

JOY WAY

An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul

TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by

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CHAPTER THREE

WHAT A HAPPY PRAYER! - Philippians 1:9-11

"**THIS I pray**" - the character and content of Paul's prayers form a great stimulus and education in the blest employ. See here -:

A PRAYER FOR THE HEART

"**That your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment**" (9).

Love is the first of all Christian characteristics, and so the apostle makes that the first of his desires for them - even as he opens with it the catalogue of Christian virtues, "**the fruit of the Spirit is love . . .**", Galatians 5:22 - as though to imply that if that is right, all else will probably fall into its due place.

The word translated "**abound**" signifies "*overflow*" - a like conception to that of Malachi 3:10, "**prove Me now herewith said the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of Heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it**": all you can do is to overflow it. Or, as the Master said, in John 7:38 "**He that believeth on Me . . . out of [him] shall flow rivers of living water**" - verse 37 was the inflow; 4:14 was the upflow; this verse 38 is the overflow.

What a grand thought it is that any one of us Christians - yes, any one of us - can overflow with love: an overflowing "with all" love towards GOD, and a selfless love toward our fellows, Matthew 22:37-39. Of course, this same writer knew the secret of this so desirable quality, that "**the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us**", Romans 5:5.

It is surprising how such love begets "**knowledge**" - and that, here, not simply a superficial knowledge, for, in the Greek, an intensive preposition is conjoined with the usual verb, to give it the force of a deep knowledge.

Real love for a person brings us rare insight and understanding of them: we see it even in the highest realm - "**Everyone that loveth . . . knoweth God**" I John 4:7. The converse is also true: that if love produces knowledge, knowledge safeguards love.

Dr. Plummer has said that "love may go grievously astray - misty thought, emotional conduct, and indiscriminate good nature are perilous". If this is the point of this passage, which I beg leave to doubt, then this "**knowledge**" and this "**judgment**" would be as the banks of love's river, keeping the rushing water within bounds.

In this sense, a deepening knowledge of others through experience, a heightening knowledge of GOD through communion, a widening knowledge of truth through the Word, are so greatly to be desired, and to be prayed for.

Many of the commentators approve of this latter interpretation of the passage; but others offer the former explanation for the reader's consideration, which, with great temerity, I venture to endorse. Of this, however, we shall have no quarrel, that both deep knowledge, and overflowing love, are of exceeding worth, and that each, whatever be the meaning here, has a contribution to make toward the perfection of the other - for this twofold blessing let us all pray: whether for ourselves, or for others, as Paul did for his Philippians.

A further qualification of this all-out love is this quality of "**all judgment**". Discernment, or insight, is the meaning of this word - a quick, sensitive perception such as would prevent love from doing, saying, thinking the wrong thing. You remember that promise concerning Messiah, in Isaiah 11:3, that the "**Spirit of the Lord . . . shall make him of quick understanding**", where the A.V. margin renders it, "of quick scent."

A spiritual sense of smell is of great importance is both beneficial to love, and bestowed by love.

Barnabas possessed it to an unusual degree. If I may put it thus crudely, he had a nose for the fragrance of the good - recall how he detected that in Saul of Tarsus, when everybody else was afraid of him, Acts 9:26-27; and how he detected it at Antioch, Acts 11:22-23; and how he detected it in John Mark, in spite of that young man's desertion, Acts 15:37-39. Happy they who have a quick scent for the fragrance of grace: there are many still of the Barnabas ilk!

There are others who have a nose for the effluvium of the evil, who can detect fake doctrines, false notions, and what not. They can exercise a very useful office in the church - as Paul himself did, when he smelt heresy even in Peter, Galatians 2:11-13: which, incidentally, Barnabas failed to detect (verse 13).

But that great man had not much of a nose for bad smells, but for good! Of course, I have Scriptural authority for speaking thus of a spiritual nose. In I Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of those who are, as it were, spiritual feet, spiritual hands, spiritual ears, spiritual eyes; and though he shrinks from naming some as nasal men, he does imply their existence in his phrase, "**If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?**" (verse 17).

