

Sermon preached by Mr J H Gosden  
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## 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.

The Apostle, in this chapter, reminds us of what he once was, of his then activities in religion; how zealous he was in the Jews' religion, above those of his class, and his zeal carried him so far that he obtained authority from the priests to arraign Christians, compelling them to blaspheme and apprehending them for the hated Name which they bore. A change had come, a mighty change - the account of which we have just read - and is it not a wonderful favour and mercy and privilege that we have the divine records, that are divinely authoritative and inerrant, so that what we read in the Scriptures can be relied upon as absolutely true? What should we do, what should we know, where should we be, but for the holy Scriptures of truth, whereby God is revealed; His character, His Name, His grace, His justice, His mercy, His gospel, His dear Son, Jesus Christ? We should know nothing; all would be a mere guess, the imagination of our puny minds. But, blessed be God, in the Church of God there is no such uncertainty of foundation. The impregnable Rock, the unalterable truth of the Scripture, is the foundation upon which we stand in regard to all which we believe, and all that we practise. That is only incidental, but it is a fortification to the mind sometimes when scepticism that is powerful, and unbelief with its lusts, and temptations, come against our faith, to feel the certainty, as Luke says in his gospel, of the things wherein they have been instructed. The Apostle wrote from a knowledge of Christ, in writing to these

Philippians - those who had been the subjects of regenerating grace. He wrote to them affectionately; gave thanks to God upon every remembrance of them, for the faith and grace given to them, and the fellowship he had with them in the gospel. And he enjoined them to rejoice in the Lord. "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord". There is not much rejoicing today, speaking generally, in the living Church of God; much mourning, and much cause for mourning; many vexations from without, and from within; many disappointments, and much reproach, alas! upon the church from easy professors, and reproach too, in many of our cases because of our sin-procured ignorance and leanness. There are times of rejoicing - blessed be God for that - moments, it may be, hardly more, when there is a real rejoicing in the Lord. But when you get a little loosening from your fears, unbelief, temptations of the enemy, and you can rejoice in Him for being what He is, for His unchangeability, His enthronement in heaven, for His finished work - O, how precious is Christ! Never more so than when you are deeply tried in yourself and from without. The Apostle cautions them against the concision, those who mix things and are not separate; the gospel separates. People who suggest that there is no need for separation, that differences do not matter, and doctrinal truths have no imperative necessity to be known. "Beware of the concision". Beware of worldly conformity, and uniting with errorists, and following evil men. Peter warns the believers, "Beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness." We cannot rejoice in the Lord unless by grace we are enabled to walk thus carefully and circumspectly.

Then he speaks of himself and what had been done in him and what was accomplished in him, in respect to his privileges. He renounced them all; he considered everything that was gain to him - in comparison with Christ and the excellency of His knowledge - to be loss, dross, dung, and gladly suffered the loss of all things for the love and desire that he had toward Christ. He had attained to a great deal; he had received great apostolic authority and a revelation of Christ. He knew the Lord in some good measure of intimacy; he had heard His Voice audibly, as we cannot. He knew much and yet in the text, and in the context, he makes it plain that he was not satisfied. This arose from what he knew, not ignorance. When people suggest that

they know all that is necessary to be known, and are satisfied with their present attainments in religion, it proves that they know very little, perhaps nothing as they ought to know, for every little bit of spiritual knowledge, derived from the Spirit's instruction and life, while it does convey solidity to that truth in the soul, and brings a measure of nourishment and satisfaction, yet it so increases a sense of need, and enlarges the capacity, and gives a sinner strength to seek for yet more knowledge, for the soul to be without knowledge and without growth in grace is unprofitable. There is in us - some of us - the love of ease and we do not like what Rutherford calls "the labour of religion". There is a liability to grow formally confident in past attainments. But then, it is an exceedingly great error to disregard the past, to cast away the beginning of our confidence, and to fall under unbelieving fears and temptations; and, because there is so much more to attain, that we have not attained to, then it is our duty to say that we have received nothing. That is not sober; the insobriety may take both forms - either in resting on what we have had, or denying what we have had, because it is not what we would have. How many here could dare to claim to have had, comparatively, much of what is to be had and is seen to be in Christ? If we have a little, a touch, a crumb, a word, a promise, a look, a visit, an answer to prayer, and blessings of such kind, we ought to be deeply thankful to the Lord. If we have ever received a living token from the Spirit of Christ, an assurance that we are born again, that is no little attainment. Attainments are not by our own efforts, and yet, not without them. You cannot climb to heaven by your own efforts, but you will never get to heaven without effort, without the exercises, that is to say, of a Spirit-wrought faith. Why are there so many admonitions and directions in the Scripture enjoining seeking, praying, reading, running, wrestling, striving, holding fast, if we can lie down and just pharisaically say, well the Lord has done something for us, we need not trouble. That is not grace, yet how much we may be in danger of that zeal which is not according to knowledge, that activity in religion which is only in the flesh, and leads only to the flesh ; so that in all this we need constantly the gracious influence and vital power of the Holy Ghost, without Whom there are no right motions God-ward. The Holy Spirit is alone the Author and Maintainer of the life of God in the soul, for He it is Who unites to Christ, Who is that Life, and from Whom communications are received

through the Spirit.

