

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

X.

PAUL'S STRIVING FOR THE COLOSSIANS.

"For I would have you know how greatly I strive for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; that their hearts may be comforted, they being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, that they may know the mystery of God, even Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden."—Col. ii. 1-3 (Rev. Ver.).

WE have seen that the closing portion of the previous chapter is almost exclusively personal. In this context the same strain is continued, and two things are dwelt on: the Apostle's agony of anxiety for the Colossian Church, and the joy with which, from his prison, he travelled in spirit across mountain and sea, and saw them in their quiet valley, cleaving to the Lord. The former of these feelings is expressed in the words now before us; the latter, in the following verses.

All this long outpouring of self-revelation is so natural and characteristic of Paul that we need scarcely look for any purpose in it, and yet we may note with what consummate art he thereby prepares the way for the warnings which follow. The unveiling of his own throbbing heart was sure to work on the affections of his readers and to incline them to listen. His profound emotion in thinking of the preciousness of his message, would help to make them feel how much was at stake, and his unflinching faith would give firmness to their less tenacious grasp of the truth which, as they saw, he gripped with such force. Many truths may be taught coolly, and some must be. But in religious matters, arguments wrought in frost are powerless, and earnestness approaching to passion is the all-conquering force. A teacher who is afraid to show his feelings, or who has no feelings to show, will never gather many disciples.

So this revelation of the Apostle's heart is relevant to the great purposes of the whole letter—the warning against error, and the exhortation to stedfastness. In the verses which we are now considering, we have the conflict which Paul was waging set forth in three aspects: first, in itself; second, in regard to the persons for whom it was waged; and, finally and principally, in regard to the object or purpose in view therein. The first and second of these points may be dealt with briefly. The third will require further consideration.

I. Notice the conflict, which he earnestly desired that the Colossian Christians might know to be “great.” The word rendered in the Authorised Version “conflict,” belongs to the same root as that which occurs in the last verse of the previous chapter, and is there rendered “striving.” The Revised Version rightly indicates this connexion by its translation, but fails to give the construction as accurately as the older translation does. “What great strife I have” would be nearer the Greek, and more forcible than the somewhat feeble “how greatly I strive,” which the Revisers have adopted. The conflict referred to is, of course, that of the arena, as so often in Paul's writings.

But how could he, in Rome, wage conflict on behalf of the Church at Colossæ? No external conflict can be meant. He could strike no blows on their behalf. What he could do in that way, he did, and he was now taking part in their battle by this letter. If he could not fight by their side, he could send them ammunition, as he does in this great Epistle, which was, no doubt, to the eager combatants for the truth at Colossæ, what it has been ever since, a magazine and arsenal in all their warfare. But the real struggle was in his own heart. It meant anxiety, sympathy, an agony of solicitude, a passion of intercession. What he says of Epaphras in this very Epistle was true of himself. He was “always striving in prayer for them.” And by

these wrestlings of spirit he took his place among the combatants, though they were far away, and though in outward seeming, his life was untouched by any of the difficulties and dangers which hemmed them in. In that lonely prison-cell, remote from their conflict, and with burdens enough of his own to carry, with his life in peril, his heart yet turned to them and, like some soldier left behind to guard the base while his comrades had gone forward to the fight, his ears listened for the sound of battle, and his thoughts were in the field. His prison cell was like the focus of some reverberating gallery in which every whisper spoken all round the circumference was heard, and the heart that was held captive there was set vibrating in all its chords by every sound from any of the Churches.

Let us learn the lesson, that for all Christian people sympathy in the battle for God which is being waged all over the world is plain duty. For all Christian teachers of every sort, an eager sympathy in the difficulties and struggles of those whom they would try to teach is indispensable. We can never deal wisely with any mind until we have entered into its peculiarities. We can never help a soul fighting with errors and questionings until we have ourselves felt the pinch of the problems, and have shown that soul that we know what it is to grope, and stumble. No man is ever able to lift a burden from another's shoulders except on condition of bearing the burden himself. If I stretch out my hand to some poor brother struggling in "the miry clay," he will not grasp it and my well-meant efforts will be vain, unless he can see that I too have felt with him the horror of great darkness, and desire him to share with me the benedictions of the light.

Wheresoever our prison or our workshop may be, howsoever Providence or circumstances—which is but a heathenish word for the same thing—may separate us from active participation in any battle for God, we are bound to take an

eager share in it by sympathy, by interest, by such help as we can render, and by that intercession which may sway the fortunes of the field, though the uplifted hands grasp no weapons, and the spot where we pray be far from the fight. It is not only the men who bear the brunt of the battle in the high places of the field who are the combatants. In many a quiet home where their wives and mothers sit, with wistful faces waiting for the news from the front, is an agony of anxiety, and as true a share in the struggle as amidst the battery smoke and the gleaming bayonets. It was a law in Israel, "As his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that abideth by the stuff. They shall part alike." They were alike in recompense, because they were rightly regarded as alike in service. So all Christians who have in heart and sympathy taken part in the great battle shall be counted as combatants and crowned as victors, though they themselves have struck no blows. "He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward."

