

# New Years' Address, January 1853

by J.C. Philpot

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*J.C. Philpot's New Year's Address challenges the church to reflect on its spiritual state amidst worldly prosperity and calls for a return to love, unity, and reliance on the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 20:11, Isaiah 50:10, Isaiah 66:5, Jeremiah 5:31, Ezekiel 13:10, Ezekiel 34:4, Joel 1:10, Zephaniah 2:3, Zechariah 2:5, 2 Corinthians 2:4

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Church Revival"

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## Description

J.C. Philpot delivers a powerful sermon reflecting on the state of the church amidst worldly progress and material prosperity, questioning the lack of vital godliness and grace despite advancements in society. He highlights the need for true conversions, love, and unity within churches, emphasizing the importance of spiritual growth and genuine faith over external success. Philpot draws parallels between the current state of the church and the decline of the Jewish Church before the Babylonish captivity, urging for repentance, confession of sin, and a return to seeking the Lord's face. He calls for pastors and churches to imitate the prophets in their faithful denunciations of ungodliness while showing compassion and encouragement to the suffering remnant.

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## Transcript

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In the world everything at this moment speaks of movement and progress. Science daily wins new fields; are advances in taste and beauty; trade flourishes; employment abounds; wealth increases; luxury prevails. Australia pours forth her golden treasures, and draws thousands across the ocean, to turn up, like Demas, her glittering ore. America opens wide her arms to myriads of needy emigrants. Steamships, railways, electric telegraphs, spreading in every direction and knitting in close bonds the most distant nations, all bespeak an era of activity and progress such as the world has never yet seen. Well may the prince and god of this world look from his dusky throne upon his devoted subjects and worshipers, and say, "All goes on well. Never did the sons of Adam post faster to hell. The whirl of business; the ever-clanging hammer; the ever-whirring shuttle; the snorting of the iron steed, hourly dragging in its swift train thousands of throbbing brains; the incessant occupation of mind in office, shop, and counting-house; the clamor of "work, work, work," ever knolling from the factory-bell- in this huge fermenting vat of life all seems heaving and moving. Men view these signs of the times and cry, "What prosperity! what success! Let us only have more of it; more business, more gold; greater crops, larger barns; then will we take our

ease, eat, drink, and be merry."

But where, with all this material prosperity, is religion- vital godliness, the work of grace? Does this flourish too? Is the church, the Lamb's wife, growing in grace and in knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do striking conversions or remarkable deliverances abound? Does love reign in the bosom of churches? Do ministers preach with power and savor? Is God deeply feared, his promises firmly believed, his precepts carefully obeyed, his ordinances highly prized, his word dearly loved, his glory earnestly sought? Are those who profess the truth humble, prayerful, watchful, spiritually-minded, walking as living witnesses for God, and testifying to an ungodly world that they are children and servants of the Most High? Is the line of separation between the church and the world clear and distinct? And does she shine forth "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"

Who can say so? Who can say of the church that she is flourishing, and that her prosperity runs parallel with that of the world? We may rather take up Joel's lament- "The fields are ruined and empty of crops. The grain, the wine, and the olive oil are gone. Despair, all you farmers! Wail, all you vine growers! Weep, because the wheat and barley--yes, all the field crops--are ruined. The grapevines and the fig trees have all withered. The pomegranate trees, palm trees, and apple trees--yes, all the fruit trees--have dried up. All joy has dried up with them." (Joel 1:10-12.)

No one who knows what grace is, and what grace does, can help seeing that Zion's sky is much beclouded, that the life of God is at a low ebb, and that the blessings and consolations of the Spirit are much restrained. Go where you will, the same complainings reach the ear. Churches are much rent and divided, party spirit widely prevails, coldness and deadness benumb those who once seemed full of life and feeling. When the children of God meet there is little real spiritual conversation. Worldly subjects, the mere trifles of the day, the weather, the markets, and the crops, politics and gossip, thrust out the things of God. When religion is talked of, it is all at a distance; experience is lost in a cloud of generalities; the gifts and abilities, texts and sermons, changes and movements of ministers are a prevailing topic; some controversial point is broached, on which the combatants fall tooth and nail; the contending parties lose their tempers; one harsh word produces another, until the whole degenerates into an ale-house squabble, and poor religion is as much trampled down in the vestry as sobriety is in the bar-room.

