the sadness that comes due to the separation of living humans from dead loved ones:

And as it is appointed for men to die once... (Hebrews 9:27)

Like it or like it not, we are all subject to that enemy of mankind that we call the First Death.

Bible examples of separation

Let us look now into just a few of the 88 mentions of the term "separation" and its derivatives that appear in God's Word.

God commands His children to separate themselves from the world at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles and the Last Great Day and to relocate themselves to the place where He has chosen to place His holy name:

But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go... then there will be the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. There you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, and all your choice offerings which you vow to the LORD. (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11)

And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you, then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. (Deuteronomy 14:23-25)

With our modern, comparatively rapid modes of transportation, we are usually able to speed our way to and from God's Feast sites in a matter of hours. Depending on where they lived, many of the obedient feast-goers of "Bible times" would have left home in time to arrive at the site in time to keep the Feast of Trumpets there, so many of them must have separated themselves from the world for the best part of a month.

This separation of God's people at Feast-time appears to be symbolic in a number of different ways. The most obvious of those ways is to typify our compliance to God's repeated commands for us to separate ourselves from this wicked world. In one of the final prayers of His human sojourn, Jesus talked to His Father about His brothers and sisters how, although they must remain in this wretched physical world, they are spiritually not of it... they are spiritually separate from it:

I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (John 17:14-16)

Later, one of Christ's faithful spiritual brothers recognized the vast gulf and the huge incompatibility between God's obedient and those who have rejected Him. The apostle Paul expanded on his Master's words and put it this way:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate," says the Lord. "Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." (II Corinthians 6:14-17)

Paul was quoting here, from the prophet Isaiah, this command to be separate:

Depart! Depart! Go out from there, touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her, be clean, you who bear the vessels of the LORD. (Isaiah 52:11)

The English translation is somewhat different between Paul's quote and Isaiah's original, but the idea of commanded separation comes through powerfully, just the same. Jesus Christ had specifically separated Paul and Barnabas from the world for His service:

As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." (Acts 13:2)

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God. (Romans 1:1)

It is interesting to note that Jesus also foresaw that the people of the world would often separate the righteous from themselves if the righteous fail to do it voluntarily:

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. (Luke 6:22 KJV)

He had made it very clear to His Old Testament "church" many years before that they were to maintain a separation between themselves and the rest of the world:

But I have said to you, "You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey." I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. (Leviticus 20:24)

God commanded the Israelites to strictly separate clean and unclean animals, as a symbol of their separation from the Gentile world:

You shall therefore distinguish between clean animals and unclean, between unclean birds and clean, and you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird, or by any kind of living thing that creeps on the ground, which I have separated from you as unclean. (Verse 25)

Moses was obedient to this command:

For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth. (Exodus 33:16)

The Levites and Aaronic priests were given an extra "layer" of separation – even from the rest of Israel – for their dedicated lives of service to God:

Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine. (Numbers 8:14)

Then Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the work of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to serve them; and that He has brought you near to Himself, you and all your brethren, the sons of Levi, with you? (Numbers 16:8-9)

At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister to Him and to bless in His name, to this day. (Deuteronomy 10:8)

The sons of Amram: Aaron and Moses; and Aaron was set apart [KJV: separated], he and his sons forever, that he should sanctify the most holy things, to burn incense before the LORD, to minister to Him, and to give the blessing in His name forever. (I Chronicles 23:13)

And I separated twelve of the leaders of the priests—Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them. (Ezra 8:24)

In the same way as the Levites and Aaronites were separated for God's service, so were the temple musician families and those who took a Nazarite vow:

Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service some of the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals. (I Chronicles 25:1)

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from similar drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin. All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. Then he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother, for his brother or his sister, when they die, because his separation to God is on his head. All the days of his separation he shall be holy to the LORD... He shall consecrate to the LORD the days of his separation, and bring a male lamb in its first year as a trespass offering; but the former days shall be lost, because his separation was defiled. Now this is the law of the Nazirite: When the days of his separation are fulfilled, he shall be brought to the door of the tabernacle of meeting... This is the law of the Nazirite who vows to the LORD the offering for his separation, and besides that, whatever else his hand is able to provide; according to the vow which he takes, so he must do according to the law of his separation.’” (Numbers 6:2-8, 12-13, 21)

God repeated His command for Israel’s national separation over and over again. Solomon knew how it was to be:

