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Job 6:18 '*avadh* is used of a path losing itself in the desert. Self-will beckons but to destroy.

The first Psalm affords a fascinating study in contrasts:

(1) Contrasted Choices. One man chooses sin. Another chooses the will of God.

(2) Contrasted Characters. The one becomes like a tree planted upon streams of water. The other becomes like wind-driven chaff, rootless, fruitless, worthless.

(3) Contrasted Courses. The path of the one loses itself in the trackless wastes of a godless oblivion. The path of the other leads to God who is LIFE and in whose presence are joys evermore.

CONFLICT AND COMFORT

W. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.

'For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; that their hearts may be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ'.—Col. 2:1, 2.

Although he was in prison the Apostle was constantly at work for his Master, and not least of all at the work of prayer. If ever the words *or are est laborare*, 'to pray is to labour', were true, they were true of Paul, for to him to pray was to work with all his might, as we shall see from a study of another of the prayers offered in his Roman prison.

1. What Prayer Means

Prayer is described as a *conflict*. We have a similar expression used of the prayers of Epaphras, in the words 'labouring fervently' (Col. 4:12). The same word 'conflict' is associated with faith, 'the good fight of faith' (1 Tim. 6:12), and with the 'good fight'

of the Apostle's entire life (2 Tim. 4:7). Prayer regarded as a conflict includes the two ideas of toil and strife.

The toil of prayer shows us the work involved in it. Sometimes we hear the expression, 'If you can do nothing else, you can pray', as though prayer were the easiest of all things. As a simple fact, it is the hardest. No man knows what prayer means unless he knows what it is to 'labour' in prayer. The strife involved in prayer implies opposition—the opposing force of one who wishes above all things to check and thwart our prayers. We discern something of this opposition in the well-known words, 'We wrestle' (Eph. 6:12) and the words of the hymn are as true as they are familiar—

'And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees'.

The Apostle knew by personal experience that to pray was to rouse up against himself a mighty opposition and it was this force that made his prayer such a 'great conflict'. No believer should be surprised at his prayers 'being hindered' (1 Pet. 3:17). It is evidently one of Satan's main objects to get the Christian to restrain prayer. The Christian man or the Christian Church that continues instant in prayer may rest assured of malignant opposition from the hosts of spiritual wickedness in high places. On the other hand, we may be sure that Satan scarcely troubles himself about the believer or congregation whose private, family, and public praying is neglected or thought little of. Prayer is, therefore, a 'great conflict.' It is not solicitude only, but a struggle; not merely anxiety, but activity. As Bishop Moule says: 'Prayer is never meant to be *indolently* easy, however simple and reliant it may be. It is meant to be an infinitely important transaction between man and God. And therefore very often, when subjects and circumstances call for it, it has to be viewed as a work involving labour, persistency, conflict, if it would be prayer indeed' (*Colossian Studies*, p. 124). The Bishop goes on to quote a familiar incident which illustrates this great truth: 'A visitor knocked betimes one morning at the door of a good man, a saint of the noblest Puritan

type—and that was a fine type indeed. He called a friend to consult a friend, sure of his welcome. But he was kept waiting long. At last a servant came to explain the delay: "My master has been at prayer, and this morning he has been long in getting access".'

The practical question for us is whether this is our idea of prayer, or whether we are merely playing at prayer, and not regarding it with true seriousness. If we know what it is to have 'great conflict' in prayer, happy are we. If we do not, we may well ask God to search our hearts and change our minds about prayer.

Prayer is characterised by *unselfishness*. The conflict of the Apostle was not self-centred. It was on behalf of others: 'Great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea'. This is the essence of prayer—intercession on behalf of others. If our seasons of prayer are largely taken up with prayers for our own needs, however genuine, we are failing at a crucial point; but if our time is mainly taken up with prayers for others, we shall soon find that our own blessings begin to abound. 'There is that scattereth and yet increaseth'.

