

Lord." "Blessed is she that believeth," said Elizabeth, no doubt with some sad thoughts about her dumb husband sitting beside her.

"Blessed is the womb that bore thee," on another occasion cried a nameless woman, a nameless but true woman, as her speech bewrayeth, "and the paps that thou hast sucked." But He said, "Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it." And again, "Whosoever shall do the will of My Father in heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother."

ALEXANDER WHYTE.

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

II.

THE PRELUDE.

"We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have toward all the saints, because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which is come unto you; even as it is also in all the world bearing fruit and increasing, as it doth in you also, since the day ye heard and knew the grace of God in truth; even as ye learned of Epaphras our beloved fellow-servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, who also declared to us your love in the Spirit" (Col. i. 3-8).

THIS long introductory section may at first sight give the impression of confusion from the variety of subjects introduced. But a little thought about it shows it to be really a remarkable specimen of the Apostle's delicate tact, born of his love and earnestness. Its purpose is to prepare a favourable reception for his warnings and arguments against errors which had crept in, and in his judgment were threatening to sweep away the Colossian Christians from their allegiance to Christ, and their faith in the gospel as it had been originally preached to them by Epaphras. That

design explains the selection of topics in these verses, and their weaving together.

Before he warns and rebukes, Paul begins by giving the Colossians credit for all the good which he can find in them. As soon as he opens his mouth, he asserts the claims and authority, the truth and power of the gospel which he preaches, and from which all this good in them had come, and which had proved that it came from God by its diffusiveness and fruitfulness. He reminds them of their beginnings in the Christian life, with which this new teaching was utterly inconsistent, and he flings his shield over Epaphras, their first teacher, whose words were in danger of being neglected now for newer voices with other messages.

Thus skilfully and lovingly these verses touch a prelude which naturally prepares for the theme of the epistle. Remonstrance and rebuke would more often be effective if they oftener began with showing the rebuker's love, and with frank acknowledgment of good in the rebuked.

I. We have first a *thankful recognition of Christian excellence* as introductory to warnings and remonstrances.

Almost all Paul's letters begin with similar expressions of thankfulness for the good that was in the Church he is addressing. Gentle rain softens the ground and prepares it to receive the heavier downfall which would else mostly run off the hard surface. The exceptions are 2 Corinthians; Ephesians, which was probably a circular letter; and Galatians, which is too hot throughout for such praises. These expressions are not compliments, or words of course. Still less are they flattery used for personal ends. They are the uncalculated and uncalculating expression of affection which delights to see white patches in the blackest character, and of wisdom which knows that the nauseous medicine of blame is most easily taken if administered wrapped in a capsule of honest praise.

All persons in authority over others, such as masters, parents, leaders of any sort, may be the better for taking the lesson—"provoke not your"—inferiors, dependents, scholars—"to wrath, lest they be discouraged"—and deal out praise where you can, with a liberal hand. It is nourishing food for many virtues, and a powerful antidote to many vices.

This praise is cast in the form of thanksgiving to God, as the true fountain of all that is good in men. How all that might be harmful in direct praise is strained out of it, when it becomes gratitude to God! But we need not dwell on this, nor on the principle underlying these thanks, namely that Christian men's excellences are God's gift, and that therefore, admiration of the man should ever be subordinate to thankfulness to God. The fountain, not the pitcher filled from it, should have the credit of the crystal purity and sparkling coolness of the water. Nor do we need to do more than point to the inference from that phrase "having heard of your faith," an inference confirmed by other statements in the letter, namely, that the Apostle himself had never seen the Colossian Church. But we briefly emphasize the two points which occasioned his thankfulness. They are the familiar two, *faith* and *love*.

Faith is sometimes spoken of in the New Testament as "*towards* Christ Jesus," which describes that great act of the soul by its direction, as if it were a going out or flight of the man's nature to the true goal of all active being. It is sometimes spoken of as "*on* Christ Jesus," which describes it as reposing on Him as the end of all seeking, and suggests such images as that of a hand that leans or of a burden borne, or a weakness upheld by contact with Him. But more sweet and great is the blessedness of faith considered as "*in* Him," as its abiding place and fortress-home, in union with, and indwelling in whom the seeking spirit may fold its wings, and the weak heart may

be strengthened to lift its burden cheerily, heavy though it be, and the soul may be full of tranquillity and soothed into a great calm. *Towards, on, and in*—so manifold are the phases of the relation between Christ and our faith.