Where is love and union amid this strife of tongues? What are the feelings of the tender-hearted, the meek and quiet, the newly-called, the young members of churches, the exercised part of the flock, the doubting and fearing, when they see those who, for age and experience, should be fathers in Israel, cold and dead in conversation, asleep under the ministry, buried in carnality, and whose tongues can only wag when the world is on the carpet, strife at the church meeting, or disputation in the vestry? When churches are made up of discordant materials, strife and disunion must needs exist. How can the stormy seabird and the timid dove dwell in the same nest? The dove cannot scream on the crest of the boiling wave and gather up its fishy prey between the heaving billows, reveling in wind and storm. Nor can the seabird lodge in the calm nest of love, cooing lamentations for the absence of its beloved.

It is, however, a mark that the Lord has not left his church that there are such doves still. "Behold, you are fair, my love!" says the Lord to the church; "behold, you are fair; you have doves' eyes." (Cant. 1:15.) "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled." "My dove, my undefiled, is but one." (Cant. 5:2; 6:9.) These doves are the quiet in the land; the meek, who are to inherit the earth; the humble and contrite, who tremble at God's word; the marked in forehead, that sigh and cry for all the abominations; the tender-hearted Josiahs, who rend their garments at the discovery of the law- the Baruchs, who seek not

great things for themselves, but whose life is given them for a prey.

These abhor themselves, with Job; cry out "Woe is me!" with Isaiah; lament over Zion's desolations, with Jeremiah; lie on their side all the days of her siege, like Ezekiel; and rejoice in the building of the temple of the Lord, with Nehemiah. These pray for the peace of Jerusalem, love the very dust and stones of Zion, are valiant for the truth on earth, and cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart.

True, they are, like Asaph, plagued all the day long and chastened every morning; like Heman, their soul is often full of troubles and their life draws near to the grave; their hope with Job's, is sometimes removed like a tree; like Hezekiah, for peace they have often great bitterness; and, like Joseph, the archers frequently grieve them, and shoot at them, and hate them. At the throne of grace, Satan resists them, as he did Joshua, the high priest, and accuses them before God day and night, as he did the ancient martyrs; snares beset their feet on every side; often do they slip and stumble in slippery places; lusts and passions work at a fearful rate; an evil heart is ever sprouting evil things- and gloomy despair sometimes opens wide her arms, as if at the last gasp she would bear them away into the blackness of darkness for ever.

We do not say there are not some favored individuals whose souls are more warmed by the beams, and watered with the rains and dews of heaven than those whose experience we have just sketched out. The Lord bless them more and more abundantly, and, if his will, increase their number! They are bright and blessed exceptions to the generality of the living family at this day. But they are, for the most part, deeply afflicted, and need these cordials; and if they have more of the consolations they have more of the afflictions of Christ.

But is the state of things at this day without a parallel in the word of truth? The latter days of the Jewish Church, just before the Babylonish captivity, and the period just before the prophet Malachi closed the canon of the Old Testament, appear to present very similar features- we may perhaps add, even worse. Read the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and see their lamentations over prophet, and priest, and people. "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so; and what will you do in the end thereof?" (Jer. 5:31.) "For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one deals falsely. They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace." (Jer. 6:13, 14.) ""These evil prophets deceive my people by saying, 'All is peaceful!' when there is no peace at all! It's as if the people have built a flimsy wall, and these prophets are trying to hold it together by covering it with whitewash! Tell these whitewashers that their wall will soon fall down. A heavy rainstorm will undermine it; great hailstones and mighty winds will knock it down." (Ezek. 13:10, 11.)

Bold indeed and fearless were the denunciations of these servants of God against the ungodliness that abounded in those days. Without fear and without flattery they proclaimed the coming judgments of God upon a guilty nation. But how did they treat the suffering remnant? Did they make no distinction between the timid and the stout-hearted; the tremblers at God's word and the doers of evil; the sickly sheep and the strong he-goats? Here are they eminently worthy of our imitation. Did they whip the afflicted saints with scorpions? Did they lash them with the same scourge as the ungodly world or the false prophets? No; on the contrary, they gave them repeated promises of the Lord's favor. This was the burden of their testimony, "Verily, it shall be well with your remnant."

