

"AS THY SOUL PROSPERETH"

"Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." III John 2.

This brief epistle of fourteen verses is addressed to the well-beloved Gaius. "Gaius the well-beloved" reads like a title conferred upon him by the common consent of his fellow-members. All sorts and conditions of men loved him, official and unofficial, tutored and untutored, rich and poor alike. He had obtained a good report everywhere for his amiable qualities. This was his first and chief distinction. In addition, he was loved especially by the Apostle John.

This letter from which our text is taken was written to Gaius, who had evidently extended his hospitality to some Christian teachers and John requested him to repeat his kindness. But Gaius was not well physically, and John noted that fact. If he had been writing today, and expressed it in present-day phraseology, he would probably have said: "I am sorry that you are ill, and I hope you will soon be better." He was interested in his physical well-being. But he did not stop there. He made an interesting comparison. He desired that Gaius might be as well physically as he was spiritually.

Gaius was a deeply religious man; a man of intense spirituality of mind and heart; a man with a genius for piety. He was so much so that John did not hesitate to tell his friend that it would be good for him if the measure of his spiritual prosperity were also to become the measure and standard of his temporal prosperity and bodily health. "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." Of how many today dare we cherish a thought or offer a prayer like that? This truly wondrous prayer is an extraordinary attestation to character.

We have here one of the most remarkable prayers of which we have any information; for the word translated, "I wish," not only expresses the fact that the thing is desired, and that the person thus desiring would have pleasure in securing it, but it carries the additional idea of so desiring it as to make it a matter of earnest and formal petition.

Just as rules must be observed for physical health, so rules must be followed for spiritual health, and there is such a thing as spiritual health, and there is such a thing as spiritual illness, and it can be diagnosed in much the same way as physical illness.

A low temperature is always an indication of an ailing body, and as soon as it is evident measures are used to bring the patient back to normal. We are suffering today in our spiritual life in this respect and it is a difficult condition to treat. It is set forth in the spirit of indifference about spiritual things on the part of so many people.

Lack of appetite is another sign of ill health. A lack of desire for health-giving foods is a bad sign. The tragedy of our age, spiritually, is that so many people do not have any desire for the things of the spirit. You talk to them about their souls and there is an utter indifference on their part, and some of them will tell you quite frankly that they do not need the things which you are talking about. All they seem to be interested in is that which appeals to the senses, so they go merrily on their way ignoring the fact that man cannot live by these things.

One of the greatest aids to health is plenty of good food. We cannot live aright on delicacies. Pure air is another requisite of sound health. We cannot be strong in soul if we allow ourselves to live in a fetid atmosphere. How can we expect the soul to prosper if we do not give it the proper food? Our souls can prosper only as they live in an atmosphere of high thinking and those things which make for holy living.

Whatever his occupation in life, his worldly possessions or his bodily health may have been, John tells us that Gaius was prosperous in his soul. Thus John proclaimed, what

all other scriptural writers proclaimed, the preeminence of the soul. For some reason, the word "soul" has dropped out of too much preaching. We hear about life, character and personality, but rarely do we hear of the greatest thing in man--his soul. The soul is man's eternal part.

No matter what test you subject it to, the soul stands preeminent. If you test it by the purpose of life, the soul comes first. What is the end and purpose of life. If it is for knowledge and wisdom, then how little man knows! If it is for fame and power, then how quickly man is forgotten! If it is for pleasure, then life is just a joke! But if the purpose of life is the training of a soul, the development of moral and spiritual qualities in this life, and their coronation and reward in the life to come, then life is not an illusion, or a shadow that passes, but "Life is real! Life is earnest!"

Another test which shows the preeminence of the soul is what has been done for it. Christ gave Himself up to death upon the cross for the redemption of the soul. The fact that Christ died for your soul declares that your soul is the preeminent thing about you. Hence it is that the poverty or the prosperity of your soul is the thing of chief importance.

John glimpsed the real and vital truth we need today when he said, "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth," or "according to the measure of thy soul's prospering." He was not putting the soul last, or treating it as an afterthought. He made it the foundation of all else. In reality he was saying, "With all my heart I wish for you good health and good fortune, but it can come only as your soul prospers." There can never be any real prosperity until the soul is prosperous.

One of God's great gifts is a sound body and good health. The full zest of life has been denied to many a person who had every blessing but this. For health men have squandered fortunes, counting no cost too great if only health could be found. They have left the sweet comforts of home and friends to live in other climes. Nothing so turns the sunshine of life to mockery, or its sweets to sourness as the subtle, destroying disease, unless there be some great spiritual reservoir from which one can draw fresh life and fresh hope.

John wished his friend "Good health and good fortune." "Good fortune"--that the road may never be too rough, or too full of pitfalls; the skies never too grey, or the fogs too dense; that life may smile upon you, and the thing you put your hand to may flourish; that the chilling sense of disappointment may not be yours, or the staggering sense of defeat; that flowers may blossom and scent the air along your pathway, and the birds sing their sweetest songs; that life may ever be at the spring for you and the winter frosts never come.

After John had wished his friend "Good health and good fortune," he added the phrase "as thy soul prospereth." That was not like the speech of a kindly uncle, who was well accustomed to the ways of the world, who slapped his nephew on the back and said breezily, "My lad, I wish you good health; I hope you make plenty of money," and then he added in a whisper, "And I hope you get to heaven." That is how many people today teach their children. They want them to have health, good fortune and success. At long last, they entertain a kind of pious hope that all may be well with their souls in the end. But that attitude is wrong.

The witness of our text to the worth of Caius is provocative indeed. It is no small compliment to say to a man, "I wish and pray to God that your temporal affairs may be as flourishing as your spirit, and that the health of your body may be as vigorous as the life of your soul." John's prayer for Caius was short, but very comprehensive. His spiritual health was made the standard of his outward prosperity. Dare we pray thus for our friends? What would be the result if such a prayer were answered? It would be a terrible wish if it were offered for and were to take effect upon many a professed Christian. It would blast them in body and ruin them in circumstances. Would you want this prayer prayed for you?

1. Gaius was a godly man.

His soul prospered because he was a godly man and did that which was right in the sight of the Lord. Uprightness of life comes first. Integrity of soul is the foundation virtue. "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

2. Gaius blessed other lives.

He fulfilled the blessing which was bestowed upon Abraham when God said to him, "Thou shalt be a blessing." Are you trying to live in such a way that your life will bless others? You are rich according as you enrich others. Gaius was kind, sympathetic, generous and hospitable to those who came to his town as Christian travellers.

3. Gaius was rich in faith.

John said that he walked in the truth. "Without faith it is impossible to please God."

"As thy soul prospereth." Would it be safe for one who had the power to make his wish come true, to make that wish for you--that your bodily health and your worldly prosperity be brought to the level of the prosperity of your soul?