In all, faith is the same, simple confidence, precisely like the trust which we put in one another. But how unlike are the objects!—broken reeds of human nature in the one case, and the firm pillar of that Divine power and tenderness in the other, and how unlike, alas! is the fervency and constancy of the trust we exercise in each other and in Christ! “Faith” covers the whole ground of man’s relation to God. All religion, all devotion, everything which binds us to the unseen world is included in or evolved from faith. And mark that this faith is, in Paul’s teaching, the foundation of love to men and of everything else good and fair. We may agree or disagree with that thought, but we can scarcely fail to see that it is the foundation of all his moral teaching. From that fruitful source all good will come. From that deep fountain sweet water will flow, and all drawn from other sources has a tang of bitterness. Goodness of all kinds is most surely evolved from faith—and that faith lacks its best warrant of reality which does not lead to whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. Barnabas was a “good man,” because, as Luke goes on to tell us by way of analysis of the sources of his goodness, he was “full of the Holy Ghost,” the author of all goodness, “and of faith” by which that Inspirer of all beauty of purity dwells in men’s hearts. Faith then is the germ of goodness, not because of anything in itself, but because by it we come under the influence of the Divine Spirit whose breath is life and holiness.

Therefore we say to every one who is seeking to train his character in excellence, begin with trusting Christ, and out of that will come all lustre and whiteness, all various

beauties of mind and heart. It is hard and hopeless work to cultivate our own thorns into grapes, but if we will trust Christ, He will sow good seed in our field and "make it soft with showers and bless the springing thereof."

As faith is the foundation of all virtue, so it is the parent of love, and as the former sums up every bond that knits men to God, so the latter includes all relations of men to each other, and is the whole law of human conduct packed into one word. But the warmest place in a Christian's heart will belong to those who are in sympathy with his deepest self, and a true faith in Christ, like a true loyalty to a prince, will weave a special bond between all fellow subjects. So the sign, on the surface of earthly relations, of the deeplying central fire of faith to Christ, is the fruitful vintage of brotherly love, as the vineyards bear the heaviest clusters on the slopes of Vesuvius. Faith in Christ and love to Christians—that is the Apostle's notion of a good man. This is the ideal of character which we have to set before ourselves. Do we desire to be good? Let us trust Christ. Do we profess to trust Christ? Let us show it by the true proof—our goodness and especially our love.

So we have here two members of the familiar triad, Faith and Love, and their sister Hope is not far off. We read in the next clause, "because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens." The connexion is not altogether plain. Is the hope the reason for the Apostle's thanksgiving, or the reason in some sense of the Colossians' love? As far as the language goes, we may either read "We give thanks . . . because of the hope," or "the love which ye have . . . because of the hope." But the long distance which we have to go back for the connexion if we adopt the former explanation, and other considerations which need not be entered on here, seem to make the latter the preferable construction if it yields a tolerable sense. Does it?

Is it allowable to say that the hope which is laid up in heaven is in any sense a reason or motive for brotherly love? I think it is.

Observe that "hope" here is best taken as meaning not the emotion, but the object on which the emotion is fixed; not the faculty, but the thing hoped for; or in other words, that it is objective not subjective; and also that the ideas of futurity and security are conveyed by the thought of this object of expectation being laid up. This future blessedness, grasped by our expectant hearts as assured for us, does stimulate and hearten to all well-doing. Certainly it does not supply the main reason; we are not to be loving and good because we hope to win heaven thereby. The deepest motive for all the graces of Christian character is the will of God in Christ Jesus, apprehended by loving hearts. But it is quite legitimate to draw subordinate motives for the strenuous pursuit of holiness from the anticipation of future blessedness, and it is quite legitimate to use that prospect to reinforce the higher motives. He who seeks to be good only for the sake of the heaven which he thinks he will get for his goodness—if there be any such a person existing anywhere but in the imaginations of the caricaturists of Christian teaching—is not good and will not get his heaven; but he who feeds his devotion to Christ and his earnest cultivation of holiness with the animating hope of an unfading crown will find in it a mighty power to intensify and ennoble all life, to bear him up as on angel's hands that lift over all stones of stumbling, to diminish sorrow and dull pain, to kindle love to men into a brighter flame, and to purge holiness to a more radiant whiteness. The hope laid up in heaven is not the deepest reason or motive for faith and love—but both are made more vivid when it is strong. It is not the light at which their lamps are lit, but it is the odorous oil which feeds their flame.

II. The course of thought passes on to *a solemn reminder*

of the truth and worth of that Gospel which was threatened by the budding heresies of the Colossian Church.

