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Some Thoughts on the Seven Epistles.

VII.

THE last Epistle of the series claims our solemn attention. We approach and enter Laodicea, and seek the angel of its Church, and listen to the voice of the Son of God as it reaches him through the writing of the Seer.

We find around us a large and busy town, the capital of the valley of the Lycus. Its rank is considerable among the cities of Asia in respect of population and of exterior dignity. Over a wide area it spreads its streets, with all the stately paraphernalia which adorn even inferior centres in the Roman imperial age—temples, baths, theatres, amphitheatres, and private mansions elegant and dignified. The market-place, the commercial centre, we find alive with prosperous trade.

It is, and has long been, the seat of a Christian mission. We remember that years earlier than this, when Paul was spending at Rome the full and fruitful two years of his first imprisonment, there was already a Church, a congregation, at Laodicea. The place grouped itself in his mind with Hierapolis and Colossæ, the other mission-stations of the Lycus country. From Laodicea the Colossians were to expect an Epistle to reach them, and to Laodicea they were to forward their own Epistle, that it might be read in turn to the assembly there. It is interesting to think that, very probably indeed, "the Epistle from Laodicea" (Col. iv. 16) was no other than what we know as the Epistle to the Ephesians. That Epistle, as careful students have long thought, from Archbishop Ussher onwards, bears internal signs of a *circular* character. It has no local allusions in detail. It deals only with the highest and most comprehensive truths and the most universally binding duties of a holy life. One phenomenon of the text confirms the impression that it was intended, not for one Church only, but for a circle. The margin of the Revised Version, against Eph. i. 1, contains the note: "Some very ancient authorities omit *at Ephesus*." And it is at least a lawful guess that copies were distributed to the Asian missions,

each inscribed with the name of a different place of destination; a space may have been left blank for the purpose originally.

Perhaps one copy was thus directed, "To the saints which are at Laodicea"; and to them it was entrusted to forward the precious pages on to their smaller neighbour-church at Colossæ.

If it were so, what heights and depths of truth and holiness had the Laodiceans seen opened up to them in that wonderful Letter, in which the messenger of Christ now mounts into the holiest heights, unfolding the secrets of our life "in the heavenly places in Christ," and now traces out the humblest paths of daily duty, not least in the sphere of home, with precepts of all-embracing truth, purity, and love; and finally bids the Christian meet "all the power of the enemy" in that panoply which all means Christ trusted, Christ used.

Yes, and Laodicea not only received messages and greetings (Col. iv. 15) from St. Paul. It was often in his prayers: "I would have you know how greatly I strive for you, *and for them at Laodicea*" (Col. ii. 1). So too did the loving Epaphras, the native missionary of the Lycus, pray: "He hath much labour for you, and for them in Laodicea, and for them in Hierapolis" (Col. iv. 13).

It is possible, but I cannot think it probable, and I cannot possibly wish it to be so, that we have yet another contact with Laodicea in Col. iv. 17. There Archippus is enjoined to "*fulfil*" his ministry, to live it out to the full, to see that his "work is perfect" before God. And tradition makes Archippus, whom we may call with almost certainty Philemon the Colossian's son (Philem. 2), the first Bishop of Laodicea. If so, it may be that he and no other was the angel of this apocalyptic letter. It has been suggested that the solemnity of the appeal to him, Col. iv. 17, implies a certain misgiving about him, and may prepare us for the sad picture of his latter days here drawn. But this I cannot think. The warm tone of Philem. 2, where "Archippus our fellow-soldier" is grouped with the dear Philemon and "our sister Apphia," seems to me to look another way. The solemn call to "*fulfil*" might well be addressed to any, the most devoted, newly ordained missionary pastor.

But however this may be, the angel of Laodicea, this embodied "ministering spirit," appears in the revealing light of the Lord's estimate of him as a man woefully other than a faithful "fulfiller" of the pastorate of souls. And as such, whether he was or was not Archippus, he stands here in view, not only as an unfaithful man, but as one whose unfaithfulness had that "bad eminence" about it, that he was pastor of a flock where the story was still recent of the prayerful devotion and heavenly teaching of St. Paul.

