

Gleanings from Paul on Prayer

By A.W. Pink

3. Prayer In Hope

Romans 15:13

In his preceding Prayer the Apostle Paul had made request that the God of patience and consolation would grant the saints at Rome to be "like-minded one toward another, according to Christ Jesus" (Rom. 15:5) so that amity and concord might prevail among them. He had followed this by reminding them that the Redeemer's mission embraced not only the Jews but also the Gentiles, that the eternal purpose of God respected an elect portion from both parts of the human race (Rom. 15:8-9). In support of this statement he quoted no less than four Old Testament passages, taken respectively from the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets (the principal sections into which the divine oracles were divided; see Luke 24:44), each of which foretold that the Gentiles would take their place alongside the Jews in worshiping the Lord. Thus the Hebrew Christians need have no hesitation in welcoming believing Gentiles into their midst. The apostle then concluded this section of his epistle, by again supplicating the throne of grace on their behalf, thereby evidencing his deep solicitude for them, and intimating that God alone could impart the grace necessary for obedience to the injunctions given them.

Vital instruction is to be obtained by attending closely to the connection between Romans 15:13 and the verses which immediately precede it. In the context Paul had cited a number of Old Testament passages which announced the salvation of the Gentiles and their union with believing Jews. Now the prophecies of Scripture are to be viewed in a threefold manner. First, as proofs of their divine inspiration, demonstrating as they do the omniscience of their Author in unerringly forecasting things to come. Second, as revelations of the will of God, announcements of what He has eternally decreed, which must therefore come to pass. Third, as possessing a moral and practical bearing upon us: where they are predictions of judgment, they are threatenings and therefore warnings of the objects to be avoided and the evils to be shunned—as the before announced destruction of the papacy bids us have nought to do with that system; but where they consist of predictions of divine blessing, they are promises for faith to lay hold of and for hope to anticipate before their actual fulfillment. Paul is viewing them in this third respect.

Our Use of the Divine Promises

Here the apostle shows us what use we are to make of the divine promises, namely, turn them into believing prayer, requesting God to make them good. As God draws near

to us in promise, it is our privilege to draw near to Him in petition. Those prophecies were infallible assurances that God intended to show mercy to the Gentiles. No sooner had Paul quoted them than he bowed his knees before their Giver, thereby teaching the Roman saints—and us—how to turn the promises to practical account, instructing them what to ask for. In like manner when he would have the Ephesian saints beg God to enlighten their understandings, that they might know the great things of the gospel, he set them an example by praying for that very thing (Rom. 1:17-18). So here; it was as though he said, "Thou hast promised that the Gentiles should hope in Thee [Romans 15:12]. Thou art 'the God of hope.' Graciously work in these saints so that they 'may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost,' and that they too may from my example be constrained to supplicate Thee and plead this promise for the attainment of this very blessing."

That the reader may have a more definite view of the connection, we will now quote the verse before our prayer: "And again, Esaias [Isaiah] saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust." That is taken from one of the great Messianic prophecies, recorded in Isaiah 11. Whatever may or may not be its ultimate accomplishment, Paul was moved to make known to us that that prediction was even then receiving fulfillment. Literally the Greek reads, "In Him shall the Gentiles hope," and it is thus rendered correctly in the Revised Version. Though intimately connected, as Hebrews 11:1 shows, there is a real difference between faith and hope. Faith is more comprehensive in its range, for it believes all that God has said concerning the past, present, and future—the threatenings as well as the promises—but hope looks solely to a future good. Faith has to do with the Word promising; hope is engaged with the thing promised. Faith is a believing that God will do as He has said; hope is a confident looking forward to the fulfillment of the promise.

The Remote Context

Having sought to point out the instructive connection between the apostle's prayer and the verses immediately preceding, a word now on its remoter context. This prayer concludes that section of the epistle begun at Romans 14:1, on unhappy division in the company of the Roman saints. Without taking sides and expressly declaring which was in the wrong, Paul had laid down broad and simple principles for each to act upon, so that if their conduct was regulated thereby, Christian love and Christian liberty would alike be conserved. He set before them the example of their Master, and then showed that both Jews and Gentiles were given equal place in the Word of prophecy. To borrow the lovely language of Moule, "He clasps them impartially to his own heart in this precious and pregnant benediction, beseeching for both sides, and for all their individuals, a wonderful fullness of those blessings in which most speedily and most surely the spirit of their strife would expire." The closer a company of Christians are drawn to their Lord, the closer they are drawn to one another.

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost." The "God of hope" is both the Object and the Author of hope. He is the One who has prepared the blessings which are to be the objects of our hope, who has set them before us in the gospel, and who by the power of the Spirit enables us to understand and believe the gospel, which awakens motives and sets in action principles that ensure hope. The burden of Paul's prayer was that the saints might abound in this spiritual grace, and therefore he addressed the Deity accordingly. As Matthew Henry pointed out, "It is good in prayer to fasten upon those names, titles and attributes of God which are most suitable to the errand we come upon and will best serve to encouragement concerning it." A further reason why the apostle thus addressed the Deity appears from the preceding verse, where it was announced of the Lord, "In him shall the Gentiles hope." More literally our verse reads, "Now the God of that [or 'the'] hope"—the One who is the Inspirer of all expectations of blessing.