That is contained in the clauses from the middle of the fifth verse to the end of the sixth, and is introduced with significant abruptness, immediately after the commendation of the Colossians' faith. The Apostle's mind and heart are so full of the dangers which he saw them to be in, although they did not know it, that he cannot refrain from setting forth an impressive array of considerations, each of which should make them hold to the gospel with an iron grasp. They are put with the utmost compression. Each word almost might be beaten out into a long discourse, so that we can only indicate the lines of thought. This somewhat tangled skein may, on the whole be taken as the answer to the question, Why should we cleave to Paul's gospel, and dread and war against tendencies of opinion that would rob us of it? They are preliminary considerations adapted to prepare the way for a patient and thoughtful reception of the arguments which are to follow, by showing how much is at stake, and how we shall be poor indeed if we are robbed of that great Word.

He begins by reminding them that to that gospel they owed all *their knowledge and hope of heaven*—the hope "whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel." That great word alone gives light on the darkness. The sole certainty of a life beyond the grave is built on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the sole hope of a blessed life beyond the grave for the poor soul that has learned its sinfulness is built on the Death of Christ. Without this light, that land is a land of darkness, lighted only by glimmering sparks of conjectures and peradventures. So it is to-day, as it was then; the centuries have only made more clear the entire dependence of the living conviction of immortality on the acceptance of Paul's gospel, "how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and

that He was raised again the third day." All around us, we see those who reject the fact of Christ's resurrection finding themselves forced to surrender their faith in any life beyond. They cannot sustain themselves on that height of conviction, unless they lean on Christ. The black mountain wall that rings us poor mortals round about is cloven in one place only. Through one narrow cleft there comes a gleam of light. There and there only is the frowning barrier passable. Through that grim cañon, narrow and black, where there is only room for the dark river to run, bright-eyed Hope may travel, letting out her golden thread as she goes, to guide us. Christ has cloven the rock, "the breaker has gone up before us," and by His resurrection alone we have the knowledge which is certitude, and the hope which is confidence, of an inheritance in light. If Paul's gospel goes, that goes like morning mist. Before you throw away the "word of the truth of the gospel," at all events understand that you fling away all assurance of a future life, along with it.

Then, there is another motive touched in these words just quoted. The gospel is a word of which the whole substance and content is truth. You may say that is the whole question, whether the gospel is such a word? Of course it is; but observe how here, at the very outset, the gospel is represented as having a distinct dogmatic element in it. It is of value, not because it feeds sentiment or regulates conduct only, but first and foremost because it gives us true though incomplete knowledge concerning all the deepest things of God and man about which, but for its light, we know nothing. That truthful word is opposed to the argumentations and speculations and errors of the heretics. The gospel is not speculation but fact. It is truth, because it is the record of a Person who is the Truth, The history of His life and death is the one source of all certainty and knowledge with regard to man's relations to God, and God's

loving purposes to man. To leave it and Him of whom it speaks in order to listen to men who spin theories out of their own brains is to prefer will-o'-the-wisps to the sun. If we listen to Christ, we have the truth; if we turn from Him, our ears are stunned by a Babel. "To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."

Further, this gospel had been already received by them. *Ye heard before*, says he, and again he speaks of the gospel as "come unto" them, and reminds them of the past days in which they "heard and knew the grace of God." That appeal is, of course, no argument except to a man who admits the truth of what he had already received, nor is it meant for argument with others, but it is equivalent to the exhortation, "You have heard that word and accepted it, see that your future be consistent with your past." He would have the life a harmonious whole, all in accordance with the first glad grasp which they had laid on the truth. Sweet and calm and noble is the life which preserves to its close the convictions of its beginning, only deepened and expanded. Blessed are they whose creed at last can be spoken in the lessons they learned in childhood, to which experience has but given new meaning! Blessed they who have been able to store the treasures of a life's thought and learning in the vessels of the early words, which have grown like the magic coffers in a fairy tale, to hold all the increased wealth that can be lodged in them! Beautiful is it when the little children and the young men and the fathers possess the one faith, and when he who began as a child, "knowing the Father," ends as an old man with the same knowledge of the same God, only apprehended now in a form which has gained majesty from the fleeting years, as "Him that is from the beginning." There is no need to leave the Word long since heard in order to get novelty. It will open out into all new depths, and blaze in new radiance as men grow. It will give new answers as the years

ask new questions. Each epoch of individual experience, and each phase of society, and all changing forms of opinion will find what meets them in the gospel as it is in Jesus. It is good for Christian men often to recall the beginnings of their faith, to live over again their early emotions, and when they may be getting stunned with the din of controversy, and confused as to the relative importance of different parts of Christian truth, to remember *what* it was that first filled their heart with joy as of the finder of a hidden treasure, and with what a leap of gladness they first laid hold of Christ. That spiritual discipline is no less needful than is intellectual, in facing the conflicts of this day.

