

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL LETTERS TO GOD’S PEOPLE THE GOD WHO CHANGES US *Once Apart – Now Together*

Loneliness is a deadly epidemic in America. Researchers point to many factors they believe cause the problem, such as: (1) the increasingly long work days and commutes, (2) the growth of two-career and single parent families, (3) the effects of television, and (4) the decline in direct personal contact caused by social media and the Internet just to name a few. However, there is a deeper cause for loneliness in America not addressed by modern-day researchers. That loneliness comes about when people move farther away from God. The fact is there is an empty place deep within each of us – whether we realize it or not – a place that only God can fill. St. Augustine said, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

This study explains how God changes us from the aloneness of being apart from Him and brings us into His fellowship. An old hymn says, “All that thrills my soul is Jesus. He is more than life to me. And the fairest of ten thousand. In my blessed Lord I see.” What thrills your soul? I hope it is Jesus because His Presence is the most fulfilling fellowship ever!

In the Greek, *koinonia* was Paul’s favorite word to describe a believer’s relationship with the risen Lord and the benefits of salvation which come through Him. Most often in English, it is translated as fellowship; however, there is no single word that adequately describes the meaning of *koinonia*. In the minds of many today, the word fellowship often means meals and social events. God’s Word teaches us that *koinonia* – fellowship with God and His family is so much more.

**Once apart from God, now we have fellowship with Christ.**

*Read 1 Corinthians 1:9 (ESV)* <sup>9</sup> *God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

After Adam and Eve sinned against God in the Garden, we read in **Genesis 3:8 (ESV)** *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.* The fellowship between God and His people was broken because of sin. However, the death and resurrection of Jesus, God’s Son, opened the door for restored fellowship with God the Father. Feeling lonely? Maybe now is the time to come into closer fellowship with the Faithful One!

The truth is parents, spouses, children, friends, co-workers are not always faithful. Believers are not always faithful to one another. Then, there is always that curse of physical death that eventually brings separation from loved ones. But **God is faithful!** **Romans 10:13 (ESV)** <sup>13</sup> *For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* When we come into the fellowship of God’s family, He is always available to us – even when we

may think or feel that He is not. **Hebrews 13:5 (ESV)** <sup>5</sup> ... *be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."*

### Once apart from the church, now we have fellowship.

**Read Romans 12:9 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*

*Let love be genuine.* I love Christian novels. Sally John is the Christian author I have been reading recently and she has a couple of books about a small apartment complex called Casa de Vida – the House of Life where all the occupants in the 12 apartments become like family and surround each other with God’s love. As I was reading, I thought, how wonderful but these stories are just fiction. And, then, I remembered! That type of environment is not necessarily fiction. We find it in our Sunday School family – we have that special connection – sharing joys and also sharing pain. In the fiction stories, people came to live in the apartment complex because love was genuine there and they saw Jesus in the apartment owner and others who lived there. True fellowship cannot happen unless love is authentic.

My mother used to say when putting on her makeup that she was putting on her “false face.” Church can be like a masquerade ball. It is not always easy to “bare our souls” but if we want to develop authentic relationships, we don’t try to hide our faults. In fact, recovery ministries will tell you that it is therapeutic. You cannot build a relationship without authenticity. One of the best ways to build authenticity in your life is to study and apply God’s Word together.

*Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.* Good is not what you or I want to be good. And evil is not what you or I want to be evil. In our society, evil has taken on a ‘new’ normal. We see this happening before our eyes in ‘prime time’ television. Things that God’s Word teaches are wrong are being touted as personal ‘choices’ and acceptable within story lines. Yes, they may be interesting stories but we need to either change the channel or turn off the TV because the more we are exposed to sin the less offensive it becomes. If you do not currently have a fellowship where you can be encouraged to *hold fast to what is good*, you need to find one. Let’s continue with Paul’s fellowship list.

**Read Romans 12:10-18 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.* <sup>11</sup> *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.* <sup>12</sup> *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.* <sup>13</sup> *Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.* <sup>14</sup> *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* <sup>15</sup> *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.* <sup>16</sup> *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.* <sup>17</sup> *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* <sup>18</sup> *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

In our search for the “perfect fellowship,” remember that perfect does not mean sinless or faultless. Perfect means complete. **James 1:17 (ESV)** <sup>17</sup> *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* When you find the place of fellowship that God has designed for you, it will indeed be a gift from God! Let’s see how Paul outlines the way to the perfect fellowship.