They encouraged them to seek the Lord's face- "Beg the Lord to save you--all you who are humble, all you who uphold justice. Walk humbly and do what is right. Perhaps even yet the Lord will protect you from his anger on that day of destruction." (Zeph. 2:3.) They encouraged them to trust in the Lord- "Who is among you that fears the Lord, that obeys the voice of his servant, that walks in darkness, and has no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." (Isa. 50:10.) They assured them that the Lord would appear to their joy; (Isa. 66:5;) that he would be a wall of fire round about them, and his glory in the midst of them; (Zech. 2:5;) that he would seek them out and deliver them out of all places where they had been scattered in the cloudy and dark day; that though the mountains should depart, and the hills be removed, yet that his kindness should not depart from them, nor the covenant of his peace be removed.

Should not we follow in this track? If we are called upon to cry aloud and spare not; to lift up the voice like a trumpet and show the people their transgression and the house of Judah their sins, yet are we equally called upon not to make the heart of the righteous sad whom God has not made sad. The inspired prophets, if they had a commission "to root out, and to pull down, to destroy, and to throw down," had also a commission "to build and to plant." (Jer. 1:10.) If the hail swept away the refuge of lies, there was still laid "in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation." Let not Jesus be overlooked; his precious blood be tacitly set aside; his justifying obedience be put out of sight; his grace forgotten; and his dying love neglected.

We may see so much evil in ourselves and others as to see nothing else; have our eyes so fixed and riveted on the malady as to lose all view of the remedy- dwell so much and so long on Zion's sickness as to forget there is balm still in Gilead and a mighty Physician there. There is much hazard of falling into a legal spirit in the endeavor to avoid an Antinomian one. Zion is sick and languishing. How is she to be healed and restored? By the law or the gospel? Does balm flow from Mount Sinai or Mount Zion? The sheep are sickly. To cure them, shall the under-shepherds beat them on the head with the crook and throw them over the hillside, or shall they take them to the green pastures and the still waters? Shall they overdrive them, with Esau, or lead them on softly, with Jacob? Shall they rule them with force and cruelty, or feed them upon the mountain of Israel, in a good fold, and in a fat pasture? (Ezek. 34:4, 14.)

Strife exists in churches. How are these strifes to be healed and peace restored? By the ministers taking the whip into the pulpit, like a vixen mother, who flogs the children all round more as a vent for her own passion than for their good? A slap here and a box on the ear there, will no more restore peace to a church than to a household. Families and churches are to be ruled by love, not by the rod. Let there indeed be a rod, and, when necessary, let it be brought out, for discipline is as needful in the church as in the house- but let not the rod be the main instrument, and not be used until all gentler means have been tried and fail. And if the rod be necessary, let it be steeped in the pastor's tears, and be laid on, not as a schoolmaster flogs a truant, but as a parent chastises a child.

We are bound, by the tenderest ties and the most blessed obligations, to show forbearance and forgiveness to erring brethren. We are not to justify their evil deeds nor wink at sin, but to consider ourselves, lest we also be tempted. We are not to be harsh and unforgiving, ever prone to censure and condemn, taking our brethren by the throat for a hundred pence, with a "pay me what you owe!" forgetting our own debt of ten thousand talents. We are not to be ever weighing and tithing mint, anise, and cummin, and neglecting the weightier matters of judgment and love. We are not to sit as judges, but to stand at the bar as criminals; not to elevate ourselves by depressing others; nor increase our own comparative goodness by throwing into the opposite scale the deficiencies of professors.

The prophets did not do thus. They identified themselves with the Lord's people in all their confessions. Who more blameless than Daniel? Yet read his confession (Dan. 9.)- "We have sinned, and have committed iniquity," &c. Not, "I, Daniel, am free." Who more faithful than Jeremiah? Yet how he identifies himself with sinning Israel! "We have transgressed and rebelled." "Turn us unto you, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old." (Lam. 3:42; 5:21.) Who more obedient than Moses? Yet he does not separate himself from transgressing Israel "Pardon our iniquity and our sin." (Exod. 34:9.) When he departed from this putting his mouth in the dust, and taking the rod in his hand, smote with it not only the face of the rock but the backs of Israel, with a "Hear now, you rebels," as if he too were not one, he shut himself out of the land of promise. He stood then as a god, and not as a man, and therefore did not "sanctify the Lord in the eyes of the children of Israel." (Num. 20:11, 12.)

