

*THE COMPLEMENT OF CHRIST'S AFFLICTIONS.*

## COLOSSIANS i. 24.

THE context of this passage, which certainly contains "things hard to be understood," does not throw much light upon its meaning, inasmuch as the words are a parenthesis which might have been omitted without any injury to the general sense. In the preceding paragraph, St. Paul had been adverting to the glory of the gospel dispensation, arising from the supreme dignity of its Author, the unspeakable blessings which it confers, and the universal reconciliation which it effects—"Reconciling all things unto himself, whether they be things on earth, or things in heaven." Of this glorious gospel he was privileged to be a minister, an announcer of the glad tidings of reconciliation—"Whereof I Paul am made a minister." Here the Apostle breaks off his discourse to interject a brief thanksgiving to God that he was permitted to suffer for Christ's sake and the gospel's, since by his sufferings "he filled up that which is behind in the affliction of Christ for his body's sake, which is the church." Having thus given vent to the personal emotion quickened within him by the singular privilege conferred upon him, he, as his manner was, returns to the point at which he had broken off, and takes up the thread of his discourse by repeating its last phrase, "Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and generations, but now is made manifest to his saints." Our passage, then, is evidently a mere parenthesis in the Apostle's discourse.

The exegesis of the passage is as follows. *Who*: that is, "I, Paul," connected with the preceding words, "Whereof I Paul am made a minister." It is doubtful, however, if this word is in the original: the best manuscripts omit it. *Now*: not a particle of connection or transition, but of time, as is evident from its position in the original, and from the parenthetical nature of the Verse; *now*, at this present time, in contrast with the past when he was made a minister. Either now, whilst reflecting on the glorious gospel which I am privileged to announce; or, rather, now, although a prisoner at Rome and in chains, although suffering for the cause of the gospel. *Rejoice*: joy in; the union of joy with suffering often occurs with this Apostle—"We glory in tribulation." *In my sufferings*: or, rather, "in sufferings," the pronoun not being in the original. His sufferings were not merely the sphere of his joy, "joy in the midst of sufferings," but the cause or the occasion of his joy—"joy on account of sufferings." *For you*: not "instead of you," or "in room of you"—there is here no reference to the idea of substitution—nor yet "on your account," but "on your behalf," "for your sake." *And fill up*: a double compound verb, not found elsewhere in the New Testament, signifying to fill up by way of compensation; hence it may be rendered "supplement," or, rather, "complete." *That which is behind*: indicating what was yet wanting in the afflictions of Christ to fill them up, or to render them complete. The word denotes "those things which are lacking." The nearest approach to it is "deficiencies," though without precisely implying that there was any positive defect in the afflictions of Christ. Our own Version is not inappropriate, "that which

remains behind." *Of the afflictions*: a different word from that rendered "sufferings" in the former clause: it does not denote the vicarious suffering of Christ, but his afflictions. *Of Christ*: not the afflictions of which Christ was the cause, but of which He is the subject: his afflictions, the afflictions which He endures. *In my flesh*: belonging to the verb "fill up," namely, fill up or complete in my flesh. Paul's sufferings in his flesh supplemented or completed what was lacking in Christ's afflictions. *For*: "for the sake of," "on behalf of." *His body*: there being here an antithesis of the Apostle's flesh and Christ's body. *Which is the church*: an explanation of what is meant by the body of Christ. So that the passage literally translated runs as follows: "Now I rejoice in suffering for your sake, and am completing in my flesh the deficiencies of the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body, that is, the Church." The passage is beautifully rendered in Luther's translation: "Nun freue ich mich in meinem Leiden, dass ich für euch leide, und erstatte an meinem Fleisch was noch mangelt an Trübsalen in Christo für seinen Leib, welcher ist die Gemeine."

This being the exegesis of the passage, several interpretations may at once be dismissed as inadmissible. All those, for instance, which give a substitutionary meaning to the preposition *for*, as if Paul's sufferings were vicarious like those of Christ, a meaning unsupported by this passage, and in evident contradiction to the general scope of Pauline doctrine. So also we may dismiss all those meanings which regard the afflictions of Christ as those of which He is the cause; such as "afflictions which Christ sends," "afflictions of which Christ is the author." The genitive is not the genitive of agency,

but of possession. We may also omit those meanings which give a metaphorical or figurative interpretation to the afflictions of Christ; such as "afflictions for the sake of Christ." All these are artificial explanations, employed to escape a difficulty. The afflictions are the afflictions endured by Christ.

