

presence of the mountains and the waters, and the mid-night stars from the brilliant talk of London drawing-rooms."

G. A. SIMCOX.

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## THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

### VII.

#### THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF RECONCILIATION AND ITS HUMAN CONDITIONS.

"To present you holy and without blemish and unreprouceable before Him: if so be that ye continue in the faith, grounded and stedfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven; whereof I Paul was made a minister."—*Col.* i. 22, 23 (Rev. Ver.).

THE Apostle has been sketching in magnificent outline a vast system, which we may almost call the scheme of the universe. He has set forth Christ as its Lord and centre, through whom all things at first came into being, and still continue to be. In parallel manner he has presented Christ as Lord and Centre of the Church, its lifegiving Head. And finally he has set forth Christ as the Reconciler of all discords in heaven and earth, and especially of that which parts sinful men from God.

And now he shows us here, in the first words of our text, the purpose of this whole manifestation of God in Christ to be the presenting of men perfect in purity before the perfect judgment of God. He then appends the condition on which the accomplishment of this ultimate purpose in each man depends—namely, the man's continuance in the faith and hope of the Gospel. That leads him to gather up, in a series of clauses characterizing the Gospel, certain aspects of it which constitute subordinate motives and encouragements to such stedfastness. That is, I think, the outline

connection of the words before us, which at first sight seem somewhat tangled and difficult to unravel.

I. We have then, first, to consider the ultimate purpose of God in the work of Christ.

“To present you holy and without blemish and un-reproveable before Him.” It may be a question whether these words should be connected with “now hath He reconciled,” or whether we are to go farther back in the long paragraph, and make them dependent on “it was the good pleasure of the Father.” The former seems the more natural—namely, to see here a statement of the great end contemplated in our reconciliation to God; which, indeed, whatever may be the grammatical construction preferred here, is also, of course, the ultimate object of the Father’s good pleasure. In the word “present” there is possibly a sacrificial allusion, as there is unquestionably in its use in Romans xii., “Present your bodies a living sacrifice”; or there may be another and even more eloquent metaphor implied, that of the bringing of the bride to the husband by the friend of the bridegroom. That lovely figure is found in two of the instances of the use of the word in Paul’s epistles (2 Cor. ii. 2, “to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ,” and Eph. v. 27, “that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church”), and possibly in others. It certainly gives an appropriate and beautiful emblem here if we think of the presentation of the bride in virginal beauty and purity to her Lord at that last great day which is the bridal day of the perfected Church.

There is however no need to suppose any metaphor at all, nor any allusion beyond the general meaning of the word—to *set in the presence of*. The sacrificial reference is incongruous here, and the bridal one not indicated by anything in the context, as it is in the instances just quoted. One thing is clear, that the reference is to a future presentation in the day of judgment, as in another place,

where Paul says, "He . . . shall raise up us also . . . and shall present us" (2 Cor. iv. 14). In the light of that revealing day, His purpose is that we shall stand "holy," that is, devoted to God and therefore pure—"without blemish," as the offerings had to be, and "unreproveable," against whom no charge can be brought. These three express a regular sequence; first, the inward principle of consecration and devotion to God, then its visible issue in stainless conduct and character, and then its last consequence, that in the judgment of God and of men we shall stand acquitted of blame, and every accusation drop away from our dazzling purity, like muddy water from the white wing of the sea-bird as it soars. And all this moral perfectness and unblameableness is to be not merely in the judgment of men, but "before Him," the light of whose "pure eyes and perfect judgment" discovers all stains and evils. They must be spotless indeed who are "without fault before the throne of God."

Such, then, is the grand conception of the ultimate purpose and issue of Christ's reconciling work. All the lines of thought in the preceding section lead up to and converge in this peak. The meaning of God in creation and redemption cannot be fully fathomed without taking into view the future perfecting of men. This Christian ideal of the possibilities for men is the noblest vision that can animate our hopes. Absolute moral purity which shall be recognised as perfect by the perfect Judge, and a close approach to God, so as that we shall be "before Him" in a manner unknown here—are hopes as much brighter than those which any other system of belief prints on the dim canvas curtain of the future, as the Christian estimate of man's condition apart from Christ is sadder and darker than theirs. Christianity has a much more extended scale of colours than they have. It goes further down into blackness for the tints with which it paints man as he is, and further up into flashing glories

of splendour for the gleaming hues with which it paints him as he may become. They move within narrow limits of neutral tints. The Gospel alone does not try to minimise man's evil, because it is triumphantly confident of its power to turn all that evil into good.