Again, this gospel was filling the world; "it is in all the world bearing fruit, and increasing." There are two marks of life—it is fruitful and it spreads. Of course such words are not to be construed as if they occurred in a statistical table. "All the world" must be taken with an allowance for rhetorical statement; but making such allowance, the rapid spread of Christianity in Paul's time, and its power to influence character and conduct among all sorts and conditions of men, were facts that needed to be accounted for, if the gospel was not true.

That is surely a noteworthy fact, and one which may well raise a presumption in favour of the truth of the message, and make any proposal to cast it aside for another gospel, a serious matter. Paul is not suggesting the vulgar argument that a thing must be true because so many people have so quickly believed it. But what he is pointing to is a much deeper thought than that. All schisms and heresies are essentially local, and partial. They suit coteries and classes. They are the product of special circumstances acting on special casts of mind, and appeal to such. Like parasitical plants they each require a certain species to grow on, and cannot spread where these are not found. They are not for all time, but for an age. They are not for all men,

but for a select few. They reflect the opinions or wants of a layer of society or of a generation, and fade away. But the gospel goes through the world and draws men to itself out of every land and age. Dainties and confections are for the few, and many of them are like pickled olives to unsophisticated palates, and the delicacies of one country are the abominations of another; but everybody likes bread and lives on it after all.

The gospel which tells of Christ belongs to all and can touch all, because it brushes aside superficial differences of culture and position, and goes straight to the depths of the one human heart, which is alike in us all, addressing the universal sense of sin, and revealing the Saviour of us all, and in Him the universal Father. Do not fling away a gospel that belongs to all, and can bring forth fruit in all kinds of people, for the sake of accepting what can never live in the popular heart, nor influence more than a handful of very select and "superior persons." Let who will have the dainties, do you stick to the wholesome wheaten bread.

Another plea for adherence to the gospel is based upon its continuous and universal fruitfulness. It brings about results in conduct and character, which strongly attest its claim to be from God. That is a rough and ready test, no doubt, but a sensible and satisfactory one. A system which says that it will make men good and pure is reasonably judged of by its fruits, and Christianity can stand the test. It did change the face of the old world. It has been the principal agent in the slow growth of "nobler manners, purer laws" which give the characteristic stamp to modern as contrasted with pre-Christian nations. The threefold abominations of the old world—slavery, war, and the degradation of woman—have all been modified, one of them abolished, and the second growingly felt to be utterly un-Christian. The main agent in the change has been the gospel. It has wrought wonders, too, on single souls; and

though all Christians must be too conscious of their own imperfections to venture on putting themselves forward as specimens of its power, still the gospel of Jesus Christ has lifted men from the dunghills of sin and self to "set them with princes," to make them kings and priests; has tamed passions, ennobled pursuits, revolutionised the whole course of many a life, and mightily works to-day in the same fashion, in the measure in which we submit to its influence. Our imperfections are our own; our good is its. A medicine is not shown to be powerless, though it does not do as much as is claimed for it, if the sick man has taken it irregularly and sparingly. The failure of Christianity to bring forth full fruit arises solely from the failure of professing Christians to allow its quickening powers to fill their hearts. After all deductions we may still say with Paul, "it bringeth forth fruit in all the world." This rod has budded, at all events; have any of its antagonists' rods done the same? Do not cast it away, says Paul, till you are sure you have found a better.

This tree not only fruits, but grows. It is not exhausted by fruit-bearing, but it makes wood as well. It is "increasing" as well as "bearing fruit," and that growth in the circuit of its branches that spread through the world, is another of its claims on the faithful adhesion of the Colossians.

Again, they have heard a gospel which reveals the "true grace of God," and that is another consideration urging to steadfastness.

In opposition to it there were put then, as there are put to-day, man's thoughts, and man's requirements, a human wisdom and a burdensome code. Speculations and arguments on the one hand, and laws and rituals on the other, look thin beside the large free gift of a loving God and the message which tells of it. They are but poor bony things to try to live on. My soul wants something more nourishing than such bread made out of sawdust. I want a loving

God to live upon, whom I can love because He loves me. Will anything but the gospel give us that? Will anything be my stay, in all weakness, weariness, sorrow and sin, in the fight of life and the agony of death, except the confidence that in Christ, I "know the grace of God in truth"?

