

*THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.*

IV.

*THE FATHER'S GIFTS THROUGH THE SON.*

“The Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.”—COL. i. 12–14 (Rev. Ver.).

WE have advanced thus far in this Epistle without having reached its main subject. We now, however, are on its verge. The next verses to those now to be considered lead us into the very heart of Paul's teaching, by which he would oppose the errors rife in the Colossian Church. The great passages describing the person and work of Jesus Christ are at hand, and here we have the immediate transition to them.

The skill with which the transition is made is remarkable. How gradually and surely the sentences, like some hovering winged things, circle more and more closely round the central light, till, in the last words they touch it, “. . . the Son of His love!” It is like some long procession heralding a king. They that go before, cry Hosanna, and point to him who comes last and chief. The affectionate greetings which begin the letter, pass into prayer; the prayer into thanksgiving. The thanksgiving, as in these words, lingers over and recounts our blessings, as a rich man counts his treasures, or a lover dwells on his joys. The enumeration of the blessings leads, as by a golden thread, to the thought and name of Christ, the fountain of them all, and then, with a burst and a rush, the flood of the truths he had to give them about Christ sweeps through Paul's mind and heart, carrying everything before it. The name of Christ always opens the floodgates in Paul's heart.

We have here then the deepest grounds for Christian thanksgiving, which are likewise the preparations for a true estimate of who the Christ who gives them, is. These grounds of thanksgiving are but various aspects of the one great blessing of "Salvation." The diamond flashes greens and purples, and yellows and reds, according to the angle at which its facets catch the eye.

It is also to be observed, that all these blessings are the present possession of Christians. The language of the first three clauses in the verses before us points distinctly to a definite past act by which the Father, at some definite point of time, made us meet, delivered and translated us, while the present tense in the last clause shows that "our redemption" is not only begun by some definite act in the past, but is continuously and progressively possessed in the present.

We notice, too, the remarkable correspondence of language with that which Paul heard when he lay prone on the ground, blinded by the flashing light, and amazed by the pleading remonstrance from heaven which rung in his ears. "I send thee to the Gentiles . . . that they may turn from *darkness* to *light*, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive *remission of sins*, and an *inheritance* among them which are sanctified." All the principal phrases are there, and are freely recombined by Paul, as if unconsciously his memory was haunted still by the sound of the transforming words heard so long ago.

I. The first ground of thankfulness which all Christians have is, *that they are fit for the Inheritance*. Of course the metaphor here is drawn from the "inheritance" given to the people of Israel, namely, the land of Canaan. Unfortunately our use of "heir" and "inheritance" confines the idea to possession by succession on death, and hence some perplexity is popularly experienced as to the force of the word in Scripture. There, it implies possession by lot,

if anything more than the simple notion of possession ; and points to the fact that the people did not win their land by their own swords, but because "God had a favour unto them." So the Christian inheritance is not won by our own merit, but given by God's goodness. The words may be literally rendered, "fitted us for the portion of the lot," and taken to mean the share or portion which consists in the lot ; but perhaps it is clearer, and more accordant with the analogy of the division of the land among the tribes, to take them as meaning "for our (individual) share in the broad land which, as a whole, is the allotted possession of the saints." This possession belongs to them, and is situated in the world of "light." Such is the general outline of the thoughts here. The first question that arises is, whether this inheritance is present or future. The best answer is that it is both ; because, whatever additions of power and splendour as yet unspeakable may wait for the future to be revealed, the essence of all that heaven can bring is ours to-day, if we live in the faith and love of Christ. The difference between a life of communion with God here and yonder is one of degree and not of kind. True, there are differences of which we cannot speak, in enlarged capacities, and a "spiritual body," and sins cast out, and nearer approach to "the fountain itself of heavenly radiance ;" but he who can say, while he walks amongst the shadows of earth, "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance," will neither leave his treasures behind him when he dies, nor enter on the possession of a wholly new inheritance, when he passes into the heavens. But while this is true, it is also true that that future possession of God will be so deepened and enlarged that its beginnings here are but the "earnest," of the same nature indeed as the inheritance, but limited in comparison as the tuft of grass which used to be given to a new possessor, is, when set against the broad lands from which it was plucked. Here certainly

the predominant idea is that of a present fitness for a mainly future possession.