Nothing short of this complete purity and blamelessness satisfies God's heart. We may travel back to the beginning of this section, and connect its first words with these, "It pleased the Father," to present us holy and spotless and blameless." It delights Him thus to effect the purifying of sinful souls, and He is glad when He sees Himself surrounded by spirits thus echoing His will and reflecting His light. This is what He longs for. This is what He aims at in all His working—to make good and pure men. The moral interest is uppermost in His heart and in His doings. The physical universe is but the scaffolding by which the true house of God may be built. The work of Christ is the means to that end, and when God has got us, by such lavish expenditure, to be white like Himself, and can find nothing in us to condemn, then, and not till then, does He brood over us satisfied and glad at heart, resting in His love, and rejoicing over us with singing.

Nor will anything short of this complete purity exhaust the power of the Reconciling Christ. His work is like a broken column, or Giotto's Campanile, all shining with marbles and alabasters and set about with fair figures, but waiting for centuries for the glittering apex to gather its glories into a heaven-piercing point. His cross and passion reach no adequate result short of the perfecting of saints, nor was it worth Christ's while to die for any less end. His cross and passion have evidently power to effect this perfect purity, and cannot be supposed to have done all that is in them to do, until they have done that with every Christian.

We ought then to keep very clear before us this as the

crowning object of Christianity: not to make men happy, except as a consequence of holiness; not to deliver from penalty, except as a means to holiness; but, to make them holy, and being holy, to set them close by the throne of God. No man understands the scope of Christianity, or judges it fairly, who does not give full weight to that as its own statement of its purpose. The more distinctly we, as Christians, keep that purpose prominent in our thoughts, the more shall we have our efforts stimulated and guided, and our hopes fed, even when we are saddened by a sense of failure. We have a power working in us which can make us white as the angels, pure as our Lord is pure. If it, being able to produce perfect results, has produced only such imperfect ones, we may well ask, where the reason for the partial failure lies. If we believed more vividly that the real purpose and use of Christianity was to make us good men, we should surely labour more earnestly to secure that end, should take more to heart our own responsibility for the incompleteness with which it has been attained in us, and should submit ourselves more completely to the working of the "might of the power" which worketh in us.

Nothing less than our absolute purity will satisfy God about us. Nothing less should satisfy ourselves. The only worthy end of Christ's work for us is to present us holy, in complete consecration, and without blemish, in perfect homogeneity and uniformity of white purity, and unreprouvable in manifest innocence in His sight. Let us make it our life's business to see that that end is being accomplished in us in some tolerable and growing measure, if we call ourselves Christians.

II. We have next set forth the conditions on which the accomplishment of that purpose depends: "If so be that ye continue in the faith, grounded and stedfast, and not moved away from the hope of the Gospel."

The condition is, generally speaking, a stedfast adherence

to the Gospel which they had received. "If ye continue in the faith," means, I suppose, if ye continue to live in the *exercise* of your faith. The word here has its ordinary subjective sense, expressing the act of the believing man, and there is no need to suppose that it has the later ecclesiastical objective sense, expressing the believer's creed, a meaning in which it may be questioned whether the word is ever employed in the New Testament. Then this continuance in the faith is further explained as to its manner, and that first positively, and then negatively. They are to be grounded, or more picturesquely and accurately, "founded," that is, built into a foundation, and therefore "stedfast," as banded into the firm rock, and so partaking of its fixedness. Then, negatively, they are not to be "moved away"; the word by its form conveying the idea, that this is a process which may be continually going on, and in which, by some force constantly acting from without, they may be gradually and imperceptibly pushed off from the foundation—that foundation is the hope evoked or held out by the Gospel, a representation which is less familiar than that which makes the Gospel itself the foundation, but is substantially equivalent to it, though with a different colour.