For You separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be Your inheritance, as You spoke by Your servant Moses, when You brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD. (I Kings 8:53)

Nevertheless, as the years rolled by, the pleasure-loving houses of Israel and Judah forgot the necessity for separation from the rest of the world. In disobedience to God’s clear commands, they rather separated themselves from Him and reunited themselves with the heathen world and its wicked ways – just as our nations are doing today. God gave them this stern warning:

For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the LORD will answer him by Myself. (Ezekiel 14:7)

After repeated, patient, merciful warnings, God separated both houses from their homeland and sent them into captivity in Assyria and Babylon. After completing the time of their captivity, God allowed a remnant of the house of Judah to return to their homeland. Some of these returned exiles recognized the reasons for their punishment and now repeated God's requirement for their separation from the heathen:

Then the children of Israel who had returned from the captivity ate [the Passover] together with all who had separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land in order to seek the LORD God of Israel... When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites"... Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives. (Ezra 6:21, 9:1, 10:11)

Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers... Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding—these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes: (Nehemiah 9:2, 10:28-29)

Not only did these exiles separate themselves from the heathen; they also re-joined themselves to – reunited themselves with – God, His law, their brethren and their nobles. This indicates that some were previously joined with the heathen and separated from God, from His law, from their brethren and from their nobles. Like these exiles who returned to Jerusalem at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, we see that it is very wise for God's people not only to separate ourselves from the world, but also to join with each other – to stick tightly together in unity.

But does unity exist in the church of God today? Is the church of God united? Can the scattered church be truly united? Or is it separated or divided? When we sing the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers," can we truthfully sing the words, "We are not divided... All one Body we"?

Let us turn these questions around. Can it be possible for the Body of Jesus Christ to be divided? I don't believe that it can be! Yes, it is true that the "tribes" of spiritual

Israel are presently scattered physically just like the tribes of physical Israel are. But does the physical scattering of the tribes of modern physical Israel make them any less real parts of Israel? Despite the physical scattering, and apart from some relatively minor points, the various "tribes" of the church of God today are generally united in doctrine. Again, our differences appear to be relatively minor.

This is not to claim, however, that we have the authority, power or responsibility to attempt to reverse God's scattering of His church. Referring to human marriage in Matthew 19:6, Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let not man separate." Conversely, regarding the scattered church, we can quite rightly state, "What God has separated, let not man join together."

Returning to the sub-topic of post-exile Judah once again, it came to be considered a great sin for the Jews not to separate themselves, because their recent captivity had clearly proved that the lack of separation led to the adoption of the sins of the heathen, and hence to their punishment by God. Even certain of the Gentiles who dwelt within the territory of the returned exiles were to be separated:

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God, because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel. (Nehemiah 13:1-3)

It should be stated, nevertheless, that true and obedient believers among the Gentiles of Old Testament times were not totally cut off from access to God:

Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD speak, saying, "The LORD has utterly separated me from His people"; nor let the eunuch say, "Here I am, a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, says, "Yet I will gather to him others besides those who are gathered to him." (Isaiah 56:3-8)

What about the human Jesus? Did He obey His own laws regarding these requirements? Of course He did:

For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; (Hebrews 7:26)

Jesus is our great High Priest of the Melchizedek order and, like the Levites and Aaronic priests who had that "double layer" of separation for their dedicated lives of service to God, His separation was and is complete.

Despite all that we have studied thus far, we need to be well aware that, since Jesus' death and resurrection, there is no necessity for His New Covenant brothers and sisters to be separated by race. God does not require true Christians of Israelite lineage to separate themselves from true Christians of Gentile lineage. In fact, there was even a dispute between two of God's chief apostles on this matter:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. (Galatians 2:11-12)

Paul repeatedly asserted that under God's New Covenant, there is no difference between Israelites and Gentiles:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. (Romans 10:12)

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. (Colossians 3:11)

The separation that is required for the New Testament Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) is not to be separation from converted physical Gentiles, but rather is from the sin of the world and, especially in these end times, from the Babylonish system of the world:

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory. And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird! For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury." And I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities." (Revelation 18:1-5)

Separation for bodily safety

Before moving on, let us look at a different aspect of separation: the common sense, voluntary separation from potentially dangerous situations. One of the most well known examples of separation for the preservation of human life is that of Israel's separation from the advancing Egyptian army:

And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light by night to the other, so that the one did not come near the other all that night. (Exodus 14:19-20)

Later, once the danger of the Egyptians was well past, God warned Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from another great danger, symbolized by the tents of the rebellious Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Moses passed on God's warning to the Israelites:

And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." Then they fell on their faces, and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?" So the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the congregation, saying, 'Get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.'" Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart now from the tents of these wicked men! Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins." So they got away from around the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, with their wives, their sons, and their little children... Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly. (Numbers 16:20-27, 31-33)

Later still, God commanded the Israelites to organize cities of refuge for the protective separation of those who accidentally killed others:

You shall separate three cities for yourself in the midst of your land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess. You shall prepare roads for yourself, and divide into three parts the territory of your land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, that any manslayer may flee there. And this is the case of the manslayer who flees there, that he may live: Whoever kills his neighbor unintentionally, not having hated him in time past—as when a man goes to the woods with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings a stroke with the ax to cut down the tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he shall flee to one of these cities and live; lest the avenger of blood, while his anger is hot, pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and kill him, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated the victim in time past. Therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall separate three cities for yourself.’ (Deuteronomy 19:2-7)

The fact that some of the most prominent, righteous and brave Bible personalities made wise use of such separation shows that such self-protective action should not be confused with cowardice, which God commands against (Isaiah 35:4; Matthew 8:26; Mark 4:40; Revelation 21:8). David, a man after God’s own heart (I Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22) repeatedly found it necessary to separate himself from the insane jealousy of King Saul:

**Then Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he slipped away from Saul’s presence; and he drove the spear into the wall. So David fled and escaped that night... So Michal let David down through a window. And he went and fled and escaped... So David fled and escaped, and went to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went and stayed in Naioth... Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and went and said to Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my iniquity, and what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?"... Then David arose and fled that day from before Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath... Then the king said to the guards who stood about him, "Turn and kill the priests of the LORD, because their hand also is with David, and because they knew when he fled and did not tell it to me." But the servants of the king would not lift their hands to strike the priests of the LORD... And it was told Saul that David had fled to Gath; so he sought him no more.
(I Samuel 19:10, 12, 18; 20:1; 21:10; 22:17; 27:4)**

The prophet Elijah had good cause to separate himself from the wicked King Ahab and his queen, Jezebel:

And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. (I Kings 19:1-4)

Jeremiah wisely separated himself from another advancing Egyptian army, possibly leaving with a group of refugees:

And it happened, when the army of the Chaldeans left the siege of Jerusalem for fear of Pharaoh's army, that Jeremiah went out of Jerusalem to go into the land of Benjamin to claim his property there among the people. (Jeremiah 37:11-12)

Jesus too made good use of His ability to separate Himself from His enemies. When He knew that the time was right, Jesus bravely faced physical torture and execution, so we know that He was no coward. But when the Jews made earlier attempts to kill him, He separated Himself from them:

"You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come." When He had said these things to them, He remained in Galilee. But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret. Then the Jews sought Him at the feast, and said, "Where is He?"... Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by. (John 7:8-11; 8:59)

So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way. (Luke 4:28-30)

There is some indication in these verses that Jesus may have used His power to actually disappear in order to protect Himself until the right time had come.

Jesus also advised His people – specifically those who live in Judaea – to separate themselves from sources of extreme danger when it becomes necessary:

Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Matthew 24:15-16)

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. (Luke 21:20-21)

We understand that the first fulfillment of this separation recommended by Jesus took place in 70AD when the young church of God fled to Pella, and that a second fulfillment will take place at the time of the Great Tribulation.

Some separation caused by sin

As we look through the scriptures, we find many accounts of painful separations that have been caused by sin. Here are just a few examples:

Abram and Lot were separated due to the sinful strife between their herdsmen:

And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. The Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land. So Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left." And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other. (Genesis 13:7-11)

The young Joseph was violently separated from his family due to the sinful jealousy of his brothers. However, as with the separation, captivity and exile of the house of Israel, God turned this painful separation into great blessings – not just at the time of the great Egyptian drought, but on the future of Israel, as God unfolded the great blessings He had promised Abraham and as He concentrated so many of them on the sons and descendants of Joseph:

The blessings of your father have excelled the blessings of my ancestors, up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers. (Genesis 49:26)

With the precious things of the earth and its fullness, and the favor of Him who dwelt in the bush. Let the blessing come 'on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers.' (Deuteronomy 33:16)

Many years later, on the night of Jesus' illegal arrest, He foretold that, because of His separation from His disciples, they also would be separated from each other and scattered:

Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" (Matthew 26:31)

One reason for Jesus' great agony at Gethsemane that same night was that all the sins of the world – the sins that He hated so much, the sins which He was so averse to, the sins which He was so strict on maintaining a wide margin of separation to – every one of them was laid upon His head.