So, if we gather together all these characteristics of the gospel, they bring out the gravity of the issue when we are asked to tamper with it, or to abandon the old lamp for the brand new ones which many eager voices are proclaiming as the light of the future. May any of us who are on the verge of the precipice lay to heart these serious thoughts! To that gospel we owe our peace; by it alone can the fruit of lofty devout lives be formed and ripened; it has filled the world with its sound, and is revolutionizing humanity; it and it only brings to men the good news and the actual gift of the love and mercy of God. It is not a small matter to fling away all this.

We do not prejudge the question of the truth of Christianity; but, at all events, let there be no mistake as to the fact that to give it up is to give up the mightiest power that has ever wrought for the world's good, and that if its light be quenched there will be darkness that may be felt, not dispelled but made more sad and dreary by the ineffectual flickers of some poor rushlights that men have lit, which waver and shine dimly over a little space for a little while, and then die out.

III. We have the *Apostolic endorsement* of Epaphras, the early teacher of the Colossian Christians.

Paul points his Colossian brethren, finally, to the lessons which they had received from the teacher who had first led them to Christ. No doubt his authority was imperilled by the new direction of thought in the Church, and Paul was desirous of adding the weight of his attestation to the complete correspondence between his own teaching and that of Epaphras.

We know nothing about this Epaphras except from this letter and that to Philemon. He is "one of you," a member of the Colossian Church (iv. 12), whether a Colossian born or not. He had come to the prisoner in Rome, and had brought the tidings of their condition which filled the Apostle's heart with strangely mingled feelings—of joy for their love and Christian walk (verses 4, 8), and of anxiety lest they should be swept from their steadfastness by the errors that he heard were assailing them. Epaphras shared this anxiety, and during his stay in Rome was much in thought, and care and prayer for them (iv. 12). He does not seem to have been the bearer of this letter to Colosse. He was in some sense Paul's fellow-servant, and in Philemon he is called by the yet more intimate, though somewhat obscure, name of his fellow-prisoner. It is noticeable that he alone of all Paul's companions receives the name of "fellow-servant," which may perhaps point to some very special piece of service of his, or may possibly be only an instance of Paul's courteous humility, which ever delighted to lift others to his own level—as if he had said, Do not make differences between your own Epaphras and me, we are both slaves of one Master.

The further testimony which Paul bears to him is so emphatic and pointed as to suggest that it was meant to uphold an authority that had been attacked, and to eulogize a character that had been maligned. "He is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf." In these words the Apostle endorses his teaching, as a true representation of his own. Probably Epaphras founded the Colossian Church and did so in pursuance of a commission given him by Paul. He "also declared to us your love in the Spirit." As he had truly represented Paul and his message to them, so he lovingly represented them and their kindly affection to him. Probably the same people who questioned Epaphras' version of Paul's teaching would suspect the favourableness of his

report of the Colossian Church, and hence the double witness borne from the Apostle's generous heart to both parts of his brother's work. His unstinted praise is ever ready. His shield is swiftly flung over any of his helpers who are maligned or assailed. Never was a leader truer to his subordinates, more tender of their reputation, more eager for their increased influence, and freer from every trace of jealousy than was that lofty and lowly soul.

It is a beautiful though a faint image which shines out on us from these fragmentary notices of this Colossian Epaphras—a true Christian bishop, who had come all the long way from his quiet valley in the depths of Asia Minor, to get guidance about his flock from the great Apostle, and who bore them on his heart day and night, and prayed much for them, while so far away from them. How strange the fortune which has made his name and his solitudes and prayers immortal! How little he dreamed that such embalming was to be given to his little services, and that they were to be crowned with such exuberant praise!

The smallest work done for Jesus Christ lasts for ever, whether it abide in men's memories or no. Let us ever live as those who, like painters in fresco, have with swift hand to sketch lines and lay on colours which will never fade, and let us, by humble faith and holy life, earn such a character from Paul's master. He is glad to praise, and praise from His lips is praise indeed. If He approves of us as faithful servants on His behalf, it matters not what others may say. "I appeal unto Cæsar." The Master's "Well done" will outweigh labours and toils, and the depreciating tongues of fellow-servants, or of the Master's enemies.

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