

Joy in Spiritual Progress
Philippians 3:12-21

August 7, 2011

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[Photo by Canadian Olympic Committee shown of Donovan Bailey:

<http://www.olympic.ca/en/news/canadas-olympic-heroes-live-forever-hall-fame/photos/26732/>

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^B 2 Timothy 4:8

^C Colossians 1:13

^D Philippians 2:8, 1 Corinthians 15:42-48

A. Introduction

1. Dr Howard Thurman

- a. is a noted African-American of the past century
- b. ordained as a Baptist minister
- c. serving for over a decade at each of
 - (A) Howard University, Washington DC, as dean
 - (B) and Boston University as dean of chapel
- d. being a spiritual advisor to Dr Martin Luther King, Jr
- e. Martha Graybeal Rowlett, author of 'Responding to God' recounts that at the beginning of each new year, Thurman would write down his understanding of God's nature and then compare it with that of the previous year. If there was no real development in these, Thurman was disappointed. If there were no growth in his knowledge and understanding of God, if no evidence of spiritual growth within himself, he considered that past year to have been wasted.—{2}.
- f. growth and progress is the evidence of life

2. our God, a creative God

- a. Genesis chapter 1 is filled with acts of creation:
 - (A) 'Let there be light', verse 6
 - (B) 'Let the earth sprout vegetation: plants yielding seed after their kind, ...', verse 11
 - (C) 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, ...' verse 20
 - (D) then He created man, verses 26-27, and to man He said, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' verse 28
- b. in these acts of creation it can be seen that growth is an inherent part of God's acts of creation
- c. in the last 6 weeks, Maureen and I have had the joy of watching our grand-daughter – Elizabeth; Eun Bin – grow
- d. so spiritual growth, spiritual progress is an inherent part of God's act of re-creation of a person; what a joy to watch!

3. let us look at the last half of Philippians 3 and observe what it has to teach us about spiritual progress or spiritual growth; and I am using those two terms interchangeably as equivalents

B. Effort for Growth 3:12-14

1. Verse 12: The Definition of Spiritual Growth – is given here – **Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.**

a. first note this: spiritual growth is not a result but a process

- (A) neither Paul nor any of us is 'already perfect'
- (B) spiritual maturity does not have an end point
- (C) room for spiritual growth ever continues to exist

b. second note that spiritual growth requires effort

- (A) to a certain extent physical growth is natural
- (B) just eat up and you'll grow – perhaps too much!
- (C) but for spiritual progress, we with Paul must press on

c. now the definition: spiritual progress is

- (A) laying hold of the Christ's purpose in laying hold of us
- (B) grabbing onto Christ's reason for grabbing onto us
- (C) making our own purpose, His purpose in saving us

2. Verse 13: The Focus in Spiritual Growth – is shown – **Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing (omit the words in italics, 'I do':) forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,**

a. with the word, 'brethren' used to address his readers, Paul introduces a serious concern, a concern which is that they take their eyes off of what they have already accomplished

b. emphatically Paul says, 'I myself don't think I have arrived' ... don't consider yourself beyond Paul in progress

c. focus on 'one thing ... reaching forward' – past achievement is well and good, but don't rest on your

laurels; you are in a race, and in a race every nerve and sinew is straining «

d. illustration: picture of Donovan Baily in Olympic race »

3. Verse 14: The Desire for Spiritual Growth – is described thus – **I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

a. **'the upward call (or, high calling) of God in Christ Jesus'** is purely and simply the offer of salvation in Christ Jesus made effective by God in the believer's soul

b. now the question, 'have you been saved?' is tremendously important: it draws a line of demarcation between a past life, separated from God by sin, and a present life, eternal life, a life lived in fellowship with God

c. but the question asked in the present passage is, 'are you being saved? Are you pursuing the goal for which Christ died on the cross to save YOU?'

d. are you racing not for the laurel wreath of this world which will dry up and fade away? or **'the crown of righteousness ... (given) unto all them who love his appearing'**? (2 Tim 4:8)

C. Attitude for Growth 3:15-16

1. Verse 15: Do you Share this Desire or Not? – **Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you;**

a. 'perfect' in the Greek is not speaking of being flawless, of sinless perfection, as we would describe God

b. it's root means 'end, final end, purpose' and the word conveys the idea of **'having reached a certain point of completeness; of maturity; of being full-grown'**

c. Paul is now speaking to those who are 'on schedule' in their growth and progress as Christians

d. let such Christians share in his desire to be what Christ Jesus has saved him to be; to be what God wants

e. yet, if they haven't yet understood and felt that desire, then as they continue to grow God will show them this

2. Verse 16: Growth Requires Perseverance – **however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.** or, as Wuest translates: **'Only one thing, so far as we have come, let us keep our lives in the same path.'**