We notice again—where the inheritance is situated—“in the light.” There are several possible ways of connecting that clause with the preceding. But without discussing these, it may be enough to point out that the most satisfactory seems to be to regard it as specifying the region in which the inheritance lies. It lies in a realm where purity and knowledge and gladness dwell undimmed and unbounded by an envious ring of darkness. For these three are the triple rays into which, according to the Biblical use of the figure, that white beam may be resolved.

From this there follows that it is capable of being possessed only by *saints*. There is no merit or desert which makes men worthy of the inheritance, but there is a congruity, or correspondence between character and the inheritance. If we rightly understand what the essential elements of “heaven” are, we shall have no difficulty in seeing that the possession of it is utterly incompatible with anything but holiness. The vulgar ideas of what heaven is, hinder people from seeing how to get there. They dwell upon the mere outside of the thing, they take symbols for realities and accidents for essentials, and so it appears to them an arbitrary arrangement that a man must have faith in Christ to enter heaven. If it be a kingdom of light, then only souls that love the light can go thither, and until owls and bats rejoice in the sunshine, there will be no way of being fit for the inheritance which is light, but by ourselves being “light in the Lord.” Light itself is a torture to diseased eyes. Turn up any stone by the roadside and we see how unwelcome light is to crawling creatures that have lived in the darkness till they have come to love it.

Heaven is God and God is heaven. How can a soul possess God, and find its heaven in possessing Him? Certainly only by likeness to Him, and loving Him. The

old question, "Who shall stand in the Holy Place?" has no answer in the Gospel, which reduces the conditions, or negatives the old reply. The common sense of every conscience answers, and Christianity answers, as the Psalmist does, "He that hath clean hands and a pure heart."

One more step has to be taken to reach the full meaning of these words, namely, the assertion that men who are not yet perfectly pure are already fit to be partakers of the inheritance. The tense of the verb in the original points back to a definite act by which the Colossians were made meet, namely, their conversion, and the plain emphatic teaching of the New Testament is that incipient and feeble faith in Christ works a change so great, that through it we are fitted for the inheritance by the impartation of a new nature, which, though it be but as a grain of mustard seed, shapes from henceforth the very inmost centre of our personal being, and in due time will convert into its own fiery brightness the whole mass, however green and smokily it begins to burn. Not absence of sin, but presence of faith working by love and longing for the light, makes fitness. No doubt flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, and we must put off the vesture of the body which has wrapped us during the wild weather here, before we can be fully fit to enter the banqueting hall; nor do we know how much evil which has not its seat in the soul may drop away therewith—but the spirit is fit for heaven as soon as a man turns to God in Christ. Suppose a company of rebels, and one of them, melted by some reason or other, is brought back to loyalty. He is fit by that inward change, although he has not done a single act of loyalty, for the society of loyal subjects, and unfit for that of traitors. Suppose a prodigal son away in the far off land. Some remembrance comes over him of what home used to be like, and of the bountiful house-keeping that is still there; and though it may begin with nothing more exalted than an empty

stomach, if it ends in "I will arise and go to my Father," at that instant a gulf opens between him and the riotous living of "the citizens of that country," and he is no longer fitted for their company. He is meet for the fellowship of his father's house, though he has a weary journey before he gets there, and needs to have his rags changed, and his filth washed off him, ere he can sit down at the feast.

So whoever turns to the love of God in Christ, and yields in the inmost part of his being to the power of His grace, is already "light in the Lord." The true home and affinities of his true self are in the kingdom of the light, and he is ready for his part in the inheritance, either here or yonder. There is no breach of the great law, that character makes fitness for heaven—might we not say that character makes heaven?—for the very roots of character lie in disposition and desire, rather than in action. Nor is there in this principle anything inconsistent with the need for continual growth in congruity of nature with that land of light. The light within, if it be truly there, will, however slowly, spread, as surely as the grey of twilight brightens to the blaze of noonday. The heart will be more and more filled with it, and the darkness driven back more and more to gloom in remote corners, and at last will vanish utterly. True fitness will become more and more fit. We shall grow more and more capable of God. The measure of our capacity is the measure of our possession, and the measure in which we have become light, is the measure of our capacity for the light. The land was parted among the tribes of Israel according to their strength; some had a wider, some a narrower strip of territory. So, as there are differences in Christian character here, there will be differences in Christian participation in the inheritance hereafter. "Star differeth from star." Some will blaze in brighter radiance and glow with more fervent heat because they move in orbits closer to the sun.