The reason that having a “church home” is so significant is that mutual fellowship helps us grow. **Hebrews 10:25 (ESV)** <sup>25</sup> *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* There is a yearning in each of us to ‘belong’ that springs from the depths of our soul. When I worked in Little Rock, almost every day I would see homeless people who lived on the streets. But, there’s another group of ‘homeless’ people living among us. Actually, they live in houses all around us but in many ways are just as desperate as the street people— They are those who for many different reasons have never found ‘their church home’ – that place where they ‘fit in’. God’s Word calls it fellowship. **Ecclesiastes 4:10 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> *For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!*

This group does not just include those in need of fellowship with the Living Lord. This group is also those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ but for one reason or the other have never found that ‘special place’ to belong and to serve.

We cannot always fix other people’s problems but one thing we have learned in our ‘family’ group is that the sharing together of problems helps. Sometimes it is something as simple as saying, “I’ve been there. I know how you feel.”

*Love one another with brotherly affection.* Any group that wants to be a genuine House of Life to others must have brotherly affection for each other.

*Outdo one another in showing honor.* The world likes to outdo one another to see how much they can get for themselves. The family of God is just the opposite – giving with no thought of return.

*Do not be slothful in zeal.* Don’t be lazy in showing enthusiasm for the Lord’s work. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that zeal for the Lord’s house would consume Him. (**John 2:17**) Many things in this world consume us – in order to avoid an attitude adjustment within the family of God, we need to be consumed in our work for the Lord.

*Be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.* Fervent means eager. Paul wrote in **Romans 1:15 (ESV)** *So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.* God’s family needs to be eager in our spirits to do the Lord’s work and to seek His will. Spiritual eagerness is not something limited to Paul and the early Christians. Eagerness for the things of God should be contagious within the fellowship.

*Rejoice in hope.* Paul wrote often about hope and rejoicing. He said in **Philippians 4:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.* When I think of hope, I think most often of the Blessed Hope. **Titus 2:13 (ESV)** *waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.* Even in our darkest days, we can *rejoice in hope*. Our “family home” is not built on this earth. **Psalms 30:5 (ESV)** ... *Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*

*Be constant in prayer* – Paul expressed this another way in **1 Thessalonians 5:17 (ESV)** *pray without ceasing,* Prayer is communication with God. Because God is personal, all people can pray. However, sinners who have not trusted Jesus Christ for their salvation remain alienated from God. So while unbelievers may pray, they do not have the basis for a rewarding fellowship with God. They have not met the conditions laid down in the Bible for effectiveness in prayer. **James 5:16 (ESV)** *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for*

*one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

Although they probably do not realize it, this is often the reason non-Christians seek out Christians to pray for them. Our prayers for the needs of the unsaved, can be just the ‘foot in the door’ we need to share the good news of Jesus.

*Live in harmony with one another.* We are able to live in harmony because of love. **Colossians 3:14 (ESV)** *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* It is a fact of life that not everyone – even within the family of God is always going to see ‘eye to eye’. But, we need to remain on guard and *live peaceably*. Paul wrote something similar in **Titus 3:1-2 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,* <sup>2</sup> *to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.*

### **Once without purpose, now we have fellowship in the mission.**

**Read Philippians 1:3-7 (ESV)** <sup>3</sup> *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,* <sup>4</sup> *always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,* <sup>5</sup> *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* <sup>6</sup> *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* <sup>7</sup> *It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*

There is a fellowship in laboring together on mission for the kingdom of God. It is like no other – in the good times and the bad. Those who share in mission work discover the same bond that Paul wrote to the Philippians about. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. Philippi was the first European city to receive the gospel of Christ from Paul. I love the words Paul shared with them: *I thank my God every time I remember you.* Paul was a prayer warrior. Though in prison, he prayed for his co-workers in the faith. One of the commentators that I read asked this question, “Does your pastor thank God for you when he thinks of you?”

Paul had confidence in the Philippian fellowship. He was so confident that he wrote: *I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* Need a verse to give a Christian laborer in the faith who is discouraged? It doesn’t get any better than this one! God’s work **for** us began when Christ died on the cross in our place. His work **in** us began when we first believed. God’s work continues and strengthens us as we stay in fellowship with Him and His family and then reach out to work in His harvest field.

Do you sometimes feel as though you aren't making progress in your spiritual life? When God starts a project, He completes it! As with the Philippians, God will help you grow in grace until He has completed His work in your life.

A life that is lived in service to the Lord is a rich life although it may not seem so to the world. Sin and selfishness drive us to isolation. But God has made a way – actually The Way of Jesus to experience a relationship with the Savior and with others that satisfies the deep longings of our souls and for sure we will never be alone again!