Prayer also implies *sympathy*. The Apostle was praying for people whom he had never seen, and probably never would see. This is not easy—indeed, is very difficult—but it is a real test of spirituality. 'Out of sight, out of mind'. We are tempted to limit our prayers to friends whom we know, causes in which we are interested, subjects spiritually near and akin to us. Not so the Apostle, whose heart went out to the whole Church of God in every place where he knew through friends that little bodies of Christians were to be found. His sympathy was at once quick, wide, and deep, and it is one of the supreme tests of true spirituality to have a sympathy possessed of all these characteristics. Our sympathy may be quick and yet narrow, or wide but not deep, or even deep and not wide; but to be at once quick, wide, and deep in sympathy is to be a true follower of Christ.

As we ponder these things—conflict, unselfishness, sympathy—do not our hearts condemn us? Instead of conflict, how easy-going

have been our prayers? Instead of unselfish, how self-centred, instead of sympathetic, how contracted? Thus the Apostle searches and tests us as we dwell on his wonderful life of prayer.

2. What Prayer Brings

What were the objects for which the Apostle prayed so earnestly on behalf of these unknown Christians? What were the precise gifts that he sought for them from God? This is no unnecessary question, for the same gifts will surely be suitable to us.

He asked for spiritual *strength*: 'That their hearts might be comforted'. Paul always went to the very centre and core of things, and so we find him constantly praying with reference to the 'hearts' of these Colossian Christians. Since, as we have seen, the 'heart' in the Scripture is the centre of our moral and spiritual being, if the heart is right, all will be right, for 'out of it are the issues of life'. He prays that their 'hearts' might be comforted—that is, in the full sense of the word, encouraged, exhorted, strengthened. 'Comfort' includes the three elements of strength, courage, and consolation. We must be strong, brave, and cheery. This is the full meaning of the term 'Comforter' as applied to the Holy Spirit. He is the One Who gives strength, courage, and consolation. This, too, is the true meaning of the familiar phrase of 'comfortable words'—words that minister strength, fortitude, and cheer. The fact that this thought of 'hearts comforted' was often in the mind and on the lips of the Apostle shows the importance he attached to it (2 Thess. 2:17; Eph. 6:22). With hearts made strong, courageous, and cheerful, Christians can face anything; while with hearts that remain weak, fearful and sad the Christian life is a prey to all the temptations of the Evil One. It is exactly similar with a Church or a congregation of Christians, for one of the supreme needs in any community is comforted hearts—the centres of life made strong, courageous, and happy. Then it is that churches live, grow, extend, and witness for Christ in the demonstration of the Holy Spirit the 'Comforter'.

He asked for spiritual *unity*: 'Being knit together in love', or, quite literally, 'having been compacted in love'. He prayed

that these Christians might be kept together, knit together in a spirit of love. Solitary Christians are always weak Christians, for 'union is strength'. If Christians are not knit together, the cause of Christ must necessarily suffer, for through the severances caused by division the enemy will keep thrusting his darts. That is why the Apostle elsewhere urges them 'earnestly to strive to keep the unity of the Spirit' (Eph. 4:3). One of the greatest powers that Satan wields today is due to the disunion among the people of God. It is true of the Christian home, congregation, and denomination. The wedge of discord is one of the enemy's most powerful weapons. On the other hand, where the brethren dwell together in unity, the Lord commands His blessing. In almost every Epistle the Apostle emphasises unity, and we can readily understand the reason.

This unity is only possible 'in love'. It is the love of God *to* us that unites us to Him, and it will be the love of God *in* us that unites us to our brethren. There is no power like love to bind Christians together. We may not see eye to eye on all aspects to truth; we may not all use the same methods of worship and service, but if we love one another God dwells in us and among us, and adds His own seal of blessing to the work done for Him. Let every Christian be fully assured that in so far as he is striving, praying, and labouring for the union of God's people in love, he will be doing one of the most powerful and blessed pieces of work for his Master, and one of the greatest possible pieces of disservice to the kingdom of Satan. Contrariwise, the Christian man or Christian Church that stands out for separateness and exclusiveness is one of the best allies of Satan, and one of the most effective workers for the kingdom of darkness.