Let us ministers of the Word—I speak first for myself—take heed here, with a renewed reverence and godly fear. No privilege of revealing grace, no tradition of holiest influence, nothing but a walk with God, can keep us true to our holy and awful calling, which is to be, in a sense most special, "men of God." All such mercies are only gracious warnings that we can retain them as possessions, and use them as powers, solely by the virtues of our Head, continually received through communion and converse with Him.

The Epistle to this self-complacent but unhappy bearer of the Lord's charge follows the outline of the other six. The Speaker first designates Himself. He is "the Amen," the eternal embodiment of verity, of certainty. He is "the faithful and true (*ἀληθινός*, 'genuine') witness," testifying with unerring insight and unfaltering fidelity to what He sees and knows. He is "the beginning of the creation of God"; its "beginning," manifestly, as the whole presentation of Him in this book assures us, not in the sense of the first created existence, but as the Existence which is the fount and origin of all creation, being Himself not created, but from all eternity begotten. This great title stands here, surely, not without its special fitness in the message to the Laodicean. He who sends that tremendous warning to the pastor who is sinking towards the frozen death of the soul is addressed by One who has in Him all the resources and forces of new creation. Let the angel only come back to Him without reserve, and, behold, "He will make all things new."

Then follows the dread report of the true Witness upon His angel's state of heart and will. He is not "cold," with the chill

of unregenerate death, which might be surprised and melted by the first converting call. He is not "hot," under the summer-sun of eternal love, living full in the beams of the countenance of a dear and near Redeemer, for whom it is life to suffer and to toil. He is "lukewarm," in the sad progress of a falling temperature. Like the Ephesian, he has "left his first love." But, unlike the Ephesian, he has lost also his energy, his practical zeal, his *care* for truth and labour. Apparently, if we may judge by the silence of the Epistle, he is curiously exempt from external difficulties and crosses. No active heresy disturbs him and his congregation. No persecuting terrors approach him. He is such that the pagan world finds nothing in him to dread and to attack. And so has the torpor of his own spirit infected his flock that there is not enough activity of mind and will among them to discuss and to differ!

In a Litany of that Moravian Church, the Church of which we were reminded last month at Philadelphia, the petitions occur: "*From the loss of our glory in Thee; from self-complacency; preserve us, gracious Lord and God.*" Such prayers were sorely needed by the Laodicean angel. Only as he lost sight of the "fair beauty" of his Lord could he have come to value himself, in the sphere of religion, as "rich, and increased in goods, and having need of nothing." It is fatally easy to think that we are living up to our creed when our creed is "held" without life—a thing far different from the creed of the glory and salvation of Christ so known by the soul that *it holds* the holder.

When we see HIM in deed and in truth, what words can fully tell the gladness and the freedom? But in that same consciousness, as we behold Him, we are made aware in our inmost soul of our own unworthiness, and of the progress to which we are always called, in a perpetual repentance.

The Master meets this lamentable condition of the man with three great utterances. First He warns, with terrible explicitness: "I am about (*μέλλω*) to spue thee out of my mouth," with the moral repugnance of divine holiness and love. Then He counsels, bidding the self-contented sinner, awaking to his needs, hasten to get them supplied, "buying" of his Lord "gold,

tried in the fire," the powers of the tested life of faith; "and white raiment" for his spiritual nakedness, the large robe of his Redeemer's merit, free and ready for the real penitent; and "eyesalve," the gift of open vision of "his exceeding need and Christ's exceeding love." These he is to "buy"—yes, to buy, though he is "the wretched one, and miserable, and mendicant" (*πτωχός*). Even so; but if he will only cast down his miserable self-righteousness and self-praise at the Lord's feet, and "abhor himself, and repent in dust and ashes," and take divine Love at its word, he shall receive *in exchange*, as if value had been given and purchase made, the whole treasures of salvation.