"The God of Hope"

This expression "the God of [that] hope" had special pertinency and peculiar suitability to the Gentiles—who are mentioned by name no less than four times in the verses immediately preceding. Its force is the more apparent if we consider it in the light of Ephesians 2:11-12, where Gentile believers are reminded that in time past they "were without Christ [devoid of any claim upon Him], being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world"—without any knowledge of Him, without a written revelation from Him. But the incarnation of Christ had radically altered this. The grand design of His mission was not restricted to Palestine but was worldwide, for He shed His atoning blood for sinners out of all peoples and tribes and, upon the triumphant conclusion of His mission, commissioned His servants to preach the gospel to all nations. Hence the apostle had reminded the Roman saints that God said, "Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people" (Rom. 15:10). He had now become to them "the God of hope."

If God had not revealed Himself in the Word of truth we should be without any foundation of hope. But the Scriptures are windows of hope to us. This is evident from the fourth verse of our chapter: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Thus the God of hope is revealed in His living oracles with the design of inspiring hope. If we would be filled with faith, joy, and peace it must be by believing what is presented to us in Holy Writ. Before we have any true inward ground of hope, God Himself as revealed in the Bible must be our confidence. Through God's Word the apostle discovered there was hope for the Gentiles; and so may the most burdened heart find solid consolation therein if he will search and believe its contents. Every divine promise is calculated to inspire the believer with hope. Therein is to be found a sure foundation, on which to rest.

Let us now consider the petition the apostle here presented to the God of hope: that He would "fill you with all joy and peace in believing." This is to be considered first in its

local bearing. The phrase "in believing" looks back to those blessed portions of the Old Testament which had just been quoted. Paul prayed that God would graciously enable those saints to lay hold of such promises and conduct themselves in harmony therewith. We quote Charles Hodge: "In the fulfillment of that promise [Romans 15:12] Christ came, and preached salvation to those who were near and to those who were afar off (Eph. 2:17). As both classes had been thus kindly received by the condescending Savior and united into one community, they should receive and love each other as brethren, laying aside all censoriousness and contempt, neither judging nor despising one another." In other words, the apostle longed that both should be occupied alike with Christ. Let faith and hope be duly operative, and joy and peace would displace discord and strife.

Regarding this prayer of the Apostle Paul, Handley Moule wrote: "Let that prayer be granted, in its pure depth and height, and how could the 'weak brother' look with quite his old anxiety on the problems suggested by the dishes at a meal and by the dates of the Rabbinic calendar? And could 'the strong' bear any longer to lose his joy in God by an assertion, full of self, of his own insight and liberty? Profoundly happy and at rest in the Lord, whom they embraced by faith as their Righteousness and Life, and whom they anticipated in hope as their coming Glory; filled through their whole consciousness by the indwelling Spirit with a new insight into Christ, they would fall into each other's embrace, in Him. They would be much more ready when they met to speak 'concerning the King' than to begin a new stage of their not very elevating discussion. How many a church controversy now, as then, would die of inanition, leaving room for living truth, if the disputants could only gravitate, as to their always most beloved theme, to the praises and glories of their redeeming Lord Himself!"

As our Lord's prayer in John 17 was not confined to His disciples then but reached forward to "them also which shall believe" (Rom. 5:20), so this prayer of Paul's is suited to all the children of God. "The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing." Let it be duly noted that Paul did not hesitate to ask for these particular blessings. We make that remark because we very much fear that some of our readers are well-nigh afraid to cry to God for such things; but they need not be. Fullness of spiritual joy does not unfit its possessor to live his life in this world, nor does fullness of peace produce presumption and carnal security. If such experiences were dangerous, as Satan would fain have us conclude, the apostle would not have sought them on behalf of his fellow Christians. From his making request for these very blessings we learn they are eminently desirable and furnished warrant for us to supplicate for the same, both for ourselves and our brethren.

The Apostle's Example

The example which the apostle has here set before us evidences not only that it is desirable for Christians to be filled with joy and peace, but also that such a delightful experience is attainable. C. H. Spurgeon stated, "We may be filled with joy and peace believing, and may abound in hope. There is no reason why we should hang our heads

and live in perpetual doubt. We may not only be somewhat comforted, but we may be full of joy; we may not only have occasional quiet, but we may dwell in peace, and delight ourselves in the abundance of it. These great privileges are attainable or the apostle would not have made them the subject of prayer . . . The sweetest delights are still grown in Zion's gardens, and are to be enjoyed by us; and shall they be within our reach and not be grasped? Shall a life of joy and peace be attainable, and shall we miss it through unbelief? God forbid. Let us as believers resolve that whatsoever of privilege is to be enjoyed we will enjoy it."