One or two plain lessons may be drawn from these words. There is an "if," then. However great the powers of Christ and of His work, however deep the desire and fixed the purpose of God, no fulfilment of these is possible except on condition of our habitual exercise of faith. The Gospel does not work on men by magic. Mind, heart and will must be exercised on Christ, or all His power to purify and bless will be of no avail to us. We shall be like Gideon's fleece, dry when the dew is falling thick, unless we are continually putting forth living faith. That attracts the blessing and fits the soul to receive it. There is nothing mystical about the matter. Common sense tells us, that if a man never

thinks about any truth, that truth will do him no good in any way. If it does not find its road into his heart through his mind, and thence into his life, it is all one as if there were no such truth, or as if he did not believe it. If our creed is made up of truths which we do not think about, we may just as well have no creed. If we do not bring ourselves into contact with the motives which the Gospel brings to bear on character, the motives will not mould our character. If we do not, by faith and meditation, realize the principles which flow from the truth as it is in Jesus, and obtain the strength which is stored in Him, we shall not grow by Him or like Him. No matter how mighty be the renewing powers of the Gospel wielded by the Divine Spirit, they can only work on the nature that is brought into contact with and continues in contact with them by *faith*. The measure in which we trust Jesus Christ will be the measure in which He helps us. "He could do no mighty works because of their unbelief." He cannot do what He can do, if we thwart Him by our want of faith. God will present us holy before Him *if* we continue in the faith.

And it must be *present* faith which leads to *present* results. We cannot make an arrangement by which we exercise faith wholesale once for all, and secure a delivery of its blessings in small quantities for a while after, as a buyer may do with goods. The moment's act of faith will bring the moment's blessings; but to-morrow will have to get its own grace by its own faith. We cannot lay up a stock for the future. There must be present drinking for present thirst; we cannot lay in a reserve of the water of life, as a camel can drink at a draught enough for a long desert march. The Rock follows us all through the wilderness, but we have to fill our pitchers day by day. Many Christians seem to think that they can live on past acts of faith. No wonder that their Christian character is stunted,

and their growth stopped, and many a blemish visible, and many a "blame" to be brought against them. Nothing but continual exercise of faith, day by day, moment by moment, in every duty, and every temptation, will secure the continual entrance into our weakness of the strength which makes strong and the purity which makes pure.

Then again, if we and our lives are to be firm and stable, we must have a foundation outside of ourselves on which to rest. That thought is involved in the word "grounded" or "founded." It is possible that this metaphor of the foundation is carried on into the next clause, in which case "the hope of the Gospel" would be the foundation. Strange to make a solid foundation out of so unsubstantial a thing as "hope." That would be indeed to build a castle on the air, a palace on a soap-bubble, would it not? Yes it would, if this hope were not "the hope produced by the Gospel," and therefore as solid as the ever-enduring Word of the Lord on which it is founded. But, more probably, the ordinary application of the figure is preserved here, and Christ is the foundation, the Rock, on which builded, our fleeting lives and our fickle selves may become rock-like too, and every impulsive and changeable Simon Bar Jonas rise to the mature stedfastness of a Peter, the pillar of the Church.

Translate that image of taking Christ for our foundation into plain English, and what does it come to? It means, let our minds find in Him, in His Word, and whole revealing life, the basis of our beliefs, the materials for thought; let our hearts find in Him their object, which brings calmness and unchangeableness into their love; let our practical energies take Him as their motive and pattern, their strength and their aim, their stimulus and their reward; let all hopes and joys, emotions and desires, fasten themselves on Him; let Him occupy and fill our whole nature, and mould and preside over all our actions. So shall we be "founded" on Christ,