He asked for spiritual *certitude*. 'Unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding'. Wealth is a favourite metaphor of Paul and is used to denote the fulness and abundance of the Christian life as conceived by him. Mark how he piles phrase upon phrase—'understanding', 'fulness of understanding', and then 'wealth of fulness of understanding'. To the Apostle, the mind was one of the essential powers and principles of the Christian life. So

far from thinking according to a modern fashion that the less one uses the mind the better Christian one is, Paul, following his Master, ever emphasises the duty and glory of loving God 'with all the mind'. This wealth of the fulness of 'understanding' means an abundance of conviction, both intellectual and moral, that Christianity is what it claims to be, and that the Christian life is the perfect satisfaction of all the different parts of man's nature. He prays that they may 'rise to the whole wealth of the full exercise of their intelligence' (Moule). Just as we find elsewhere 'the fulness of faith' (Heb. 10:22), 'the fulness of hope' (Heb. 6:11) and 'much fulness' (1 Thess. 1:5), so here the Apostle desires them to enjoy to the full the intelligent grasping of assurance of Christian truth which was theirs in Christ.

In the same spirit Luke writes to Theophilus: 'That thou mightest know the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed'. A firm conviction for the understanding is one of the greatest needs, as it is also one of the greatest blessings, of the Christian life. If a Christian cannot say, 'I know', 'I am persuaded', he is lacking in one of the prime essentials of a vigorous experience. Let us ponder, then, this remarkable phrase, 'the whole wealth of the fulness of intelligence', and see in it one of the absolute necessities of daily experience.

But how does it come? It is the result of the foregoing 'comfort' and 'love'. Hearts made strong mean minds fully assured. Hearts full of love mean intellects full of knowledge and conviction. Let no one say that love is blind; on the contrary, it is love that sees and knows. It was the Apostle of love who was the first with spiritual insight to say, 'It is the Lord', on that memorable early morning on the Lake of Galilee. It is the Christian with a heart strong and full of love, who will have the 'wealth of the fulness of intelligence'. The same is true of a Church, for when it is strong and united in love, there will come such an influx of conviction that the world will be impressed by the demonstration of the truth of the Christian Gospel.

He asked for spiritual *knowledge*: 'To the full knowledge of the mystery of God and the Father, even Christ' (not as A.V.).

Here, again, we have a favourite word of these Epistles, 'full knowledge', that is, ripe, mature experience; and it means the experience of all that is summed up in the one word 'Christ'. In view of the dangerous errors, then ripe and increasing, of a special knowledge confined only to a few, to an intellectual aristocracy, the Apostle lays stress upon the possibility of every Christian becoming acquainted in personal experience with all the knowledge of God that is stored up in Christ. He declares Christ as the Image of God (ch. 1:15), as the One in Whom all fulness dwells (ch. 1:19), as the Head of the Church (ch. 1:18), as the Redeemer from sin (ch. 1:20), as the Hope of Glory (ch. 1:27), as the One in Whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (ch. 2:3). There is no mistiness here, no vagueness, no hesitation, no limitation, but a full, free, open opportunity for all believers to become acquainted with Christ in His Divine fulness. This is the crowning-point of the Apostle's prayer, for in the full knowledge of Christ everything else is included. This knowledge, at once intellectual, moral, and spiritual, is the safeguard from all error, the secret of all progress, and guarantee of all blessing.

Let this prayer, then, be our constant and careful study. We shall find in it much to rebuke the shallowness, the selfishness, the dulness and sluggishness of our prayers; and we shall also find in it a model of instruction, and inspiration of all true petition and intercession. The Christian who learns from the prayers of the Apostle will learn some of the deepest secrets of the Christian life.