

CLEANSING IN THE BLOOD OF CHRIST¹

THE Gospel according to John and his First Epistle are complementary. The Gospel portrays the Christ-life as it was lived by the Master in the days of His flesh; the Epistle depicts the Christ-life as it is lived on earth by successive generations of believing men and women. This life of sainthood has two cardinal features—love and purity. These graces are delineated with exactitude in the Epistle, and are cursorily mentioned in the text before us. *Love*—“we have fellowship one with another”; *Purity*—“the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

The maintenance of the Christ-life in believers is conditioned by their attitude to the Divine Presence. The Christian virtues shall be in us and abound, “if we walk in the light, as He is in the light”.

In the Apocalypse St. John paints in poetic imagery what is here set forth as plain doctrine. He describes the New Jerusalem as it descends from God out of heaven, and adds, “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it; . . . and the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day; for there shall be no night there.” God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. He is pure transparency, clear as the flawless crystal (Rev. iv. 3). And those who walk in the light, as He is in the light, live and move and have their being in the Holy Presence of God and the Lamb.

When Samuel Rutherford, the Scottish Covenanter, was preaching on one occasion, the sky darkened, and a thunderstorm broke. When a sudden flame of lightning pierced the gloom, the preacher cried in ecstasy, “To see Him, for a moment swift as yonder fire-flash, were worth half-heaven.” But the glory of our life in Christ is that we need never lose the light of His countenance; He is our dwelling-place, the home of our soul. George Fox, the founder of the “Society of the Friends of Truth” chose for his seal an effigy of the flaming sword of Paradise, to

¹ 1 John i. 7. If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.

indicate that he had passed under the angel-guardianship, and had re-entered the Garden of God.

To walk in the light, in plain language, is to spend our days and hours in unbroken communion with the Saviour, and to perform all our actions in fellowship with Him. This life-walk implies a will that is renewed, affections purged from self-seeking, desires directed towards those things which are above. It requires that we shall be tolerant of no sin, that we shall yield to no reluctance to obey the promptings of the Spirit, that we hold up to that clear light all our acts and wishes, so that we may look upon the face of Christ, not with fear, but with joy and love.

Albrecht Dürer, the German painter, a disciple of Luther, sometimes depicted the interior of a Bavarian cottage. One may observe the smoke-begrimed rafters, the rude furniture, the narrow room, the homely faces of parents and children; but everything is bathed in a light transcendent, for the Christ Himself is standing in the midst; in the radiance of His countenance all is transfigured.

But, and this may seem to be almost paradoxical, our life-walk in the light makes us unceasingly aware of the sinfulness of our nature. When the Baptist was confronted with the holiness of the Saviour, the strong son of the desert shrank back in awe. "I have need," said he, "to be baptized of Thee." When Simon Peter was smitten with a sense of the majesty of Christ, he exclaimed, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." When the unimagined glory of the Risen Redeemer flashed into the dim eyes of the aged disciple of love, he fell at His feet as dead. But, thanks be to God, as we walk in the light, immediately, almost before the feeling of condemnation has fallen upon our spirit, the cleansing blood of Jesus restores us to pureness.

One thing I of the Lord desire—
For all my way hath miry been :
Be it by water or by fire,
O make me clean.

So wash Thou me, without, within,
Or purge with fire, if that must be—
No matter how, if only sin
Die out in me.

Water will purify the soiled flesh; fire will bite its way into the core of things corrupt; but blood will cleanse the very soul and spirit from sin's defilement, washing out every stain.

Although the apostle mentions the fellowship of love before he speaks of the work of cleansing, he treats of the former only after he has explained the means by which the purifying grace of God is extended to us.

The Godhead is the Fountain of love. "God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God." "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." We love God who loved us first; and in Him and for His sake we love one another. This divine, eternal love, coming from the Father of lights, retains us in the communion of the Father and the Son, and thus we are taken into fellowship with all our brethren.

An old chronicler relates that when the Holy Grael, the medieval symbol of the sanctifying presence of God, came into the Hall where the knights of Arthur's court were gathered in expectation, each man saw his brother-in-arms to be statelier and fairer than he had before known or thought of him. When God comes into our lives, shedding His love abroad, we join ourselves to the brotherhood with a fresh sympathy and affection. We become aware of virtues and graces hitherto unperceived.

"The blood of Christ" is a sacramental term. At the institution of the New Memorial Feast our Saviour gave the cup to His disciples, saying, "This is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." The thought of material blood is as remote from our minds at the Supper Table as when on Commemoration Day we wear the red poppy of Flanders. What we do lovingly recall is, that a life was laid down for us, a death was embraced that we might live. These words, which the Holy Ghost teaches—"the blood of Christ"—are among the most sacred in the vocabulary of grace, and should be spoken only with tender reverence. Yet in them, though they point so directly to death, there is the thought of life triumphant and glorious. We have the key to the meaning of these words in Leviticus xvii. 11: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that maketh atonement *by reason of the life.*" This hallowed expression, therefore, "the blood of Christ", is a symbol which stands for the mightiest of all spiritual realities. Betokening the life that dwelt in the offered blood, it represents the virtue of the Great

Sacrifice. It signifies the power of a life laid down and taken again. And it involves all the actings of our Lord after His passion. These majestic achievements—His resurrection, ascension, enthronement, the Gift of the Spirit, His intercession, His mediatorial rule, His return in glory, and the last great assize—all are effected in the power of a once-offered life.

The word “cleanse” has come down to us through many languages; we are able to trace it back to the historic beginnings of the Semitic race. And always it comes with a sacrificial suggestion.