And so "founded," we shall, as Paul here beautifully puts it, be "stedfast." Without that foundation to give stability and permanence, we never get down to what abides, but pass our lives amidst fleeting shadows, and are ourselves transient as they. The mind whose thoughts about God and the unseen world are not built on the personal revelation of God in Christ will have no solid certainties which cannot be shaken, but, at the best, opinions which cannot have more fixedness than belongs to human thoughts upon the great problem. If my love does not rest on Christ, it will flicker and flutter, lighting now here and now there, and even where it rests most secure in human love, sure to have to take wing some day when Death with his woodman's axe fells the tree where it nestles. If my practical life is not built on Him, the blows of circumstance will make it reel and stagger. If we are not well joined to Jesus Christ, we shall be driven by gusts of passion and storms of trouble, or borne along on the surface of the slow stream of all-changing time like thistle-down on the water. If we are to be stable, it must be because we are fastened to something outside of ourselves that is stable, just as they have to lash a man to the mast or other fixed things on deck, if he is not to be washed overboard in the gale. If we are lashed to the unchangeable Christ by the "cords of love" and faith, we too shall, in our degree, be stedfast.

And, says Paul, that Christ-derived stedfastness will make us able to resist influences that would move us away from the hope of the Gospel. That process which their stedfastness would enable the Colossians successfully to resist, is described by the language of the Apostle as continuous, and as one which acted on them from without. Intellectual dangers arose in false teachings. The ever acting tendencies of worldliness pressed upon them, and

they needed to make a distinct effort to keep themselves from being pushed off the foundation.

That imperceptible, steady pressure of the all-surrounding worldliness, which is continually acting on us, will push us right off the foundation without our knowing that we have shifted at all, if we do not take care. If we do not look well after our moorings we shall drift away down stream, and never know that we are moving, so smooth is the motion, till we wake up to see that everything round about is changed. Many a man is unaware how completely his Christian faith has gone till some crisis comes when he needs it, and when he opens the jar there is nothing. It has evaporated. When white ants eat away all the inside of a piece of furniture, they leave the outside shell apparently solid, and it stands till some weight is laid upon it, and then goes down with a crash. Many people lose their Christianity in that fashion, by its being nibbled away in tiny flakes by a multitude of secretly working little jaws, and never know that the pith is out of it till they want to lean on it, and then it gives under them.

The only way to keep firm hold of hope is to keep fast on the foundation. If we do not wish to slide imperceptibly away from Him who alone will make our lives steadfast and our hearts calm with the peacefulness of having found our All, we must continuously make an effort to tighten our hold on Him, and resist the subtle forces which, by silent pressure or by sudden blows, seek to get us off the one foundation.

III. Then lastly, we have a threefold motive to adherence to the Gospel.

The three clauses which close these verses seem to be appended as secondary and subordinate encouragements to steadfastness, which encouragements are drawn from certain characteristics of the Gospel. Of course, the main reason for a man's sticking to the Gospel, or to anything

else, is because it is true. And unless we are prepared to say that we believe it true, we have nothing to do with such subordinate motives for professing adherence to it, except to take care that they do *not* influence us. And that one sole reason is abundantly wrought out in this letter. But then, when once it is taken for granted, we may fairly bring in other subsidiary motives to reinforce this, seeing that there may be a certain coldness of belief which needs the warmth of such encouragements.

The first of these lies in the words, "the Gospel, which ye heard." That is to say, the Apostle would have the Colossians, in the face of these heretical teachers, remember the beginning of their Christian life, and be consistent with that. They had heard it at their conversion. He would have them recall what they had heard then, and tamper with no inconsistent teaching. He also appeals to their experience. "Do you remember what the Gospel did for you? Do you remember the time when it first dawned upon your astonished hearts, all radiant with heavenly beauty, as the revelation of a Heart in heaven that cared for you, and of a Christ who, on earth, had died for you? Did it not deliver you from your burden? Did it not set new hope before you? Did it not make earth as the very portals of heaven? And have these truths become less precious because familiar? Be not moved away from the Gospel 'which ye have heard.'"

To us the same appeal comes. This word has been sounding in our ears ever since childhood. It has done everything for some of us, something for all of us. Its truths have sometimes shone out for us like suns, in the dark, and brought us strength when nothing else could sustain us. If they are not truths, of course they will have to go. But they are not to be abandoned easily. They are interwoven with our very lives. To part with them is a resolution not to be lightly undertaken.