The Apostle said: "That I may know Him". Why! he did know Him; he knew Him with some measure of intimacy, but by faith, so he needed to have that faith increased. "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained". This was a sober spirit in the Apostle; he had a wholesome apprehension of what there was to be apprehended. He saw more than he had taken hold of for his own property and enjoyment. "Not as though I had already attained" what is attainable, "either were already perfect" - complete, that is to say. It is good when we are enabled soberly to consider ourselves, and not to think - as in the Romans, Paul says - more highly than we ought to think of ourselves, that is, in respect of our experience. I am inclined to think that those who have the richest, deepest experience of the truth of God will be the most humble, and will be those who crave still more.

"I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." There was an urge in the Apostle's soul after that which he saw was apprehensible and possessible of Christ, in the gospel, beyond his own present attainments. Is it not so? more than it can even have been with the Apostle: "Not as if I had already attained .... but I follow after". I do not deny any attainments, I do not cast away what I hope the Lord has done, but would rather seek grace to hold fast, and, from time to time, review what He has done, but that is not the end - "I follow after". You may find strength, and will do as led by the Spirit, in considering to what you have attained, the way in which you have been brought, how the Lord dealt with you from the beginning, and how He has answered prayer, and visited and blessed you, and raised you to a hope in His mercy; given you some little faith's view of the plan of salvation, and so on. You may find strength from past things, but it is good when that strength is used in "following after". There is an encouragement when the Spirit shines on what has been done and attained to in the soul. It gives a kind of fresh standing and encouragement, because what has been done, if it is real, may often be assailed by unbelief, and by temptation and may be hidden by the dark clouds of fear, and sometimes

by guilt. So when we address ourselves to this task, in our experience, we shall need a clearing of the past, and then we shall need that encouragement to press on: "I follow after". In one of the Minor Prophets, it is said: "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord" (Hosea 6 v 3). There is a progress in this; there is an increase. There is more to be known and that for which God calls His people; indeed there is, because when God calls His people from Satan and darkness to the gospel and His marvellous light, He calls them with a blessed end in view, namely the attainment unto His eternal glory. He calls them according to His purpose; that purpose is to glorify them, to conform them to the image of His dear Son. That is the object, the definite, final purpose of God, and that will be the goal of every quickened sinner, as taught by the Spirit. There will be this "following after if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus". He was apprehended of Christ Jesus to be a minister; God had that for him in the course of his life below; but whether ministers or not, God calls His people unto His eternal glory, to obtain salvation by Christ Jesus and to fight the good fight of faith, and to overcome the world, the flesh and the devil, and finally to obtain the victory and enter into the triumph of their Lord.

"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended". He keeps putting this down, repeatedly, to show that he, himself, is at a point about this. He did not set up his experience as complete, though he did so later in the chapter. "Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing." There was a unison there, a mutual encouragement and strength to each for himself, and Paul for himself. We are to follow after, to lay hold of, what was laid up for us.

"This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind". That would include, and definitely imply, a renouncing of the world, and our former life. What a solemn thing it is to find an uprising of unbelief, rebellion, murmuring, and envy of the worldling in his comfort and ease; a looking back to the time, before which, religion was not such a trouble. It is very solemn. The Israelites murmured because of the difficulties, the restrictions, and the supernatural manner of their sustenance in the wilderness. They murmured against

it, as it were, even in your grasp, as you followed after and reached forth, but it seems to have gone. What did the near approach of that blessing do? Did it instruct you and make you resolved still to wait upon the Lord and for Him, until He completed that point in your experience? One word has attracted me countless times, in this particular reference, where the Lord Jesus, just before His ascension into heaven, sent a message to Peter and the ten disciples, saying: "I ascend unto My Father and your Father; and to My God and your God. (John 20 v 17). You may just get a glimpse into that sacred mystery and relationship and the intimacy of it. Sonship, of course, belongs to the eternal subsistence of the Trinity, but the adoption, the Father in Christ, is an act of grace. Yet what a sacred intimacy there is, and how near it seems to bring a poor, sinful worm, to God. You may say, I have never had it; I have seen it and do want it, and pray for that rich enjoyment. Well, my friends, it is to be had. It is not inscribed in the Scriptures for our disregard, but for our encouragement. "Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." (Romans 15 v 4) That we may know, not only what we are saved from, not only the dangers of the way, but the provision the Lord has made, the blessings He has bestowed. Says Paul: "But covet earnestly the best gifts" and is not that one of the best gifts, the Spirit of adoption?

"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." Now, if we are led in this way, by the Spirit, it will keep our religion green; it will make an exercised profession; it will keep us down from exaltation; it will make us, more or less, acquainted with the throne of grace. It will strengthen us, and separate us more and more from the world, and be the means of upholding us in our faith. In a similar line of teaching, Peter says: "If ye do these things ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly, into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ". (2 Peter 1 verses 10/11). Therefore it is not unprofitable to feel our deficiencies, when we see everything promised in Christ, and are enabled to press toward the mark for that prize, and the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

May we be thus minded.

Amen.