Now let us speak more particularly of this clause: “The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin.” This is the reading of the Revised Version, and it may seem to bring before us more vividly the human nature in which He suffered and the human death which He died. But it is “Jesus *His Son*”, so that in that death were enfolded the righteousness, the love, the glory of Deity.

In the cleansing spoken of in this clause forgiveness is pre-supposed. In the ninth verse of this chapter a distinction is made: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Yet it is a distinction more in thought than in actuality. We are to think of the believer as having already received the remission of all his sins. Then, passing from the altar, he comes to the laver of cleansing.

This fresh gift of grace is twofold. There is found in it first the cleansing of the conscience, and then, the purifying of the inner life.

(a) Cleansing in the blood of Christ removes the stain of guilt, silences the voice of condemnation, and secures settled peace with God. The redeemed soul may say with joyfulness, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” But the pardoning love of God is not always clearly or fully apprehended by the believer. It may happen that a deeply-exercised follower of the Lord may lack the full assurance of faith. Nevertheless, to possess this assurance is part of his covenant privilege through grace. The remission of sins is made secure by the finished work of Jesus. Does not the beloved disciple say, “I write unto you, my little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His Name’s sake”? It is not by works of righteousness which we have done; it is according to

His mercy that we are saved. In this all the saints agree.
Bernard of Morlaix says,

I speak not of my merit ;
I seek not to deny
My merit is destruction,
An heir of wrath am I.

Samuel Rutherford agrees with this, but strikes a more jubilant note :

I stand upon His merit ;
I know no other stand,
Not e'en where glory dwelleth,
In Immanuel's land.

When one comes to the great crises of life in which misconceptions are rebuked, and truth shines out in its pure lustre, the soul turns back from her fancied righteousness, to place her full reliance on the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. A Nonconformist worthy, in the great days of Nonconformity, was at one time so brought under conviction by the Holy Spirit as to experience deep dejection. The first ray of light which shone through his mental gloom was given in the verse of a familiar hymn :

In the world of endless ruin
It shall never once be said,
There's a soul that perished, suing
For the Saviour's promised aid.

As he drew near to death he asked his wife to read the first chapter of the First Epistle of John. When she came to the seventh verse, and read, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin," he exclaimed: "Ah, that's it; there's the foundation; there's my hope." Pillowing his heart on that comfortable assurance he entered the eternal rest. He charged his surviving friends to print on his tombstone, after name and date, only these words, "Grace reigns."

(b) The cleansing of the soul itself is included in this good work of grace. The Holy Spirit goes down into the deep places of life, and there applies the power of the death of Christ. Our thoughts are purified, our desires are ennobled, our affections are set on things above, our wills are directed towards a single intention, our hopes are fixed on God, and evil passions are stricken into impotence. This cleansing is a life-process and an undeviating experience. Moment by moment, year after year, until set of sun, the blood of Jesus *cleanseth*.

Nothing less than the power of the Great Sacrifice can effect this blessed transformation. Aristotle, who wrote ten books on the Practice of Virtue, makes this confession: "If mere treatises were sufficient of themselves to make men good, it would be our duty to provide ourselves with them. But the truth is, they have no power to persuade the multitude to what is virtuous and honourable." Nothing but the grace of the indwelling Spirit of Christ can turn a sinful man to penitence and faith, to goodness and truth. But this can do it.

In those who have been renewed in the spirit of their mind there is an instinctive longing for holiness. The prayer of Robert MacCheyne is often in their hearts, if not upon their lips, "Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be." A desire for perfection meets us in every path of life. It was said of Wordsworth that "an unfinished line used to haunt him, an unfound word shadowed his thought." Michael Angelo was accustomed to descend into the Forum of Rome, that he might study the scattered fragments of classical art: and as he went he would say, "I carry my satchel still." The foremost sculptor of his day was yet a learner in the school of art. When Ignatius of Antioch, at the close of a life of service for Christ, was being led to Rome, to be torn by wild beasts in the Coliseum, he exclaimed, "Now I begin to be a disciple." The noblest saints of God are eager to run the Christian race more swiftly, saying, as they gird their loins anew and hasten onward, "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

And those who are not so far advanced in the Christian life, they also long for completion. It was said of Witsius the famous Dutch divine, that "he pleased himself in tarrying in the porch of the temple of God—then he was introduced by the Lord Jesus to its most secret recesses." Those who are tarrying in the porch of the temple are invited by the Spirit to "Draw nigh". They shall be welcomed to the intimate Presence of God.

In this verse St. John may perhaps be recalling unconsciously his personal experience. From the day when the heavens received his Lord, he had walked in the companionship of his glorified Master. And as they journeyed they held intimate communion. The disciple whom Jesus loved never allowed himself to be separated from the Saviour who had claimed his allegiance in

the days of youth. But as they walked together through life's ways the glory of the risen Christ revealed the imperfections still attaching to a character not yet perfectly conformed to that blessed and holy example. Dark stains disfigured the white robes of pilgrimage. But even as they appeared, they were cleansed, and the son of Zebedee approached ever more nearly to that high ideal which always directed his progress: "We know that when He shall be manifested, we shall be like Him." In the Apocalypse St. John tells us how this gift of purity is daily renewed until life's last hour. Just as the redeemed soul is about to enter the city of the saints the last stain upon the garments of earth is removed, and he appears without fault before the throne of God. "Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have the right to come to the tree of life, and may enter in by the gates into the city" (Rev. xxii. 14 R.V.).

When Bishop Handley Moule of Durham was dying, the last hymn upon his lips was that pathetic appeal of Christina Rossetti's :

None other Lamb, none other Name,
 None other Hope in heaven or earth or sea,
 None other hiding-place from guilt and shame—
 None beside Thee.

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