Having thus dismissed without examination what we consider inadmissible interpretations, we now proceed to consider four of the most plausible meanings which have been attached to the words.

1. Some understand by what is wanting in Christ's afflictions deficiencies in those sufferings which He endured for the reconciliation of his people. They suppose that there was a certain deficiency in the sufferings that Christ submitted to in order to reconcile the world to God, which deficiency had to be completed, or filled up, or supplemented, by the sufferings of St. Paul and of other followers of Christ. A distinction is made between sufferings for the sake of atonement and sufferings for the sake of reconciliation. The former refer to original sin, and are complete and infinitely sufficient; the latter refer to actual sins, and have to be supplemented by the sufferings of all who take up the cross for Christ's sake. The great argument for this view is that it gives a true and natural meaning to the words, and that it is supported by the context, wherein the Apostle is discoursing on the blessings of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. This, or something like this, is the meaning which the Romanists adopt, and which is supported by the majority of their divines. And it is chiefly on the above interpretation of this Verse that they maintain their doctrines of indulgences, works of super-

erogation, and the transferable merits of the saints—doctrines which, according to our Protestant notions, have given rise to the grossest abuses in the Christian Church. They assume that Paul's sufferings and the sufferings of other saints were meritorious, and that in this sense Paul by his sufferings filled up the deficiencies in the afflictions of Christ.

Such a view we consider not only as totally unsupported by this text, but as in direct variance with the views of St. Paul and the undoubted sense of Scripture. It involves the idea of substitution. But, as we have already seen, the words, strictly interpreted, do not admit of this idea. Paul suffered not in the room, but for the sake of the Church. It may indeed be asserted that substitution is contained in the notion of atonement, but not in the notion of reconciliation; but, in reality, there is no essential difference between these two ideas: the atonement is the cause of our reconciliation. The distinction is not a scriptural one, and is introduced for a purpose. It is also to be observed that the Apostle does not speak of the sufferings, but of the *afflictions* of Christ; he employs a word which of itself does not necessarily imply the idea of meritorious suffering, but rather seems to exclude it. And certainly the above view is directly opposed to Paulinism. Nothing can be more alien to the theology of Paul than the assumption that there is any deficiency in the expiatory sufferings of Christ. And, indeed, the whole of Scripture is opposed to this view of the subject. The sufferings of Christ, as an atonement for sin and as the cause of reconciliation, are always represented as perfect. The sacrifice which He offered on Calvary is of infinite efficacy. "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth

us from all sin." Whatever be the meaning of this difficult passage it cannot possibly imply any defect or incompleteness in the expiatory sufferings of Christ which needs to be supplemented by the efforts or endurances of weak and sinful men.

2. Others consider the afflictions of Christ which have to be filled up, not as his expiatory sufferings, but as sufferings endured for the building up of his Church and for the confirmation of believers in the faith. According to this opinion, the sufferings of Christ are regarded from two points of view, sufferings for the sake of satisfaction, and sufferings for the sake of edification: they have their sacrificial efficacy and their ministerial utility. Considered sacrificially, the sufferings of Christ are perfect; He has offered, once for all, a complete atonement for the sins of the world. But considered ministerially, the sufferings of Christ are incomplete; they are supplemented by the afflictions of the faithful. The phrase, "the afflictions of Christ," is here employed, therefore, in its true and natural sense—the afflictions which He himself endured. This is the view advanced by Professor Lightfoot in his unrivalled commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians. "It is," he observes, "a simple matter of fact that the afflictions of every saint and martyr do supplement the afflictions of Christ. The Church is built up by repeated acts of self-denial in successive individuals and successive generations. They continue the work which Christ began. They bear their part in the sufferings of Christ; but St. Paul would have been the last to say that they bear their part in the atoning sacrifice of Christ."

Notwithstanding the high authority by which this view has been advanced and supported, and the natural

sense which it gives to the phrase, "the afflictions of Christ," we must regard it as hazy and far-fetched. No such distinction of the sufferings of Christ as those for satisfaction and those for edification is to be found in Scripture; nor is there any ground for affirming that the one is complete and the other incomplete. Although the sufferings of Christ *are* an example for our imitation, viewed as an instance of self-sacrifice, and the sufferings of the saints are for the edification of the Church, considered as examples of faith and patience; yet it would afford but a doubtful and mystical meaning to affirm that the afflictions of believers complete the afflictions of Christ in the building up of his Church. Such a meaning does not lie on the surface, and would not suggest itself to the first readers of the Epistle. With the profoundest respect for the great commentator who has advanced it, we are nevertheless compelled to dismiss it as obscure, unsatisfactory, and fanciful.