The argument of experience is of no avail to convince others, but is valid for ourselves. A man has a perfect right to say, "I have heard Him myself, and I know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world." A Christian may wisely decline to enter on the consideration of many moot questions which he may feel himself incompetent to handle, and rest upon the fact that Christ has saved his soul. The blind man beat the Pharisees in logic when he sturdily took his stand on experience, and refused to be tempted to discuss subjects which he did not understand, or to allow his ignorance to slacken his grasp of what he did know. "Whether this man be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see." There was no answering that, so they confessed themselves beaten by excommunicating him.

A second encouragement to steadfast adherence to the Gospel lies in the fact that it "was preached in all creation under heaven." We need not be pedantic about literal accuracy, and may allow that the statement has a rhetorical colouring. But what the Apostle means is, that the Gospel had spread so widely, through so many phases of civilization, and had proved its power by touching men so unlike each other in mental furniture and habits, that it had shown itself to be a word for the whole race. It is the same thought as we have already found in verse 6. His implied exhortation is, "Be not moved away from what belongs to humanity by teachings which can only belong to a class. All errors are transient in duration and limited in area. One addresses itself to one class of men, another to another. Each false, or exaggerated, or partial representation of religious truth, is congenial to some group with idiosyncracies of temperament or mind. Different tastes like different spiced meats, but the Gospel, "human nature's daily food," is the bread of God that everybody can relish, and which everybody must have for healthy life. What only

a certain class, or the men of one generation, or of one stage of culture can find nourishment in, cannot be meant for all men. But the great message of God's love in Jesus Christ commends itself to me because it can go into any corner of the world, and there, upon all sorts of people, work its wonders. So I will sit down with the women and children upon the green grass, and eat of *it*, however fastidious people whose appetites have been spoiled by high-spiced meat, may find it coarse and insipid. It would feed them too, if they would try—but whatever they may do, let us take it as more than our necessary food.

The last of these subsidiary encouragements to steadfastness lies in, "whereof I Paul was made a minister." This is not merely an appeal to their affection for him, though that is perfectly legitimate. Holy words may be holier because dear lips have taught them to us, and even the truth of God may allowably have a firmer hold upon our hearts because of our love for some who have ministered it to us. It is a poor commentary on a preacher's work if, after long service to a congregation, his words do not come with power given to them by old affection and confidence. The humblest teacher who has done his Master's errand will have some to whom he can appeal as Paul did, and urge them to keep hold of the message which he has preached.

But there is more than that in the Apostle's mind. He was accustomed to quote the fact that he, the persecutor, had been made the messenger of Christ, as a living proof of the infinite mercy and power of that ascended Lord, whom his eyes saw on the road to Damascus. So here, he puts stress on the fact that he *became* a minister of the Gospel, as being an "evidence of Christianity." The history of his conversion is one of the strongest proofs of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. You know, he seems to say, what turned me from being a persecutor into an apostle.

It was because I saw the living Christ, and "heard the words of His mouth," and, I beseech you, listen to no words which make His dominion less sovereign, and His sole and all sufficient work on the cross less mighty as the only power that knits earth to heaven.

So the sum of this whole matter is—abide in Christ. Let us root and ground our lives and characters in Him, and then God's inmost desire will be gratified in regard to us, and He will bring even us stainless and blameless into the blaze of His presence. There we shall all have to stand, and let that all penetrating light search us through and through. How do we expect to be then "found of Him in peace, without spot and blameless"? There is but one way—to live in constant exercise of faith in Christ, and grip Him so close and sure that the world, the flesh and the devil cannot make us loosen our fingers. Then He will hold us up, and His great purpose, which brought Him to earth, and nailed Him to the cross, will be fulfilled in us, and at last, we shall lift up voices of wondering praise "to Him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy."

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

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THE REVISED VERSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

A CRITICAL ESTIMATE.

FIRST PAPER.

A NOTED judicial dictum lately vested the censorship of literature and art in the general British public. We think the modern tribunal is likely to find far more "artistic merit" in the O.T.<sup>1</sup> Revisers than in their *confrères* of the

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations will be used in these papers: N.T. for New Testament; O.T. for Old Testament; A.V. for the "Authorized Version" of