II. We notice the persons for whom this conflict was endured. They are the Christians of Colossæ, and their neighbours of Laodicea, and "as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." It may be a question whether the Colossians and Laodiceans belong to "those who have not seen his face in the flesh," but the most natural view of the words is that the last clause "introduces the whole class to which the persons previously enumerated belong,"¹ and this conclusion is confirmed by the silence of the Acts of the Apostles as to any visit of Paul's to these Churches, and by the language of the Epistle itself, which, in several places, refers to his knowledge of the Colossian Church as derived from hearing of them, and never alludes to personal intercourse. That being so, one can understand that its members might easily think that he cared less for them than he did

¹ Bishop Lightfoot, *in loc.*

for the more fortunate communities which he had himself planted or watered, and might have suspected that the difficulties of the Church at Ephesus, for instance, lay nearer his heart than theirs in their remote upland valley. No doubt, too, their feelings to him were less warm than to Epaphras and to other teachers whom they had heard. They had never felt the magnetism of his personal presence, and were at a disadvantage in their struggle with the errors which were beginning to lift their snaky heads among them, from not having had the inspiration and direction of his teaching.

It is beautiful to see how, here, Paul lays hold of that very fact which seemed to put some film of separation between them, in order to make it the foundation of his especial keenness of interest in them. Precisely because he had never looked them in the eyes, they had a warmer place in his heart, and his solicitude for them was more tender. He was not so enslaved by sense that his love could not travel beyond the limits of his eyesight. He was the more anxious about them because they had not the recollections of his teaching and of his presence to fall back upon.

III. But the most important part of this section is the Apostle's statement of the great subject of his solicitude, that which he anxiously longed that the Colossians might attain. It is a prophecy, as well as a desire. It is a statement of the deepest purpose of his letter to them, and being so, it is likewise a statement of the Divine desire concerning each of us, and of the Divine design of the gospel. Here is set forth what God would have all Christians to be, and what He has given us ample means of being in Jesus Christ.

1. The first element in the Apostle's desire for them is "that their hearts may be comforted." Of course the Biblical use of the word "heart" is much wider than the modern popular use of it. We mean by it, when we use it in ordinary talk, the hypothetical seat of the emotions, and

chiefly, the organ and throne of love ; but Scripture means by the word, the whole inward personality, including thought and will as well as emotion. So we read of the "thoughts and intents of the heart," and the whole inward nature is called "the hidden man of the heart."

And what does he desire for this inward man? That it may be "comforted." That word again has a wider signification in Biblical, than in Nineteenth century English. It is much more than consolation in trouble. The cloud that hung over the Colossian Church was not about to break in sorrows which they would need consolation to bear, but in doctrinal and practical errors which they would need strength to resist. They were called to fight rather than to endure, and what they needed most was courageous confidence. So Paul desires for them that their hearts should be *encouraged* or strengthened, that they might not quail before the enemy, but go into the fight with buoyancy, and be of good cheer.

Is there any greater blessing in view both of the conflict which Christianity has to wage to-day, and of the difficulties and warfare of our own lives, than that brave spirit, which plunges into the struggle with the serene assurance that victory sits on our helmets and waits upon our swords, and knows that anything is possible rather than defeat? That is the condition of overcoming—even our faith. "The sad heart tires in a mile," but the strong hopeful heart carries in its very strength the prophecy of triumph.

Such a disposition is not altogether a matter of temperament, but may be cultivated, and though it may come easier to some of us than to others, it certainly ought to belong to all who have God to trust to, and believe that the gospel is His truth. They may well be strong who have Divine power ready to flood their hearts, who know that everything works for their good, who can see, above the whirl of time and change, one strong loving Hand which

moves the wheels. What have we to do with fear for ourselves, or wherefore should our "hearts tremble for the ark of God," seeing that One fights by our sides who will teach our hands to war and cover our heads in the day of battle? "Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart."

2. The way to secure such joyous confidence and strength is taught us here, for we have next, *Union in love*, as part of the means for obtaining it—"They being knit together in love"—the persons, not the hearts, are to be thus united. Love is the true bond which unites men—the bond of perfectness, as it is elsewhere called. That unity in love would, of course, add to the strength of each. The old fable teaches us that little fagots bound together are strong, and the tighter the rope is pulled, the stronger they are. A solitary heart is timid and weak, but many weaknesses brought together make a strength, as slimly built houses in a row hold each other up, or dying embers raked closer burst into flame. Loose grains of sand are light and moved by a breath; compacted they are rock against which the Atlantic beats in vain. So, a Church of which the members are bound together by that love which is the only real bond of Church life presents a front to threatening evils through which they cannot break. A real moral defence against even intellectual error will be found in such a close compaction in mutual Christian love. A community so interlocked will throw off many evils, as a Roman legion with linked shields roofed itself over against missiles from the wall of a besieged city, or the imbricated scales on a fish keep it dry in the heart of the sea.

