

THE FELLOWSHIP

An Exposition of First John

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CHAPTER FOUR -

THE PROGRESS OF THE FELLOWSHIP

I John 2:12-14

12 I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.

13 I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father.

14 I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.

THE entrance to the Fellowship is not a stopping place, but a starting place - as in all life, there is to be growth, progress. Some people miss so much for lack of this onward spirit. Like the poor woman who, trudging wearily through the driving rain and icy wind, came at last to the big house for which she was bound. When the door was opened to her she found a great blazing fire in the grate. On the door re-closing she sank down on the mat inside, utterly worn out, and wet through. Get up, they said, and come to the fire and get dry and warm. No, she answered, don't disturb me, I'm quite content to remain here.

Now that you are in the Fellowship, are you content to stay on the mat? Psalm 84:10 says, "**I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness**", where the idea of the opening phrase would be, "I would rather be just inside the door . . ."

Yes, of course, better be only just inside than be left outside; but why stick there and miss all the blessings open to those who venture farther and farther on in the Christian life. I sometimes recall the old refrain.

"More and more, more and more,
Still there's more to follow.
Have you on the Lord believed.
Still there's more to follow."

The poetry is negligible; the fact is immeasurable. There is even danger, as well as loss, in

failing to get on.

A little fellow had been tucked in to bed, but, after a bit, had fallen out. When mother came running upstairs to see what had happened, and asked however he had fallen out, the child said, "I don't know, mummie, unless it was I went to sleep too near where I got in."

Ah, how many Christians have done that. It's asking for a fall!

The New Testament is full of this idea of progress. Look at Hebrews 6:1, "**Leaving the principles . . . let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation . . .**" That doesn't mean throwing the first things overboard but leaving them there as you do the foundations when you are building a house: you don't need to lay the foundation again, it's there - now "**let us go on**", till we reach the completed edifice. Look at Colossians 2:6-7, "**As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him, Rooted and built up in Him**".

There, by the threefold variation of his metaphor, the apostle impresses upon his Christian readers the importance of their spiritual growth: the progress of a walk, the progress of a tree, the progress of a house. And now we have John, by the means of yet another illustration, pointing the same salutary lesson - some have grown in spiritual stature to be as "**Fathers**"; some are spiritually vigorous "**Young Men**"; some, for all their physical age, are yet "**Little children**" in grace.

He begins with a general and inclusive remark, embracing all believers, and calling them all "**little children**" - a different word in the Greek from that used in verse 13. The reason here seems to lie between one or other of two explanations.

(a) He is by now an old man, and is in the habit of addressing younger people by this title, as ancients often do.

(b) He is writing particularly for those who, as a matter of fact, are his children in the faith - so he uses this affectionate, fatherly, family name.

Note how he adds "**your sins are forgiven you for His Name's sake**" (12). That is true of every real believer, of whatever age, the oldest, or the youngest, in GOD'S family. We are, indeed, never in the Family unless, or until, that has happened. Oh, the bliss of it, that what we have done as sinners, is forgiven for the sake of what He has done, as Saviour. We repeat, this is true of all Christians, however long or short a time we have been such.

"YOU FATHERS"

You notice that, led as he is by the HOLY SPIRIT, John begins at the top.

Is there, I wonder, anything deliberate about that? Is it that GOD is concerned to place the highest, the greatest, before us at the start before He contemplates for us anything less than the best? Would He have us fix our eyes on the peak of spiritual attainment that we may the more readily overcome the obstacles on the way thitherward; would He have our minds filled at the outset with a Divine discontent with anything lower than His highest?

Aspire, then, to be "**fathers**", with as rapid progress as may be.

"Ye have known Him that is from the beginning" (13-14).

Twice the description is given. It refers, I believe, to the knowledge of CHRIST, as in the opening of his Gospel (1:1), and as in the opening of this Epistle (1:1). "**Known**" is an elastic word, meaning much or little according to the context. In our last Study we spoke of the growth in that knowledge - these "**fathers**" are to be presumed to know much, and to know intimately.

They will thus have become aware of (a) His Mind - what He thinks about things; what He purposes about things.

They will be conscious of (b) His Heart - so filled with love for sinful men, Romans 5:8, even while hating their sin.

They will possess an instinct for (c) His Best - in what His children may have, and be, and do.

How immensely fruitful is such knowledge of Him. Paul places it in the very forefront of his deep desire for spiritual understanding. "**That I may know . . . the power of His resurrection**", the life of the Risen One activating in him. Yes, wonderful! "**That I may know . . . the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death**", his self crucified with CHRIST. Yes, wonderful! But, firstly, and chiefly, "**that I may know Him**", (Philippians 3:10).