Once again we appeal to the context, for clear proof is found there that it is God's revealed will for His saints to be a rejoicing people. In Romans 15:10 the apostle cited a verse from the Old Testament which says, "Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people." Israel had been given no monopoly of joy; those whom God had purposed to call from out the nations would also share therein. If there was joy for Israel when redeemed from the house of bondage and led through the Red Sea, much more so is there joy for those delivered from the power of Satan and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son. Observe that the passage quoted is not in the form of a promise, but is a specific precept: regenerated Gentiles are expressly bidden to "rejoice." Nor did the apostle stop there. As though anticipating our slowness to enter into our privileges, he added, "And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles" (Rom. 15:11)—not merely the most eminent among them but all alike. Where there is praise there is joy, for joy is a component part of it. Thus one who professes to be a Christian and at the same time complains that he is devoid of joy and peace, acknowledges that he is failing to obey these precepts.

Degrees of Blessing

"The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace" intimates three things. First, there are degrees of these blessings. A few Christians enjoy them fully, but the great majority (to their shame) experience but a taste thereof. Each of us should look to God for the fullest communication of these privileges. Second, the breadth of the apostle's words, as also his "that ye may abound in hope," manifest how his heart was enlarged toward the saints and what comprehensive supplies of grace he sought for them. Third, thus we honor God in prayer: by counting on the freeness of His grace. There is no straitness in Him, and there should be none in us. Since we are coming to heaven's King, let us "large petitions with us bring." Has He not given us encouragement to do so? Having given His beloved Son for us and to us, "how shall he not with him also freely give us all things" (Rom. 8:32)! Has He not invited us to "drink, yea, drink abundantly" (Song 5:1)! Then let our requests be in accord with His invitation; let us not approach Him as though He were circumscribed like ourselves.

Privileges and Duties

The fact that the apostle prayed for these blessings indicated not only that they are desirable and attainable, but also that it is incumbent upon us to enter into possession

of them. We cannot now attempt proof, but will here state the fact that the things we may ask God to give us are, at the same time, obligations upon ourselves. Privileges and duties cannot be separated. It is the duty of the Christian to be joyous and peaceful. If any should question that statement, we would ask him to consider the opposite; surely none would affirm that it is a spiritual duty to be miserable and full of doubts! We do not at all deny that there is another side to the Christian's life, that there is much both within and without the believer to make him mourn. Nor is that at all inconsistent. The apostle avowed himself to be "sorrowful," yet in the very same breath he added "yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). Most assuredly those who claim to be accepted in the Beloved and journeying to everlasting bliss bring reproach on Him whose name they bear and cause His gospel to be evil spoken of, if they are doleful and dejected and spend most of their time in the slough of despond.

Blessings Obtained by Prayer

But we proceed one step further. The apostle here made known how these most desirable and requisite blessings may be obtained. First, they are to be sought in prayer, as is evident from Paul's example. Second, they can only be attained as the heart is occupied with "the God of hope," that is, the promising God, for the things we are to hope for are revealed in His promises. Third, these blessings come to us "in believing," in faith's laying hold of the things promised. "Fill you with all joy and peace in believing." Many seek, though vainly, to reverse that order. They will not believe God till they feel they have joy and peace, which is like requiring flowers before the bulb has been set in the ground. You ask, "But how can I have joy and peace while engaged in such a conflict—mostly a losing one—with indwelling sin?" Answer: You cannot successfully oppose indwelling sin if you are joyless and full of doubts, for "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). There is no genuine joy and peace except "in believing," and in exact proportion to our faith will be joy and peace.

"That ye may abound in hope." This clause gave the Roman saints and us the reason why the apostle made the above request, or the design he had in view for them. They were established as to the past, joyous in the present. He would have them to be confident as to the future. The best is yet to be, for as yet the Christian has received but an earnest of his inheritance, and the more he is occupied with the inheritance itself the better equipped he will be to press forward to it, through all difficulties and obstacles, for hope is one of the most powerful motives or springs of action (Heb. 6:11-12). In our day some of the Lord's people need to be informed that the word hope has quite a different meaning in Scripture from that accorded to it in everyday speech. On the lips of most people "hope" signifies little more than a bare wish, and often with considerable fear that it will not be realized, being nothing better than a timid and hesitant desire that something may be obtained. But in Scripture (e.g., Romans 8: 25; Hebrews 6:18-19) hope signifies a firm expectation and confident anticipation of the things God has promised. As joy and peace increase "in believing" so too does hope.

The Power of the Holy Spirit

"Through the power of the Holy Ghost." The Father is the Giver, but the Spirit is the Communicator of our graces. Though it is the Christian's duty to be filled with joy and peace in believing and to abound in hope, yet it is only by the Spirit's enablement such can be realized. Here, as everywhere in the Word, we find the kindred truths of our accountableness and dependency intimately connected. The joy, peace, and hope here are not carnal emotions or natural acquirements but spiritual graces, and therefore they must be divinely imparted. Even the promises of God will not produce these graces unless they be divinely applied to us. Note that it is not merely "through the operation" but "through the power" of the Holy Spirit, for there is much in us which opposes! Nor can these graces be increased or even maintained by us in our own strength—though they can be decreased by us, through grieving the Spirit. They are to be sought by prayer, by eyeing the promises, and by looking for the enablement of the Holy Spirit. That hope is but a vain fancy which is not fixed on God and inwrought by Him. "Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope" (Ps. 119:49).

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