A second cause for Jesus' incomparable agony was because of His separation from His Father because His Father could not be present wherever sin is. Even if it was on the head of His holy Son.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46)

The word "forsaken" comes from the Greek verb *egkatalaipo*, the meaning of which indicates that Jesus, in the distress and delirium that preceded His death, was crying out to His Father, "Why have you deserted me? Why have you left me behind in this place?" He knew, of course, that it was painfully necessary for His Father to separate Himself from His beloved Son.

Was this one of the reasons why Jesus wept and was moved and troubled in spirit at the death of his friend Lazarus just a week or so before His own death? (John 11:33, 35) Despite the fact that He knew that Lazarus would be resurrected just moments later, did Jesus experience, first-hand, the pain a person's loved ones feel when separated by death; and perhaps foresee the pain His Father would go through when separated from His beloved Son for three and a half days?

We can see that this agonizing separation between the Father and Jesus Christ was caused by the sins of mankind. We are reminded each year at the time of the spring holy days that humanity is separated from both Jesus Christ and His Father due to its sins:

But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. (Isaiah 59:2)

When designing His earthly house, our sinless God knew that He would need a "visiting room" in it that was separate from His sin-prone subjects. This room is commonly called the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place but, according to Bible commentator John Gill, the prophet Ezekiel repeatedly referred to it as "the Separate Place." (Ezekiel 41:12-15; 42:1, 10, 13, 20)

Not so long after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, the members of His young church were separated and scattered due to a great persecution:

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. (Acts 8:1; 11:19)

James wrote his letter to members of God's church who had been separated and scattered to the all the locations where the twelve tribes of Israel were dwelling at that time:

James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings. My brethren... (James 1:1-2)

It is interesting to speculate as to whether James knew the various locations of the scattered tribes and sent copies of his letter to them. Peter wrote his first epistle to other members (various opinions exist as to whether they were Israelites or Gentiles) who had been separated and scattered to the various areas listed in his greeting:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. (I Peter 1:1 KJV)

In more recent years, we are all very painfully aware that many of our former church leaders followed the example of Old Testament Israel by separating themselves from God's truth and way of life, preferring the comparative comfort of joining themselves to the mainstream churches of the world, along with all of their heathen trappings. This sin led to other separations. Faithful members who formerly dwelt together in the relative unity of good-sized congregations were scattered into tiny groups under various corporate banners:

But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. (John 10:12)

Some separated themselves even further by becoming self-proclaimed "independent Christians." Is it these independents of whom Jude wrote in his epistle, "These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit" (Jude 19 KJV)? Worst of all, many members and unbaptized young people became totally disillusioned and separated themselves from the church of God altogether.

Those who separate themselves from the New Testament Israel of God are making the very same mistake as those Old Testament Israelites who separated themselves from the nation, as some did to follow their own sinful desires. In separating themselves from Israel, they were separating themselves from God:

So that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood; and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart’—as though the drunkard could be included with the sober. The LORD would not spare him; for then the anger of the LORD and His jealousy would burn against that man, and every curse that is written in this book would settle on him, and the LORD would blot out his name from under heaven. And the LORD would separate him from all the tribes of Israel for adversity, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this Book of the Law. (Deuteronomy 29:18-21)

For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the LORD will answer him by Myself. (Ezekiel 14:7)

I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go apart [KJV: separate themselves] with harlots, and offer sacrifices with a ritual harlot. Therefore people who do not understand will be trampled... I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstfruits on the fig tree in its first season. But they went to Baal Peor, and separated themselves to that shame; they became an abomination like the thing they loved. (Hosea 4:14; 9:10)

Hosea’s two examples stress the fact that when one separates himself from God, His people and His ways, he allies himself to one or more false gods and their ways. This, of course, is idolatry. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, God shows us, through the symbolism of the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall, that there is a very real danger in separation from our fellow-brethren:

And they issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the descendants of the captivity, that they must gather at Jerusalem, and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the instructions of the leaders and elders, all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of those from the captivity. (Ezra 10:7-8)

Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me. Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." (Nehemiah 4:18-20)

We in God's church are blessed with His truth. If we are also blessed with good, close friends and relatives in our local congregations, we should value and maintain our affinity, and fear to jeopardize it. One of the most common ways of separating good friends is through gossip and rumour:

A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends. (Proverbs 16:28)

He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends. (Proverbs 17:9)

Staying with the book of Proverbs for a little longer, we can see that poverty can be another cause of separation:

Wealth makes many friends, but the poor is separated from his friend. (Proverbs 19:4)

Inclusion of this item under our heading of "Separation due to sin" is not to suggest that poverty itself is a sin. However, if a sin – or a series of sins – were to cause one's poverty, then the threat of separation from friends is an additional reason why they should be avoided.

Looking into the future, to the time pictured by the Last Great Day, the unrepentant will be separated at the time of the Second Death and the Third Resurrection:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels... And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46)

Which group do we desire to be a part of on that day? The sheep? Or the goats? This same question has probably been asked thousands of times. The apostle John describes the "great separation" of the Great White Throne Judgment in these words:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them [i.e. the devil, the beast and the false prophet]. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

Other separation

Here are some other miscellaneous aspects of separation, which may be worth continued study:

- **Separation during fasts (Zechariah 7:3),**
- **The water of separation (Numbers 19:9-21; 31:23),**
- **Geographic separation of the nations (Deuteronomy 32:8; Genesis 11:8-9),**
- **Separation of Ephraimite cities in Manassite territory (Joshua 16:9),**
- **Separation of new mothers from the camp of Israel, in order to maintain the purity of the tabernacle and, later, the temple (Leviticus 12:1-5),**
- **Separation of women for other reasons, also to maintain the purity of the tabernacle and temple (Leviticus 15:19-31).**

Reunification

Let us now turn from the subject of separation to its very opposite. The antonyms of separation are *unification, combination, consolidation, melding, and merging*. We can add to this list the word *atonement* or, as we often break it down into its components, *at-one-ment*. Unification that follows a period of separation is called *reunification* or *regathering*.

Referring to the spiritual symbolism of crop harvesting, God groups His fall feasts together under the term, *Feast of Ingathering*:

And the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field... And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end. (Exodus 23:16; 34:22)

Certainly, the fall feasts – and especially the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day – are joyous, annual opportunities for the reunification between families and good friends in God's church. For our family, this is a great opportunity to be reunified with our daughters and their families.

Unfortunately, we were unable to be together at this last Feast with the daughter mentioned at the beginning of this study, because of the timing of her maternity separation. Still, we did recently rejoice at a reunification with her when she returned to live in Victoria after a couple of years' sojourn in the wilds of eastern Canada! Also, we had a very special time of unification with a brand new family member, when her new baby introduced herself right after the Feast. At the beginning of this article, we examined the potential for a mother's sadness after her baby is born. However, a new, different, joyous relationship is ignited at the moment of birth, and immediately begins to grow and blossom. Jesus points out the tremendous joy when we find that we have a brand new family member to get to know:

A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. (John 16:21)

Let's look at this account again in a little more detail, because, although He mentioned the joy at the initial "meeting" between a new baby and his parents, Jesus' real topic of discussion here was the coming separation and reunification between Himself and His disciples:

"A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father." Then some of His disciples said among themselves, "What is this that He says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'; and, 'because I go to the Father'?" They said therefore, "What is this that He says, 'A little while'? We do not know what He is saying." Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask Him, and He said to them, "Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I said, 'A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'? Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you." (John 16:16-22)

Paul adds to Jesus' last point, that no one will take our joy away from us, by telling us that, once united with Christ, nothing physical can separate us:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

Shortly after Jesus had spoken the words recorded in John 16 and quoted above, His disciples were indeed sorrowful at the violent separation between Jesus and themselves. Then, just as He had told them, three days later came the first great joy when He and they were reunited after His resurrection. There was a minor separation on the Wave Sheaf Sunday when Jesus briefly (in terms of human time) returned to His Father. A most wonderful reunification, no doubt! After this, Jesus returned to His disciples to be with them for a few days more. But then He separated Himself from them again when He returned to heaven, where He has remained ever since. This separation was not quite as painful as the first, for two reasons:

First, Jesus had promised that He would send His Holy Spirit to them and that, through it, He and His Father would be with them.