But, thank God, we are "fit for the inheritance," if we have ever so humbly and poorly trusted ourselves to Jesus Christ and received His renewing life into our spirits. Character alone fits for heaven. But character may be in germ or in fruit. "If any man be in Christ, he *is* a new creature." Do we trust ourselves to Him? Are we trying, with His help, to live as children of the light? Then we need not droop or despair by reason of evil that may still haunt our lives. Let us give it no quarter, for it diminishes our fitness for the full possession of God; but let it not cause our tongue to falter in "giving thanks to the Father who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."

II. The second ground of thankfulness is, *the change of king and country*. God "delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." These two clauses embrace the negative and positive sides of the same act which is referred to in the former ground of thankfulness, only stated now in reference to our allegiance and citizenship in the present rather than the future. In the "deliverance" there may be a reference to God's bringing Israel out of Egypt, suggested by the previous mention of the inheritance, while the translation into the other kingdom may be an illustration drawn from the well known practice of ancient warfare, the deportation of large bodies of natives from the conquered kingdom to some other part of the conqueror's realm.

We notice then the two kingdoms and their kings. "The power of darkness," is an expression found in Luke's Gospel (xxii. 18), and it may be used here as a reminiscence of our Lord's solemn words. "Power" here seems to imply the conception of harsh, arbitrary dominion, in contrast with the gracious rule of the other kingdom. It is a realm of cruel and grinding sway. Its prince is personified in an image that Æschylus or Dante might have spoken. Darkness sits

sovereign there, a vast and gloomy form on an ebon throne, wielding a heavy sceptre over wide regions wrapped in night. The plain meaning of that tremendous metaphor is just this—that the men who are not Christians live in a state of subjection to darkness of ignorance, darkness of misery, darkness of sin. If I am not a Christian man, that black three-headed hound of hell sits baying on my doorstep.

What a wonderful contrast the other kingdom and its King present! “The kingdom of”—not “the light,” as we are prepared to hear, in order to complete the antithesis—“the Son of His love,” who is the light. The Son who is the object of His love, on whom it all and ever rests, as on none besides. He has a kingdom in existence now, and not merely hoped for, and to be set up at some future time. Wherever men lovingly obey Christ, there is His kingdom. The subjects make the kingdom, and we may to-day belong to it, and be free from all other dominion because we bow to His. There then sit the two kings, like the two in the old story, “either of them on his throne, clothed in his robes, at the entering in of the gate of the city” Darkness and Light, the ebon throne and the white throne, surrounded each by their ministers; there Sorrow and Gloom, here Gladness and Hope; there Ignorance with blind eyes and idle aimless hands, here Knowledge with the sunlight on her face, and Diligence for her handmaid; here Sin, the pillar of the gloomy realm, there Righteousness, in robes so as no fuller on earth could white them. *Under which king, my brother?*

We notice the transference of subjects. The sculptures on Assyrian monuments explain this metaphor for us. A great conqueror has come, and speaks to us as Sennacherib did to the Jews (2 Kings xviii. 31, 32), “Come out to me . . . and I will take you away to a land of corn and wine, that ye may live and not die.”

If we listen to His voice, He will lead away a long string

of willing captives and plant them, not as pining exiles, but as happy naturalized citizens, in the kingdom which the Father has appointed for "the Son of His love."