Paul longs increasingly (do we?), not merely for knowledge of deeper blessing, richer experience - though he will not undervalue these - but for ever deepening, ever closer, acquaintance with his Divine Saviour, MASTER, FRIEND.

What constraining impetus lies there.

See it, for instance, in Daniel 11:32, "**The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits**" - such knowledge moves the heart, steels the will, nerves the arm, to adventure for GOD.

Ned Weeks, a man uneducated and ungifted, but with a heart aflame with love for GOD and for men, did such a remarkable work in the town of Northampton that they gave him a public funeral, when crowds lined the streets with every evidence of real sorrow as the cortege passed. A stranger standing by, on asking who this was, and why all this demonstration, was given, in the rough vernacular, the explanation, "You see, he was wonderfully thick with the Almighty."

Ah yes, he knew Him. To be educated - grand; to be gifted - grand; to be enthusiastic - grand; but grandest of all is to "**know Him**", for this will over-rule any disability, caused through no fault of our own, and enable us to dare and do for Him.

This, then, is the supreme mark of "**the fathers**", the essential qualification for spiritual parenthood. What a joy it is to have spiritual children, those whom we have been enabled to lead to CHRIST. How Paul rejoiced in being able to speak of Timothy as "**my own son in the faith**",

and as "**my dearly beloved son**" (1 Timothy 1:1, 2; 2 Timothy 1:1, 2), and of "**my son Onesimus**" (Philemon 10). And with what fatherly delight John writes, "**I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth**" (3 John 4). Covet to be thus a "**father**", or mother, of many - so to know GOD that you may be able to lead others to know Him.

"YOU YOUNG MEN"

These Christians are not yet at the top; but they are climbing steadily, and by the look of it they are not so very far off.

John has more to say - and very delightful things, too - about this stage of spiritual attainment than the other two. Perhaps these latter are more simply conceived - the beginning of the life, the closing of the life; while those in the middle reaches are more beset with problems.

What a famous Scottish preacher, the late Dr. G. H. Morrison, called "*The Perils of Middle Age*", when preaching on Psalm 91:6, "**The destruction that wasteth at noonday**". Certainly our young men and women of to-day have more difficulties and dangers to face in these times than were ever our lot yesterday. The whole atmosphere of life is different. Yet, having said that, one reflects upon what was the atmosphere of the world in which these early Christian "**young men**" were called to live their life and give their testimony.

They did it by the same secret as Christian young men can do it still - "**not I, but Christ liveth in me**", (Galatians 2:20). But, in returning to our passage, we recall to mind that the people to whom John writes are, one imagines, not literal young men, but believers of any age who are young in the faith, who have all the vitality, exuberance, and adventurousness of youth exhibited in their Christian living. Older or not in years, they have a freshness and virility and enthusiasm that proclaims them as the young men and women of the Kingdom.

Mark some of their outstanding qualifications.

"**Ye have overcome the wicked one**" (13) - they have undergone many temptations, but overcome them; indeed, recognizing that behind every inducement to sin there lies lurking the sinister personality of "**the wicked one**", with all the hosts of evil spirits at his beck and call, (Ephesians 6:12), they combat not merely it, but him. There are those who deny the personality of the devil; but not so did the Master, the account of whose wilderness conflict opens with the words, "**when the tempter** [not just the temptation] **came to Him . . .**" (Matthew 4:3).

Many a contest with the Satanic myrmidons had these "**young men**" waged, and many a victory they had gained. You see, there is a secret of victory which these had learned - and we shall learn it in a later Study of this very Epistle. It is, alas, sadly true that many third-rate, poor-grade, Christians are living defeated lives: such an unsatisfactory thing for themselves, such a bad example to others, such a poor advertisement for the faith.

How different are those spoken of by Paul, in Romans 5:17, that "**they which receive abundance of grace . . . shall reign in life**". Reign, not over people nor kingdoms, but over feelings, and fears, and circumstances, and habits, and sins. You see, these "**young men**" are triumphant overcomers, because "**Ye are strong**" (14) - a weak Christian is a contradiction in

terms, for the purposes of GOD never contemplate such a thing.

Unfortunately, there are not a few delicate, invalid Christians; and all such should attend at once the Great Physician's clinic, to discover what is wrong, and to get things put right. Among the common symptoms of this spiritual debility are

- (a) A lack of good food - seen in the fact of no appetite for the Word;
- (b) A lack of good, fresh air - the mountain breezes that blow about the footstool of prayer;
- (c) A lack of good exercise - in the service of GOD.