For the voice which speaks is indeed the voice, not of mere displeasure, but of Love aggrieved: "*As many as I love* I rebuke and chasten; be zealous therefore, and repent." I do not think the Bible contains an utterance of "the love that passeth knowledge" more moving than this; the Lord's *confession* that the soul which so lamentably displeases Him is yet personally dear to Him. Consider this Lover of sinners, and meet His heart with yours.

Then, lastly, the angel is addressed in terms of promise. And the promises are two. First there is the promise of a wonderful and most tender friendship and communion. Then there is the promise of a royal exaltation.

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock." Who does not know that surpassingly beautiful passage (it is but one verse), in which we see the King of glory, the Prince of life, applying for entrance into the being which He has created, has redeemed, has blest and loved, but from which He is now treasonably excluded? Behold Him as He stands, and as He knocks, and as He speaks; waiting, still waiting, "earnestly remembering still" the once loving disciple who now has barred himself into the wretched chamber of the self-life, and tries to think it liberty. Who shall tell the gloom and misery within? The indweller cannot see it, in his heavy illusion. But he will see it, in all its deformity—when he gets the eyesalve! And the knock is repeated, and the voice comes with it through the heavy door: "May I come in? may I come in?"

Listen; there is a stir in the dark chamber. The soul is getting awake enough to understand a little of its misery and of the Lord's great love. The will is going *to give way*. The bolt inside is shaken; it is forced from its rusted hold; it is withdrawn. The door stands open. And the Christian, satisfied an hour ago with himself, now pale with shame and fear, stands face to face with the Amen, with his excluded King.

What follows? Indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish? Not at all. The blessed Christ enters without preface and delay. And, lo! the room is lighted up with the sun of heaven. The foul confusion rights itself at His presence into purity and order. The bare table is spread with a meal, at which, by turns, the man feasts the Master and the Master the man. The Lord banquets on the surrender of his dear saved one's will. The servant banquets on the very life of Him who is love, "who loved him and gave Himself for him."

Let them sit together in that wonderful and intimate companionship. And let us come away, to claim the same bliss, always, daily, for ourselves.

Then, finally, what is the second and crowning promise, the promise to the "overcomer," the man who has, at the touch and voice of the Lord Jesus, overcome his self-delusions, and dared to let the Master of his being come in without reserve? He shall partake one day, one happy and eternal day, nothing less than the exaltation of the Incarnate. He shall be enthroned beside the Son of Man, in whom sinners of the dust become the sons of God. Such shall be the glorious largeness of that heavenly issue of all the dealings of grace below, of its warnings and its tenderness alike. The beatified disciple, in ways inscrutable as yet—but are they not now soon to be revealed?—shall "sit down with Him in His throne." For while heaven, in one infinitely happy aspect, will be a scene of unremitting service and obedience, in which "self" will be lost and gone for ever, on another side it shall be a life of power unknown, in which the holy ones shall share their Lord's experience of regal domination over all that can oppose itself to holiness and love.

I attempt no long epilogue to this our closing meditation. Let it be enough to leave upon the reader's thought this wonderful wealth and *generosity* of Him "who giveth liberally and upbraideth not." We have had before us two of the very greatest promises ever spoken by the Spirit to "him that hath an ear," the promise of the blissful mutual feast, and the promise of the heavenly throne. And who is the recipient of those glorious gifts? None other than the angel of the Church of Laodicea. Such is the wealth unsearchable of the heart of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Come in, oh come. The door stands open now;
I knew Thy voice; Lord JESUS, it was Thou;
The sun has set long since, the storms begin;
'Tis time for Thee, my Saviour; oh, come in.

I seek no more to alter things, or mend,
Before the coming of so great a Friend;
All were at best unseemly; and 'twere ill
Beyond all else to keep Thee waiting still.

Come, not to find, but make, this troubled heart
A dwelling worthy of Thee as Thou art;
To chase the gloom, the terror, and the sin,
Come e'en to-night, yea, come, Lord JESUS, in!

HANDLEY DUNELM.