3. A third and more plausible interpretation is that which takes St. Paul's sufferings as similar and almost coincident with Christ's afflictions. The sufferings of Paul were in an important sense the sufferings of Christ. He drank of the same bitter cup, and was baptized with the same baptism. He trod the same path of sorrow. And more especially those sufferings which he endured for the sake of the gospel were the afflictions of Christ. Take Christ away, and his sufferings would cease; he would no longer suffer persecution. Thus, then, in his flesh, in his own person, he filled up that which was behind in the afflictions of Christ. He endured sufferings like those of his Lord; and, like his Lord, endured them for the sake of the

Church. This is the view advanced by Meyer, perhaps the greatest of modern exegetes. "Paul," he observes, "describes his own sufferings as *afflictions of Christ*, in so far as the apostolic suffering in essential character was the same as Christ endured. The collective mass of these afflictions is conceived in the form of a definite measure. He only who has suffered all has filled up that measure." And he gives the following interpretation to the passage: "I rejoice on account of the sufferings which I endure for you, and am in the course of furnishing the complete fulfilment of what in my case still remains in arrear of fellowship of affliction with Christ." The same view has been adopted by Schleiermacher, Huther, Winer, and other distinguished German theologians.

There are numerous passages in Scripture which seem to confirm this view. Thus St. Paul expresses his desire "to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death." And again he says: "As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolations also abound by Christ." "If we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him." There is therefore a similarity almost amounting to identity between the sufferings of Christ and the sufferings of believers. When a man endures any loss, or pain, or persecution, for righteousness' sake, which he might have escaped but for his devotion to Christ and Christ's will, he is a partaker of Christ's sufferings, a fellow-traveller with Him along that path of sorrow which leads to glory. Thus he, on his part, fills up in his flesh that portion of the afflictions of Christ which has been allotted to him, not for his own discipline in righteousness alone,



but also for the edification of his fellow-believers, "for his body's sake, which is the church." This view, however, though it approaches, does not come up to, the full meaning of the passage. The afflictions of Christian men may certainly, in an important sense, be called the afflictions of Christ; but, according to this view, they are not his in point of fact, but only metaphorically and analogically: they are only sufferings which *resemble* those of Christ. So that, in reality, this view gives a figurative interpretation to Christ's sufferings, and so far is forced and unnatural. The words appear to demand that the phrase "the afflictions of Christ" should denote the afflictions which He Himself actually endured or endures. And, moreover, this view hardly gives any distinct sense to the principal clause in the Verse—*filling up that which is behind*, or lacking, in the afflictions of Christ. The idea of deficiency in the suffering of Christ Himself—a deficiency that must be made good—is overlooked or omitted. And hence we are disposed to reject this view also as not sufficiently exhaustive.

4. A fourth view is that which considers the afflictions of Christ as his own afflictions in his body, the Church. According to this view, the afflictions of Christ are not those which He personally endured while He was on the earth, but those which He now mystically endures in heaven—a view which is supported, if not justified, by the explanatory words, "for his body's sake, which is the church." These words are held to afford the key of the whole passage. Christ's body, the Church, has its complement of suffering to endure; and St. Paul, as a member of that body, by his sufferings filled up *his* part, which was wanting in

the way of completion, though not in the way of substitution.

Christ, who once suffered in his person, still suffers in his Church. There is a mystical union between Him and his people, a principle of identity. The Church is his body, and if one member of the body suffers, all the members suffer with it. Thus our Lord, when He encountered Paul on his way to Damascus, accused him of persecuting, not his Church, but Himself. "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." There is a living sympathy between Christ and his people. "In all their afflictions he is afflicted." And these sufferings of Christ's body have to be filled up; *i.e.*, every member of that body has a certain measure of suffering allotted to him, and must do his part in the common work. The sufferings of the whole Church, from its birth down to the end of time, is the measure which requires to be filled up; and each believer adds his *quotum*, until at length, when the measure is filled up, Christ's body, as He Himself, will be received into glory everlasting.