Nowhere is it more certain that idleness is the precursor of illness. How frequently, in both Testaments, do the Scriptures exhort us to "**Be strong**" - whether in Joshua 1:9, 18, Haggai 2:4; or in Ephesians 6:10. Wherefore, let us heed the injunction, not only for our sake, but for others, since "**we then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak**", Romans 15:1.

The description proceeds "**The Word of God abideth in you**" (14) - here is one of the big secrets for the development of moral muscle and spiritual sinew. All big Christians have been Bible Christians; all who have been greatly blessed to others have been themselves steeped in it. I read in Acts 18:24 of Apollos, that he was "**mighty in the Scriptures**" - that was, of course, only the Old Testament, and he had much to learn of New Testament truth; but what he possessed him, so that, out of his knowledge of the Sacred Writing, he was able, with eloquence, and with fervent enthusiasm, to teach and help many.

Such a grasp of the Bible is not to be acquired easily, or quickly; to begin the day with the, sometimes hurried, reading of the day's portion is not enough - it is good so far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. Time must be found, and stuck to, for a regular weekly period of real study in some selected Book or Subject - so that gradually we begin to grasp the Bible, and the Bible begins to grip us.

I note again that the Word "**abideth**" in these virile Christians - it lives there!

With some it pays but a brief fleeting visit - that five or ten minutes in the morning, and then off again till next day; but with these it has come to take up its residence in them. They have given it such a welcome that it has come to stay. It has become part of themselves. It is always there to consult, to advise, to cheer. Something of this sense lies behind Paul's exhortation in Colossians 3:16, "**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing . . . with grace in your hearts . . .**"

How that verse reminds me of the late Mr. George Goodman - of ever blessed memory.

Often have I heard him at a Question Hour; and always he would begin his answer with a Scripture quotation - the Word dwelling in him richly. And what grace was in his heart!

And now

"YOU LITTLE CHILDREN"

Here is the different word from that used in verse 12 - that being the generic title used by John for all the children of GOD, this the specific name given by him to all who have only just been **"born again"**, or who have not grown in grace since that day.

This particular word is used only on one other occasion, in verse 18, one of whose striking implications we shall note presently.

"Ye have known the Father" - does it appear strange that the same characteristic is singled out for these as is predicated of the **"fathers"** (13) - that of knowledge? I think not, when you recollect that this quality is, as we have seen, of an ever-growing nature. It is noteworthy that whereas the **"fathers"** are said to know CHRIST, as we so interpret it, the **"little children"** are stated to love the FATHER. But, after all, the statement is close to child psychology, for the little thing, while scarcely aware of other people, has at a very early age a knowledge of Daddy and Mummy.

That is a very lovely thing that Paul has in Galatians 4:6, **"Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father"** - the HOLY SPIRIT teaching the babe in CHRIST to lisp his first word: the Aramaic word **"Abba"** does not need teeth to pronounce it!

The child in faith does begin to know his Heavenly FATHER - not as his senior knows Him, but he does know Him in his measure. He knows Him as the One to whom he must look for all supplies, and all sufficiencies.

I draw your attention to a remarkable statement lower down in this chapter, verse 20, **"Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things"**.

That will presumably be said concerning the **"fathers"**? - No, although it would be true of them. Concerning the **"young man"**, then - No, although it would be true of them also. It is actually used of the **"little children"** in the faith. To paraphrase the version, without violating the truth: You, even you Christian children, have the HOLY SPIRIT within you, and you are thus in a position to get to know all things that it is necessary to know for your spiritual well-being and well-doing. Yes, even the little children in grace - (addressed in verse 18) for the word here is the one used elsewhere only in verse 13. The fact is that every believer, whatever be his grade of spiritual growth, has open to him this inexhaustible source of information and inspiration to fit the demands of his conditions and circumstances. Even the youngest, in knowing the Father, may know all that is needful.

Oh, then, to be continually growing in the uninterrupted progress of the Fellowship. To the just converted He says, **"As new-born babes, desire the sincere (unadulterated) milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby"**, (I Peter 2:2).

To the unsatisfactory Christians, who are making no progress, He says, **"I have fed you with milk (still), and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able"**, (I Corinthians 3:2).

To those who are happily going on with GOD He says, "**From a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus . . . and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of GOD may be perfect (full-grown), thoroughly furnished unto all good works**", (II Timothy 3:15-17).

How dependent we all are upon the Word of GOD, the importance of whose study we stressed on an earlier page.

We cannot close this Meditation without referring to the all-round progress of our LORD in His earthly life. "**And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man**", (Luke 2:52). That is, He grew (as man) mentally, and physically, and spiritually, and socially.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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