- a. God has brought each of us to a certain point in our spiritual journey: this is now our starting point to grow
- b. as George Eliot said, 'it's never too late to be who you might have been'
- c. the call is now for perseverance in continuing that walk with Him, until He brings us to the goal, to the prize for which He has called us to be His children

D. Examples for Growth 3:17-19

- 1. Verse 17: Examples to Imitate – Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.
 - a. for new believers of that day there was no church culture providing guidance to acceptable living; but even that can have a negative impact « – example of rule-based church »
 - b. the apostles and elders were to be examples
 - c. so today, for new believers, those who are just beginning to learn God's word, spiritually mature Christians who are following Christ are still examples to be imitated – that lays a responsibility on Christians further along God's way
- 2. Verses 18-19: Examples to Avoid – For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.
 - a. let's not waste much time on exactly who were these 'enemies' except to note that their lives ran contrary to being crucified with Christ, to taking up their cross daily
 - b. avoid their example! they are still around today
 - c. they rationalize and justify life-styles diametrically opposed to Scripture's declared will of purity for Christians

E. Incentives to Growth 3:20-21

- 1. Verse 20: We Live in a New Country – For our citizenship (i.e. commonwealth of which we are the citizens) is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ;
 - a. to thrive as inhabitants of this world, it is needful that a person grow and progress physically and

mentally

- b. when we were saved, Colossians 1:13 tells us 'For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son' – that's a done deal
 - c. to thrive in our new heavenly residence, it is needful that we grow and progress spiritually
 - d. from that new residence we await Christ's return, when,
2. Verse 21: We Will Have a New Body – who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. – a body suited to the new, spiritual person we have been made through faith in
- a. the word translated here 'humble state' and in the AV 'vile bodies' is the adjective that corresponds to the verb in Philippians 2:8, 'but humbled himself'
 - b. so as Christ made Himself like us in our physical being
 - c. thus one day Christ shall make us like Himself in His new resurrected body « – read 1 Corinthians 15:42 (50)-58 »

F. Conclusion

1. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, once told this story about a flock of barnyard geese in Denmark.
 - a. Every Sunday the geese would gather in the barnyard near the feeding trough. The preaching goose would struggle up on the top rail of the fence and exhort the geese about the glories of goosedom. How wonderful it was to be a goose, rather than a chicken or a turkey! What a great heritage they had! What marvellous possibilities for the future!
 - b. One fall Sunday during the sermon, a flock of wild geese, winging their way south from Sweden across the Baltic Sea on their way to sunny France flew overhead in a V-formation, thousands of feet in the air. The geese excitedly looked at one another, saying, 'That's who we really are. We are not destined to spend our lives in this stinking barnyard. Our destiny is to fly.'
 - c. The wild geese disappeared from sight. The sound of their honking died away. The barnyard geese sighed and returned to the familiar surrounding of the muddy yard and filth of the barn ... they never did fly^{3}.

2. are you a Christian who is content to remain in the squalor of the barnyard when it is God's intention that you should fly!

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| ASV | American Standard Version of 1901 |
| AV | Authorized (King James) Version |
| ERV | The Revised Version of 1885 |
| NAS | New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition) |
| NIV | New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society |
| NKJV | New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers |
| NLT | 1996 New Living Translation © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A. |
| PHIL | New Testament Translation © 1972 by J. B. Phillips |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version © 1946, 1952 by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A. |
| WEY | The New Testament in Modern Speech © 1902, 1912 R. F. Weymouth |

Some of my favourite commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

BM – Biblical Museum, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870

EBC – The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, Michigan

Volume 6, Isaiah, by Geoffrey W. Grogan, Principal, Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, Scotland;

Volume 11, including Philippians, by Homer A. Kent, Jr

EGT – The Expositor’s Greek Testament, Philippians by H. A. A. Kennedy, Hodder & Stoughton, 1903

EJY – The Book of Isaiah by Edward J. Young; © 1965; Wm. B. Eerdmans

K&D – Commentary on the Old Testament, by Keil & Delitzsch; Volume 7, Isaiah, by Franz Delitzsch

Kerux – The sermon and illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick to be found at the web-site, www.holwick.com.

Moule – The Epistle to the Philippians, by H. C. G. Moule, 1873 (and his commentaries on other epistles)

Motyer – Philippians Studies, The Richness of Christ, by J. A. Motyer; Inter-Varsity Press, 1966

Wuest – Philippians in the Greek New Testament by Kenneth S. Wuest, © 1942 Wm B Eerdmans

2. Adapted from *Has Your Image of God Grown?* – Kerux illustration #24420

3. Adapted from Kerux illustration #8841