This is the view adopted by many of our most distinguished commentators and Biblical critics, — by Chrysostom and Augustine in the ancient Church; by Calvin, Luther, and Melancthon among the Reformers; by Bengel, Whitby, and Doddridge; and, more recently, by Olshausen, De Wette, Alford, Ellicott, Wordsworth, Conybeare, and Eadie. "As," says Calvin, "Christ has once suffered in his own person, so He suffers daily in his members, and in this way there are filled up those sufferings which his Father hath appointed for his body the Church." "The afflictions of Christ," observes Olshausen, "can be understood subjectively of the

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mystical Christ alone ; that is, of Christ so far as He fills the Church with his life and being. The Church of Christ, which had suffered much from the very beginning, is to endure more suffering still by the dispensation of God : a certain measure of suffering is allotted her, which must be filled up. St. Paul supplied that deficiency on his part by his sufferings in his flesh." " All the tribulations of Christ's body," observes Dean Alford, " are Christ's tribulations. Whatever the Church has to suffer, even to the end, she suffers for her perfection in holiness and her completion in Him ; and the tribulations of Christ will not be complete till the last pang shall have past and the last tear have been shed. Every suffering saint of God in every age and position is in fact filling up, in his place and degree, the afflictions of Christ in his flesh, and on behalf of his body. Not a pang, not a tear, is in vain."

But before we adopt this view, several objections have to be considered and answered. (1) Such a view, it is said, gives a figurative interpretation of the afflictions of Christ: it refers not to those which He endures in person, but to those which He endures, metaphorically, in his Church ; whereas we ought to take " the afflictions of Christ" as personal and real. But to this it may be replied that the interpretation is hardly figurative. The Scriptures speak of Christ as actually suffering in his members. *How* this is the case ; whether there is actual suffering, or whether there is a mere accommodation to our weaknesses, we do not know ; but still the analogy of Scripture justifies us in taking St. Paul's words in the sense for which we contend. (2) It is affirmed that such a view introduces an unmeaning tautology into the text, compelling us to read it as

follows : "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in his body for the sake of his body which is the Church." And certainly, at first sight, this appears to be the case ; but, on a closer examination, the tautology will somewhat disappear. The sufferings of each believer, and pre-eminently the sufferings of St. Paul, were not only a filling up of the complement of the afflictions of Christ's body, but were, moreover, and in addition, for the sake of the body, tending to its edification and perfection. (3) It is asserted that the idea of Christ suffering in the sufferings of his people is nowhere found in the New Testament. "He lives in his people ; his heart beats in them ; He is mighty in them when they are weak ; He is their hope, their life, their victory ; but nowhere is it stated that He suffers in them. Crucified through weakness, He lives at the right hand of God, exalted above all heavens, beyond the reach of further suffering." But this, as we have already shewn, is not so. Does not the risen Christ accuse Paul when persecuting his disciples of persecuting Himself, as if He Himself suffered in the persecutions of his people ? Is He not repeatedly said to sympathize with us, and does not sympathy presuppose a certain degree of suffering ? We cannot tell how the sufferings of his people affect the exalted Saviour ; but, whether in reality, or, anthropologically, in condescension to our weakness, suffering is ascribed to Him ; and our ignorance must not be allowed to deprive us of the rich consolation which the conviction of his sympathy affords us : for what can more effectually sustain us under the wrongs and sorrows of time than the assurance that so often as we suffer for righteousness' sake. He suffers in us and with us ?

Upon the whole, then, we hold that the objections brought against this view of our passage are not insuperable, and are constrained to adopt it as the true interpretation. And, assuredly, it is of all views the most consolatory and sustaining. However mysterious the idea, we believe that Christ suffers in and with us, that He sympathizes in all our sorrows. There is a vital chord which unites Him with us, as the Head to the body. Though He has gone up on high, to reassume the glory He had with his Father before the world was, He feels for his suffering brethren on earth, and is not unmindful of their sorrows. The perfections of his divinity do not obliterate the sympathies of his humanity. "We have not," writes the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "a high priest who cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities, but one who was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."

PATON J. GLOAG.

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#### *BRIEF NOTICES OF BOOKS.*

A NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY FOR ENGLISH READERS. Vol. I. *Edited by C. F. Ellicott, D.D.* (London: Cassell and Co.) Much has been done of late, far more than ever before, to put the best results of scholarship and erudition at the service of those students of the Bible who command none but their mother tongue. Never were the Scriptures so much read as now; never was it so easy, at least for the unlearned, to read them "with the understanding." But of all the aids to an intelligent study of the Gospels none is comparable with this last addition to the commentaries on the New Testament. It may be doubted, indeed, whether even those who are familiar with both Greek and German possess, in any one volume, a commentary on the Gospels so valuable as this: certainly no commentary designed "for English readers" comes anywhere near it, whether for spiritual insight and suggestiveness, or exact scholarship, or wide erudition, or resolute handling of difficulties, or that fearless