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Sermon preached by Mr J H Gosden
at Galeed Chapel Brighton
on Sunday evening 12 October 1947

PHILIPPIANS 3 v 12/14

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

What an infinite mercy and wonder it is if the Lord has made us to differ from an ungodly world, and to differ from what we once were. John Newton once said, "I am not what I would be; I am not what I once was; I am not what I hope to be". A good posture to be in - thankful for the least evidence, the least divine token of the Lord's favour, and yet pressing on, as Paul says in the Hebrews: "Let us go on unto perfection", to completeness of experience and enjoyment. What a mercy it is to have a goal; not to be aimlessly beating the air, floundering, wandering, as the hymnwriter says, here and there. We may often feel to flounder, to wander, and hardly know what we are, but there are times when the Lord's people have that definite aim; they know what they want, what they would be, and where they would be. It is set before them in the gospel: "That for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." Says Paul, "I follow after, that I may lay hold of it", for the Lord laid hold of him in order that he might lay hold upon the blessings provided in the gospel; He apprehended him. O, to be apprehended of God! How solemn, and yet how blessed. The Lord apprehends His people frequently by the rigour of His law, which comes to a child of God with its claims and says: "Pay me that which thou owest". It lays hold of him, apprehends him. This is a part of God's work in those for whom He has designed eternal blessedness. He makes them know and feel their ruined state, their

sinful helplessness, their utter inability to meet the claims of that law, or to stand before a holy God in their own names, and on their own merit, and to renounce all fancied merit as Paul did. He renounced his good deeds, as well as his evil ways. "Not having my own righteousness". It is a necessity in experience to cast away all of our own, in respect of contributing to our salvation. To be laid hold of by God, by the firm hand of His grace, is a great mercy. Sometimes, the Lord lays hold distinctly, by a firm hand, and impresses the soul, until the soul feels condemned, and that the sentence pronounced will take effect, but, blessed be God, He does not apprehend His people for that purpose, but in order that they may be instructed and made wise unto salvation. Self-righteousness is in them, and they need saving from that as well as false religion, false zeal and error. So the Lord takes hold of His people and no amount of kicking and rebelling will make Him leave His hold of one whom He has apprehended. We read in the Galatians, an important word - it comes to be important and very real in experience - where it is said that "the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ". The law does not bring people to Christ by its own efficacy, but it shuts people up to condemnation, and makes Christ an imperative necessity. It kills people as to their own power to save themselves; and to their own goodness. What a mercy it is to be well killed, to be "stung to death". For the lack of that there is a good deal of smooth profession of religion, without any clear points in experience. But if a man is killed and made alive; if he is shut up under the law and set free by Christ, what a mercy that is! A willingness is wrought in these people: "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power" (Psalm 110 v 3). There is power in the Lord's dealings with His people, both in conviction of sin and condemnation, and also in grace, in affecting the faculties of the soul. Our will is perverse by nature; it is stubborn and rebellious, and perverse, but the Lord knows how to save that soul and to create in the soul that choice which is the effect of electing love, so that there is a choice of Christ in the heart: "I choose Thee, I want Thee, I desire Thee, and I follow hard after Thee". What a mercy it is to have that inward knowledge, the motions of the Spirit - sometimes through fear, sometimes through love - constraining, causing the person to follow after Christ. The Lord apprehends His people for that purpose, that they shall not always be locked up in legal bondage, but they will have fruitful, profitable, saving union to

Jesus Christ. The Apostle here declares: "Not as though I had already attained". He did not reach his goal, nor was he perfect, nor complete, nor perfectly satisfied; not complete in the experience unto which he was called. It is only step by step; here a little and there a little, that the saints of God, apprehended by the law, are enabled to lay hold of the truth, and of this blessedness unto which they are called. We do not learn all at once, do not come into the fulness of the inheritance immediately, but there are apprehensions, there are receptions of blessings, truths and experiences, step by step. One of them is an apprehension of Christ, in respect of His redeeming work, a laying hold of the atonement, and a reception of it. Atonement is made; Christ made it when, on the cross, He laid down His precious life, and that is the doctrine which is to be translated into a fruitful experience in those who are called by grace. If we lack that experience, and are convinced of our need of it as it is set before us in the gospel, then there will be an incentive to seek the enjoyment of that experience. To receive the atonement is to have peace with God. To receive the doctrine of Christ's redemption into the heart is to feel liberated from the law, for Christ died in order to redeem those who are under the law. Doctrine is in the Scriptures, and that doctrine is followed after, by the Spirit's help. It is set before poor, hungry, naked souls and how they long for it! Perhaps some of you do. You do not deny that the Lord has done something for you and that is a great mercy. Never depreciate what He has done, though in comparison with what you feel to need, it is small; it cannot be small in itself. May the Lord help you, while thanking Him for what He has done, to "covet earnestly the best gifts", and to press diligently after the enjoyment of that atonement. The enjoyment of the atonement is in the heart - where the atonement terminates - by the Spirit bringing forgiveness and peace with God, discharging the conscience from the guilt of sin. Some of the Lord's people have attained to this; others long for it and cannot be satisfied without it. I would say this for your encouragement, the next best thing to possessing the atonement is to be following after the enjoyment of it in humble prayer at the throne of grace. In one of the hymns this morning, you prayed a prayer which, if it be from the heart, and receives an answer, will bring you a good long step toward heaven, in your experience:

Assure my conscience of her part
In the Redeemer's blood
And bear Thy witness with my heart
That I am born of God

Do you find, my friends, a real necessity of the Spirit's work, for the Spirit's work is different from a notional acquaintance with the truth. Notional acquaintance is acquirable by natural powers, but the possession of the truth in experience, the real saving knowledge of the gospel, is a communication and work of the Holy Ghost, whose prerogative it is. Many times you may feel in your soul a longing for that Divine Spirit's witness and His sprinkling on your conscience of the blood of Christ. It is good to have that longing and the Lord will satisfy every longing soul, and the desire of the righteous shall be granted. It is a wonderful truth, - the Lord is not unfaithful or unjust; He is just and faithful and that in blessing unworthy sinners with the enjoyment and the fruit of His death. There is a word in John's first epistle on this point, and a mighty encouragement to a soul pressing against difficulties, after this contact with Christ's atonement. "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness". I hope that word may be made a power in some of your hearts, giving you new strength to press after this blessing and not to be satisfied until you attain unto it. It is attainable. To each of them who have attained unto it

Forgiveness! 'tis a joyful sound
To malefactors doomed to die
Lord may this bliss in me be found
May I redeeming grace enjoy

I believe that will be the feeling of some of you here, and even those who have enjoyed in early days, redeeming love, and who can never forget that attainment - an attainment reached by no effort of their own, and yet not without their efforts. There is a distinction here of that pressing that there may be in some cases, a longing, waiting and pleading for this choice blessing, this covenant gift; blood-bought pardon. Yet, when you get it, - as I can testify in my own feeble way - you know that you did not earn it by your pressing and diligence. It comes freely, sovereignly, and the freeness of the

blessing God bestows through Jesus Christ. "I will love them freely: for Mine anger is turned away" (Hosea 14 v 4). Perhaps when you get the blessing you will feel as many have felt, that you are satisfied; you can hardly think of anything more that you want for the time being. You may think you have attained to all that is attainable. I remember when I got that in my heart; it seemed overflowing, more than I could take in; too good for such a sinner. And the freeness of it was amazing, the comfort of it was powerful, but it did not last long. We are only full of the blessing of the Lord - in our sense of the enjoyment of it - while the power of the Spirit remains upon us. Then we soon find, as we lose the comfort, that we are empty, needy, and poor. But the mercy is this - or one mercy - what the Lord has given and done He will never take away and undo. It is a great mercy to have attained to this experience of pardon that gives you, as it were, a firm standing, gives you to feel at that time that you have a standing for eternity. And yet how much there is to attain; not only forgiveness of sins, but to attain to the enjoyment of justifying righteousness, to be clothed with that. How you may long to feel that; every child of God longs for that. Paul renounces everything for the longing desire he had, and appreciation and value of the righteousness of Christ. "That I may win Christ and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is of the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith". (Philippians 3 v 8/9). And when that righteousness is put, if I may so express it, into the hand of a believer's faith, and becomes his, so that he can say "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength", then he is happy, and humbly confident, and there is a peace which pervades the soul, a strength that girds the mind, which no circumstances can disturb. That is an attainment well worth having.

But there is another point which I think proper to mention, an important one. The predestinated conformity to Christ is set before us in the Scriptures as His purpose toward His apprehended people. He purposes their conformity to the image of His dear Son. How short we come here! Truly we have to say on this point "We have not attained", but do we press after it? Do we pray for holiness, for sanctification? Have we been taught that this is the will of God in Christ Jesus, concerning us - not only to save us from hell and to forgive our sins,