Let it be freely acknowledged that, in the course of the centuries, the Church has had reason to be grateful for her spiritual noses - men like Athanasius and Luther. But, listen - Paul's prayer

proceeds to choose accordingly. That, for Paul's Philippians, and for us, is the happy way of life. The prayer goes on -

A PRAYER FOR THE MIND

"That ye may approve things that are excellent" (10).

According to Lightfoot (and what greater, more painstaking, and more exact scholar shall we follow?), commenting on the margin, "*things that differ*", it is not "*things which are opposed*", for it requires no keen moral sense to discriminate between these, but "*things that transcend*" - we may add, not between what is good, and what is bad; but between what is good, and what is better.

The word "**approve**" here means "*discriminate*" - to test, and set the seal of approval on the one thing rather than on the other. It is akin to the quality of "**judgment**", or "**discernment**" that we discussed in the previous verse.

This is, as we saw, indeed a gift of the SPIRIT, and must needs be prayed for. Shall I serve GOD, or not?

The answer needs no wisdom: it is plain to every Christian. Shall I serve GOD at home, or overseas? The answer to this may, for various reasons, be hard to see - the believer can serve GOD anywhere; but he can serve Him to the best only in one place, the place of GOD's own choosing. How important, therefore, to be able to discriminate.

As we get to know Him better, to know His Word more - we shall increasingly possess this gift of discrimination - recognising, of course, the distinction between good and not good; but also between good and better.

How precious is that word in I Corinthians 2:16, "**We have the mind of Christ.**"

Coming down to the practicalities of ordinary everyday life this touches upon our choice of friends, of books, of amusements, of employments, of ambitions.

Of course, the highest office of this gift of discrimination is to guide us about what would best please and honour GOD - and what - would displease - and grieve Him.

A gang of boys were bent on doing something wrong, and when one of them demurred, the others twitted him, "Ah, you're afraid that if your father knew he'd hurt you!" But said he, "No, I am only afraid that if he found out I should hurt him." Such is "**the fear of the Lord . . . the beginning of wisdom**". Proverbs 9:10.

That is how it is to be with the children of GOD: to distinguish between what would hurt, and what would please, the Heavenly Father, and -

A PRAYER FOR THE CHARACTER

"That ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ" (10).

Here is one's character, as it were, in three dimensions.

(a) As concerns ourselves - "**sincere**". Apparently adopting the suggestion of some scholars that the word translated "**sincere**" derives from a word meaning "*sunlight*", the late Dr. Meyer has this interesting illustration, "Just as the X-rays passing through the limb will at once show the fracture, or the result of some accident, so the X-rays of GOD'S truth are always searching the heart . . . and the man who lives in love does not mind meeting the searching rays of GOD's truth, which show that he is no hypocrite". The idea is, that in His sight we are to be adjudged true, pure, unsullied, whole.

In the Authorised Version of I Peter 2:2 you have "**the sincere milk of the Word**" - there the thought means "*unadulterated*". The idea is, again, the same: true, pure, unmixed with incompatible ingredients.

The Child of GOD, as the Word of GOD, is to be entirely wholesome, and wholly devoid of any mixture of inconsistency. Which of us stands the test? **Not by the standard of our own opinion of ourselves - not by the standard of what others think of us - but by the infallible eye of GOD.**

Do you remember Dr. James Stalker's sermon on "*The Four Men*" -

- (1) *The Man the World sees;*
- (2) *The Man our Friends see;*
- (3) *The Man we Ourselves see;*
- (4) *The Man GOD sees.*

The same man; but only the last is the Real Man.

"O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as others see us"

sings the Scottish bard; but how much more salutary that we should see what GOD thinks of us - and then, humbly and prayerfully, to seek to be utterly sincere, through and through.

A further facet of character is, as I think, in the apostle's prayer for these his children in the faith. I Timothy 1:2 -

(b) As concerns others - "**without offence**". I hold that the word can with equal accuracy be said to be either intransitive, as in Acts 24:16, "**I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence . . .**" or transitive, as in I Corinthians 10:32, "**Give none offence.**"

Here in this context we must decide whether the "**offence**", or "**stumbling**", is stumbling ourselves, or causing others to stumble. Either meaning is legitimate; and perhaps we may escape the dilemma by ruling that both are referred to. Yet, I cannot help feeling that it is the latter that Paul has in mind in interceding for his friends.