That transference is effected on the instant of our recognising the love of God in Jesus Christ, and yielding up the heart to Him. We too often speak as if the "entrance ministered at last to" a believing soul "into the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour," were our first entrance therein, and forget that we enter it as soon as we yield to the drawings of Christ's love and take service under the king. The change then is greater than at death. When we die, we shall change provinces, and go from an outlying colony to the mother city and seat of empire, but we shall not change kingdoms. We shall be under the same government, only then we shall be nearer the King and more loyal to Him. That change of King is the real fitness for heaven. We know little of what profound changes death may make, but clearly a physical change cannot effect a spiritual revolution. They who are not Christ's subjects will not become so by dying. If here we are trying to serve a King who has delivered us from the tyranny of darkness, we may be very sure that He will not lose His subjects in the darkness of the grave. Let us choose our king. If we take Christ for our heart's Lord, every thought of Him here, every piece of partial obedience and stained service, as well as every sorrow and every joy, our fading possessions and our undying treasures, the feeble new life that wars against our sins, and even the very sins themselves as contradictory of our deepest self, unite to seal to us the assurance, "Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty. They shall behold the land that is very far off."

III. The heart and centre of all occasions for thankfulness is *the Redemption which we receive in Christ.*

"In whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins." The Authorized Version reads "redemption

through His blood," but these words are not found in the best manuscripts, and are regarded by the principal modern editors as having been inserted from the parallel place in Ephesians (i. 7), where they are genuine. The very heart then of the blessings which God has bestowed, is "redemption," which consists primarily, though not wholly, in "forgiveness of sins," and is received by us in "the Son of His love."

"Redemption," in its simplest meaning, is the act of delivering a slave from captivity by the payment of ransom. So that it contains in its application to the effect of Christ's death, substantially the same figure as in the previous clause which spoke of a deliverance from a tyrant, only that what was there represented as an act of Power is here set forth as the act of self-sacrificing Love which purchases our freedom at a heavy cost. That ransom price is said by Christ Himself to be "His life," and His incarnation to have the paying of that price as one of its two chief objects. So the words added here by quotation from the companion Epistle are in full accordance with New Testament teaching; but even omitting them, the meaning of the clause is unmistakable. Christ's death breaks the chains which bind us, and sets us free. By it He acquires us for Himself. That transcendent act of sacrifice has such a relation to the Divine government on the one hand, and to the "sin of the world," as a whole, on the other, that by it all who trust in Him are delivered from the most real penal consequences of sin and from the dominion of its darkness over their natures. We freely admit that we cannot penetrate to the understanding of *how* Christ's death thus avails. But just because the *rationale* of the doctrine is avowedly beyond our limits, we are barred from asserting that it is incompatible with God's character, or with common justice, or that it is immoral, and the like. When we know God through and through, to all the depths and

heights and lengths and breadths of His nature, and when we know man in like manner, and when, consequently, we know the relation between God and man as perfectly, and not till then, we shall have a right to reject the teaching of Scripture on this matter, on such grounds. Till then, let our faith lay hold on the fact, though we do not understand the "how" of the fact, and cling to that cross which is the great power of God unto salvation, and the heart-changing exponent of the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.

The essential and first element in this redemption is "the forgiveness of sins." Possibly some misconception of the nature of redemption may have been associated with the other errors which threatened the Colossian Church, and thus Paul may have been led to this emphatic declaration of its contents. Forgiveness, and not some mystic deliverance by initiation or otherwise from the captivity of flesh and matter, is redemption. There is more than forgiveness in it, but forgiveness lies on the threshold; not only the removal of legal penalties inflicted by a specific act, but the forgiveness of a father. A judge pardons when he remits the sentence which he has pronounced, and which is inflicted only by reason of his will. A father forgives when the free flow of his love is unhindered by his child's fault, and he may forgive and punish at the same moment. The truest "penalty" of sin is that death which consists in separation from God; and the conceptions of judicial pardon and fatherly forgiveness unite when we think of the "remission of sins" as being the removal of that separation, and the deliverance of heart and conscience from the burden of guilt and of a father's wrath.

Such forgiveness leads to the full deliverance from the power of darkness, which is the completion of redemption. There is deep meaning in the fact that the word for "forgiveness," means literally, "sending away." Pardon has a mighty power to banish sin, not only as guilt, but as habit.

The waters of the gulf stream bear the warmth of the tropics to the icy north, and lave the foot of the glaciers on its coast till they melt and mingle with the liberating waves. So the flow of the forgiving love of God thaws the hearts frozen in the obstinacy of sin, and blends our wills with itself in glad submission and grateful service.