but to make us holy and fit for heaven? Conformity. We read that the Lord has predestinated His people unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, and He has predestinated them to be conformed to the image of His dear Son. That conformity has two parts in it - a suffering part, and a comfortable part. A part of humiliation and a part of exaltation, and that is wrought out in the experience of the Lord's people in this life. In a previous verse in this chapter, the Apostle says that one of his desires is that he might have fellowship with Christ's sufferings. We all, I suppose, would profess to desire to partake of His crown of glory in heaven, but there cannot be a crown without a cross; there cannot be a victory without a conflict; and there cannot be union to Christ without any suffering. Why did Christ suffer? He suffered for sin, not His Own, and He suffered penally, victoriously for His people, and shall they entirely escape suffering? They escape penal suffering - no vindictive wrath ever reaches the person of a child of God - but they do suffer on account of sin. Indeed they are brought to recognise and feel that all their sufferings in this mortal life are connected with their sin. Soul sufferings for sin are very heavy and bitter; conviction of sin is very keen. Sometimes you may feel you can hardly bear what you do feel about your own sin. What is that for? It is to bring a sinner into conformity to Christ. Not that a sinner's sufferings have any merit - they are all to him infinitely less than he deserves - but they are sanctified for his good and prove to him in his experience, the Lord's kindness and prudence in His love. When you are brought in your troubles - troubles in which you may have been distinctly taught that you procured them to yourself by your provocative sins against God - when, in such experience, you are brought down before the Lord, to pray to Him, not chiefly to have the trouble removed, but to have the sin, which procured the trouble, pardoned, then you have, in that submission to God, some measure of conformity to Christ. Was there not some conformity to Christ on the part of that dying thief on the cross, when he said to his fellow sufferer, in vindication of the innocence and dignity of the Person of Jesus Christ: "We indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man hath done nothing amiss". To have submission to God in trying circumstances, disappointments, sorrows, and afflictions, is a measure of conformity, but O, how little some of us know, being so naturally independent and rebellious. But the Lord

knows how to bend a stiff neck. He knows how to bring a sinner, proud and imperious, into meek submission to the Lord in His discipline. In the twenty fifth Psalm, the Psalmist says this, among other petitions: "Look upon mine affliction and my pain; and forgive all my sins". It was as if he would say: Do what Thou wilt with my affliction and my pain, but forgive the sin which procured them. You will find, if you are enabled to take that attitude, when under painful trials, losses, disappointments of this life, that the Lord will not resent it. He will have nothing against that in you, and you may find a strange quietness in that submission, and a blessing in it - not for it, but in it. I know hardly any sweeter position to be in, in trouble, than to be enabled to lie passive in the Lord's hands acknowledging our sin and that our sin deserves more than our trouble; and to know no other will but His; to seek to know that the sin which has procured the trouble is freely pardoned for Christ's sake. Well, that is a benefit and some of you are not altogether ignorant of that attainment. This is connected with it, namely an assurance of God's fatherly care and of your sonship by adoption in Christ through the means of this affliction and trial. In Hebrews 12 the Apostle says: "What son is he whom the Father chasteneth not?" "If ye endure chastening God dealeth with you as with sons" I once got a little touch of that in an afflictive dispensation, and O, there is a comfort in it. It seems to take the bitterness out of the affliction and trial and make the trial more than bearable. The skill of the Lord is in this, His wisdom and prudent love, in bringing you to that point, through such trying circumstances, so that you are enabled to thank Him for the patience - though solemn the dealings may be - the patience which He has exercised toward such a worthless worm, bringing you in some measure into conformity with Christ. "Thy will, not mine, be done".

"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before" - true riches. Of the sordid things of this life, how fond we are, and of the trifling toys; but that is an entire contrariety to Christ, Who had not where to lay His head, though Lord of all. We are not to make our nest and rest here, and die idolators, apart from the

grace of God; but the Lord has determined to be Lord and to be worshipped by His people, and that shall be their privilege; they shall have true riches, the durable riches of righteousness, and they are to attain to them, in attaining to the possession of Christ. Do you aim at this, at being Christ's and knowing that you are? Do you aim at being brought to this point of experience, where you can say with unwavering tongue, and with a deeply humbled, reverent spirit, I am the Lord's. "One shall say: I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel". That is a promise; it signifies that there shall be a blessed sense of belonging to the Lord. What can be better than that? "I am the Lord's". Perhaps this is greater - "The Lord is mine". You, the Lord's by redemption, by electing love, by adopting grace, by the conquest of the Spirit's grace - that is wonderful - but that the Lord should be yours, your Portion, your goodness, your righteousness, your strength, your wisdom - O, how rich they are who possess Christ! This is attainable; Christ in the heart the hope of eternal glory; and a sacred secret that is. It is brought to the sinner, the sinner is brought to it; he seeks after it. Do you seek after it? Do you long to claim the Lord as your Portion, without wavering, by a God-given warrant?

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for the sense He has given you of an interest in His precious blood? and yet say, Lord, I am a sinner; I would be holy; and you will be pressing after it. What will make us holy, even in this life, will be the Lord's presence, and communion with Him. Nothing separates from sin like communion with God in Christ; if you have a little of that communion with Him, or are enabled, even for a short time, to enjoy His sacred presence; if He comes into your heart, according to His Own gracious word - with that I will close - "It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is". Is that your goal? What will accompany that sight? Why, worship, satisfaction, and a falling down before the Lamb and casting our crowns before Him. What a prospect there is before poor, struggling people, who do press after the apprehension and attainment of promised blessings!

I have only hinted at a few - they are infinite - of the blessings which the Lord has treasured up for His people, for this life, and for eternity, and if you get the earnest of heaven then you will be enabled to say

Yes, I to the end shall endure
As sure as the earnest is given
More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven

"I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus".

AMEN.