And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He [i.e. the Father] may abide with you forever... But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, which the Father will send in My name, it will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you... But when the Helper comes, which I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth which proceeds from the Father, it will testify of Me. (John 14:16, 26; 15:26)

In fact, Jesus had told His disciples clearly that, if He did not separate Himself from them and return to His Father, He would be unable to send His Spirit to them:

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send it to you. (John 16:7)

Second, they now were convinced of the truth of the resurrection and that they would be reunited – with Jesus and with one another – at the future First Resurrection. Even as they stood on the Mount of Olives, watching Him return to heaven, He sent them an encouraging reminder of their coming reunion:

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11)

God wants *us* to be present at this wonderful reunion too! Let us look in some more detail at the reunifications that are to take place at the time of Christ's return.

We believe that there will be a reunification between the scattered tribes of physical Israel at Christ's return. Also that God will even bring about a reunification between Israel and the Gentile nations:

Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD speak, saying, "The LORD has utterly separated me from His people"; nor let the eunuch say, "Here I am, a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, says, "Yet I will gather to him others besides those who are gathered to him." (Isaiah 56:3-8)

There will be a joyful reunification of spiritual Israel – the Israel of God – the church of God. Not only will the scattered "tribes" of spiritual Israel be reunited, but many individual church members who had been separated from each other by the scatterings, by time, and by death will be brought together through Jesus Christ:

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. (I Thessalonians 4:13-17)

This account of reunification – with our Elder Brother and our other fellow-brethren – must rank among the most encouraging in the whole Bible. Here's another:

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:30-31)

God's children will be gathered together – unified in the very family of God and will be given a new name! Perhaps it will be the equivalent of God's surname:

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. (Revelation 3:12)

A woman takes on the surname of her husband on their wedding day. God's children will receive their new name when they are unified as the very Bride of Jesus Christ at the Marriage of the Lamb:

"Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints." Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God." (Revelation 19:7-9)

At that time, God's children will be unified with their brethren who had endured tremendous trials – unified as pillars in God's spiritual temple, family, kingdom, and priesthood:

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4-6)

In our joy and anticipation for the First Resurrection, which God advises us is the "better resurrection" (Hebrews 11:35), we must not forget the additional joy that we will share at the time of the Second Resurrection, when we will be reunified with formerly unconverted family members and friends:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. (Revelation 20:11-13)

Once our formerly unconverted loved ones are resurrected and converted, our level of unity with them will be lifted to a plane that neither they nor we could even imagine during our physical lives.

We saw earlier how sin can be a great contributor to separation. We can see now, then, that the level of unity amongst God's children will increase in a directly proportional ratio to the amount of sin that is removed from the earth:

- **Partially at the time of the First Resurrection and the return of Jesus Christ,**
- **More so when Satan is imprisoned,**
- **Further at the time of the Second Resurrection,**
- **Even more so at the time of the Third Resurrection and Second Death,**
- **Then totally, once sin is completely purged from the earth, which will then become fit for God the Father to come:**

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God"... And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. (Revelation 21:3; 22:3)

Total reunification, oneness and unity! A concept that is so very hard for us mortals to comprehend now, but God the Father and Jesus Christ have enjoyed this level of total unity for all eternity, only being truly separated for those few, infamous hours in the spring of 31AD. John recorded Jesus' prayer in which He yearned for the time when His brothers and sisters would be able to fully share in the level of oneness that He and His Father had enjoyed eternally:

And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was... And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them. Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. (John 17:5, 10-11)

Was Jesus praying for His disciples of that time only? No. Let us continue reading Jesus' encouraging words of reunification in verse 20:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world... And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:20-24, 26)

Each year, God's joyful Feast of Ingathering comes to a sad end and, after eight happy days together, His children must separate from their beloved brethren once again. But the time is coming very soon when we will not have to be separated any more. Once that time comes, we will be able to be together forever: united in the family of God! United with Jesus Christ as His Bride! United with the great God, our wonderful Father!

*John Plunkett
Building Bridges, The Church of God - Canada
Qualicum Beach, British Columbia, Canada*