He would have them so walk that they shall leave no stumbling-block in the way of others; even as the writer of Hebrews 12:13 exhorts his readers. "**Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way**". It is so easy for us to become unmindful of others and of our influence for good or ill upon them.

Happy is the Christian, who neither by demeanour nor behaviour, gives anyone the reason, or the excuse, to think wrongly of the faith, or to act wrongly regarding the Master.

That leads me to the third aspect of character -

(c) As concerns our Saviour - "**till the day of CHRIST**". The American scholar, Professor Marvin Vincent, suggests that "**till**" has the idea of "**with a view to**." Have you heard of employees, in factories or offices, who work with an eye on the clock? Well, it is the Christian's joy and wisdom to work with an eye on the Coming.

Paul has the same conception in his letter to Titus 2:11-13. "**The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared . . . teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly** [concerning ourselves], **righteously** [concerning others], **and godly** [concerning our GOD] **in this present world; looking for that blessed hope . . .**"

That's it! "**We should live . . . looking.**"

Here is a little girl whose Daddy is returning home after a long term of military service abroad. Mother has received the message that he is on his way - not sure quite when he is to arrive, but it might be almost any day now. The child can scarcely sleep for excitement. Anyhow, she is careful to be clean and spruce those days; she sees that her bedroom is left neat and tidy; she is ever so good in all her behaviour; she rushes home quick as soon as school is over - why all this? Only that she is living with an eye on the Coming!

So does the keen Christian want to be ready for His arrival - "**and not be ashamed before Him at His coming**" I John 2:28. This happy looking will prove a great stimulus to his holy living. See now how this great intercession concludes with -

A PRAYER FOR THE LIFE

"Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God" (11).

The character will inevitably issue in conduct. That is why there are plums on those trees in my garden: that is their character coming out in conduct - they are plum trees. That is why those people behave in a Christian manner: it is their character emerging into the open - they are Christians.

This last petition of Paul's is exactly parallel to the word in Isaiah 61:3, "**that they might be called trees of righteousness** [**"being filled with the fruits of righteousness"**], **the planting of the Lord** [**"which are by Jesus Christ**," here, **that He might be glorified**, here, "**[unto the**

glory and praise of God]."

The roots are all right; for, as the apostle reminded these Philippian believers at the outset (1:1), they are **"in Christ"** - and if we may reverently put it so, a soul in such soil has every chance to flourish: to fail is somehow, somewhere, entirely his own fault. **"My Well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill"** says Isaiah 5:1: why then should it produce only **"wild grapes"**, sour grapes?

The fruits, then, are **"in"**, and also **"by"** JESUS CHRIST.

He plants the tree, preserves the tree, prunes the tree, that it may bring forth **"fruit . . . more fruit . . . much fruit"**, John 15:2, 8.

"Herein is My Father glorified", added the Master; **"that He might be glorified"**, said the Isaiah 61 passage; **"unto the glory and praise of God"**, as Paul says here.

We cannot forbear quoting II Thessalonians 1:10, **"When He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe . . . in that day"**. Yes, perfectly so in that **"day of Christ"**: why not, then, in measure, in these days that intervene? For it is not we, but He that is to do it; **"the fruit of the Spirit . . ."**, as Galatians 5:22 reminds us.

Ours but to trust and obey; His to employ His beautiful agencies of fruitfulness in the believer

- the rain (Psalm 68:9).
- the dew (Hosea 14:5).
- the wind (John 3:8).
- the sun (Malachi 4:2).

Let us, then, never forget that there is no glory to us in all this.

Paul, elsewhere, utterly repudiates any such suggestion: **"They glorified God in me,"** Galatians 1:24.

This, then, is the apostle's prayer - in all its fulness and sweetness. We close by repeating our title for this study. What a happy prayer!

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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