When Paul sent a rod to the church at Corinth, it was not in a self-exulting, self-righteous spirit, but "out of much affliction and anguish of heart, with many tears," and when his reproofs were blessed to their repentance, he was "filled with comfort, and was exceeding joyful in all his tribulation." (2 Cor. 2:4; 7:4.) What an example of the highest faithfulness blended with the tenderest affection! He is slow to wound and swift to heal; last with the rod and first with the kiss; angry with the sin, but tender over the sinner- jealous for the Lord's glory, but mindful of his grace; careful for the purity and profit of the flock, but yearning to bring back the wandering sheep. Were pastors Pauls, and churches epistles of Christ, there would be fewer divisions, and those sooner healed. But when an unyielding, unforgiving spirit is manifested on either side, when churches cannot bear with the infirmities of their minister, and ministers will not give way where they are evidently in fault, a smoldering volcano lies under pulpit and pew which will one day burst forth into unquenchable flame, in this life. "If you bite and devour one another, take heed that you be not consumed one of another."

There is no truer sign nor more alarming symptom of the decline of vital godliness, than the lack of love and union among those who profess the truth. If love to the brethren marks the dawn of spiritual life, the decay of that love most certainly denotes its decline. A house divided against itself cannot stand. A besieged city, if torn with internal faction, must fall before the enemy. Peace in the church is the next blessing to peace in the soul, and is most intimately connected with it. It is as absurd as it is hypocritical to talk of having peace with God when the heart is at war with the brethren. To peace, then, must we sacrifice everything but truth and conscience. Our strife should be- not to gain our own selfish ends, nor stiffly carry out our own opinions, nor rule and domineer over the minds of others, as if our own views were necessarily infallible- but to preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

The prosperity of a church does not consist in the number of its members, nor in the praying gifts of its deacons, nor in its liberal quarterly collections, nor in the gifts and abilities of the minister, nor in the clear doctrinal views of the people, but in the love which knits the whole body together. The real increase of a church is not so much from without as from within, "the increase of the body unto the edifying itself in love." Without this internal increase in love, members may be added to a church by scores, and yet the whole body be a discordant mass of shapeless limbs, without union either to the Head or to each other.

We may be certain that the precepts of the New Testament for mutual love and forgiveness cannot be slighted and neglected with impunity. Our stubborn temper and unforgiving spirit may refuse to listen to the word of God, but we cannot, except to our own cost, set aside Scripture precepts and Scripture practice because our corrupt nature withstands them. God's ways may not please our carnal mind, but he will not alter them for that reason. If we walk contrary to him he will walk contrary to us, and if we are disobedient we shall reap its bitter fruits. If sin be at one end of the chain, sorrow will surely be at the other. If we sow

to the flesh, we shall most certainly of the flesh reap corruption; but if we sow to the Spirit, we shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

But what we chiefly need, and that to which our prayers and desires should be directed, is the pouring out of the Spirit upon pastors and churches, and the whole church of God. No other means will avail. For lack of this we are continually in extremes. We see this in the ministry of the present day, for the ministry is but a reflection of the times. Some are all for doctrine. Doctrine, doctrine, doctrine, and all in the hardest, driest form, is their unvaried staple. Most sweet and precious are the doctrines of the gospel when distilled into the soul by the Holy Spirit; but delivered in a cold systematic way as a mere creed, they are made a substitute for vital godliness, and thus become a curse instead of a blessing. Others, seeing the neglect in our day of practical religion, urge the precept continually, but in a spirit so legal, and with a temper so harsh, that grace seems almost thrust out of sight, and the poor hearers are ever filled with bondage and slavish fear. And others, who preach experience, dwell so much on the workings of sin as almost to omit the workings of grace, and, pointing out the malady, almost forget to dwell on the remedy.

But all these, and innumerable other evils under which Zion now labors, can only be remedied by the pouring out of the Spirit from on high. From Him alone comes a true sight of sin, repentance for it, confession of it, and turning from it. Then will Zion repent and abhor herself in dust and ashes; then will confession flow forth to God and the brethren; then will love and union be revived between ministers and churches; and then will the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep their hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Until that happy time arrive, our wisdom and mercy will be to avoid strife and contention.

A sight and sense of the evils in ourselves and others should teach us mutual forbearance. We are all in the hospital, and shall we quarrel with our fellow-patients? Should we not rather sympathize with each other's complaints, and be looking out for the arrival of the Physician who alone can cure each and all? On this common ground, even in the present dark and gloomy day, all the living family may meet. But if we cannot keep out of contention, and desire a matter of strife with the brethren, let this be our ground of dispute. Who is the greater sinner; who owes most to the Savior; who shall live most to his glory.

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