But we must not overlook the significant words in which the condition of possessing this redemption is stated: "in whom." There must be a real living union with Christ, by which we are truly "in Him" in order to our possession of redemption. "Redemption through His blood" is not the whole message of the Gospel; it has to be completed by "*In whom* we have redemption through His blood." That real living union is effected by our faith, and when we are thus "in Him," our wills, hearts, spirits joined to Him, then, and only then are we borne away from the kingdom of the darkness and partake of redemption. We cannot get His gifts without Himself.

We observe, in conclusion, how redemption here appears as a present and growing possession. There is emphasis on "we *have*." The Colossian Christians had by one definite act in the past been fitted for a share of the inheritance, and by the same act been transferred to the kingdom of Christ. Already they possess the inheritance, and are in the kingdom, although both are to be more gloriously manifested in the future. Here, however, Paul contemplates rather the reception, moment by moment, of redemption. We might almost read "we are having," for the present tense seems used on purpose to convey the idea of a continual communication from Him to whom we are to be united by faith. Daily we may draw what we daily need—daily forgiveness for daily sins, the washing of the feet which even he who has been bathed requires after each day's march through muddy roads, daily bread for daily hunger, and daily strength for daily effort. So day

unto day may, in our narrow lives, as in the wide heavens with all their stars, utter speech, and night unto night show knowledge of the redeeming love of our Father. Like the rock that followed the Israelites in the wilderness, according to Jewish legend, and poured out water for their thirst, His grace flows ever by our sides and from its bright waters we may daily draw with joy.

And so let us lay to heart humbly these two lessons, that all our Christianity must begin with forgiveness, and that, however far advanced we may be in the Divine life, we never get beyond the need for a continual bestowal upon us of God's pardoning mercy.

Many of us, like some of these Colossians, are ready to call ourselves in some sense followers of Christ. The speculative side of Christian truth may have attractions for some of us, its lofty morality for others. Some of us may be mainly drawn to it by its comforts for the weary; some may be looking to it chiefly in hope of a future heaven. But whatever we are, and however we may be disposed to Christ and His Gospel, here is a plain message for us; we must begin by going to Him for pardon. It is not enough for any of us to find in Him "wisdom," or even "righteousness," for we need "redemption" which is "forgiveness," and unless He is to us forgiveness, He will not be either righteousness or wisdom.

We can climb a ladder that reaches to heaven, but its foot must be in "the horrible pit and miry clay" of our sins. Little as we like to hear it, the first need for us all is forgiveness. Everything begins with that. "The inheritance of the saints," with all its wealth of glory, its immortal life and unfading joys, its changeless security, and its unending progress deeper and deeper into the light and likeness of God, is the goal, but the *only* entrance is through the strait gate of penitence. Christ will forgive on our cry for pardon, and that is the first link of a golden chain un-

winding from His hand by which we may ascend to the perfect possession of our inheritance in God. "Whom He justified, them," and them only, He will glorify.

A. MACLAREN.

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THE SCENES OF THE BAPTIST'S WORK.

It is somewhat remarkable how dense an obscurity still broods over the geography of John the Baptist's life. Every place connected with his name in the New Testament narrative—from the mysterious πόλις Ἰούδα where he was born, to the undiscoverable Ænon where he last appears in public—is the subject of more or less controversy. Fortunately, the work which he came to do—the whole essence of which is embalmed in his pregnant title of "Forerunner"—was directed so entirely to the hearts and consciences of men as men, that an adequate appreciation of it is comparatively independent of local colouring. A competently exact conception of it may even co-exist with an indifference to such details, which gladly leaves them to be supplied in those faintly imaginative traits which every one who vividly realizes John's work will inevitably throw around it. This very circumstance, however, advises us that something is lost by an attitude of indifference. If we desire to reproduce vividly in our minds the work which John did, and to feel it as a thing that really happened, we cannot dispense with these details, and must either give them to the mind or suffer an outraged imaging faculty to substitute others for them. The actual and true geography of John's life, thus, is of the same kind of importance to a complete understanding of his work, as any other subject usually classed under the department of study which the Germans, with a conciseness which is at once the admiration and despair of Englishmen, call *Zeitgeschichte*.