But we must go deeper than this in interpreting these words. The love which is to knit Christian men together is not merely love to one another, but is common love to Jesus Christ. Such common love to Him is the true bond of union, and the true strengthener of men's hearts.

3. This compaction in love will lead to a wealth of certitude in the possession of the truth.

Paul is so eagerly desirous for the Colossians' union in love to each other and all to God, because He knows that such union will materially contribute to their assured and joyful possession of the truth. It tends, he thinks, unto "all riches of the full assurance of understanding," by which he means the wealth which consists in the entire, unwavering certitude which takes possession of the understanding, the confidence that it has the truth and the life in Jesus Christ. Such a joyful stedfastness of conviction that I have grasped the truth is opposed to hesitating half belief. It is attainable, as this context shows, by paths of moral discipline, and amongst them, by seeking to realize our unity with our brethren and not proudly rejecting the "common faith" because it is common. Possessing that assurance, we shall be rich and heart whole. Walking amid certainties we shall walk in paths of peace, and re-echo the triumphant assurance of the Apostle, to whom love had given the key of knowledge:—"we know that we are of God, and we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true."

In all times of religious unsettlement, when an active propaganda of denial is going on, Christian men are tempted to lower their own tone, and to say, "It is so," with somewhat less of certainty, because so many are saying, "It is not so." Little Rhoda needs some courage to affirm constantly that "it was even so," when apostles and her masters keep assuring her that she has only seen a vision. In this day, many professing Christians falter in the clear assured profession of their faith, and it does not need a keen ear to catch an undertone of doubt making their voices tremulous. Some even are so afraid of being thought "narrow," that they seek for the reputation of liberality by talking as if there were a film of doubt over even the truths which used

to be "most surely believed." Much of the so-called faith of this day is all honeycombed with secret misgivings, which have in many instances no other intellectual basis than the consciousness of prevalent unbelief and a second-hand acquaintance with its teachings. Few things are more needed among us now than this full assurance and satisfaction of the understanding with the truth as it is in Jesus. Nothing is more wretched than the slow paralysis creeping over faith, the fading of what had been stars into darkness. A tragedy is being wrought in many minds which have had to exchange Christ's "Verily, verily," for a miserable "perhaps," and can no longer say "I know," but only, "I would fain believe," or at the best, "I incline to think still." On the other hand, the "full assurance of the understanding" brings wealth. It breathes peace over the soul, and gives endless riches in the truths which through it are made living and real.

This wealth of conviction is attained by living in the love of God. Of course, there is an intellectual discipline which is also needed. But no intellectual process will lead to an assured grasp of spiritual truth, unless it be accompanied by love. As soon may we lay hold of truth with our hands, as of God in Christ with our understandings alone. This is the constant teaching of Scripture—that, if we would know God and have assurance of Him, we must love Him. "In order to love human things, it is necessary to know them. In order to know Divine things, it is necessary to love them." When we are rooted and grounded in love, we shall be able to know—for what we have most need to know and what the Gospel has mainly to teach us is the love, and "unless the eye were sunlike, how could it see the sun?" Unless the eye with which we look is love, how shall we know love? If we love, we shall possess an experience which verifies the truth for us, will give us an irrefragable demonstration which will bring certitude to ourselves, how-

ever little it may avail to convince others. Rich in the possession of this confirmation of the gospel by the blessings which have come to us from it, and which witness of their source, as the stream that dots some barren plain with a line of green along its course is revealed thereby, we shall have the right to oppose the full assurance born of love to many a doubt, and while others are disputing whether there be any God, or any living Christ, or any forgiveness of sins, or any guiding providence, we shall know that they are, and are ours, because we have felt the power and wealth which they have brought into our lives.

4. This unity of love will lead to full knowledge of the mystery of God. Such seems to be the connexion of the next words, which may be literally read "unto the full knowledge of the mystery of God," and may be best regarded as a co-ordinate clause with the preceding, depending like it on "being knit together in love." So taken, there is set forth a double issue of that compaction in love to God and one another, namely, the calm assurance in the grasp of truth already possessed, and the more mature and deeper insight into the deep things of God. The word for knowledge here is the same as in i. 9, and here as there means a full knowledge. The Colossians had known Christ at first, but the Apostle's desire is that they may come to a fuller knowledge, for the object to be known is infinite, and endless degrees in the perception and possession of His power and grace are possible. In that fuller knowledge they will not leave behind what they knew at first, but will find in it deeper meaning, a larger wisdom and a fuller truth.

Among the large number of readings of the following words, that which is adopted by the Revised Version is to be preferred, and the translation which it gives is the most natural and that which is in accordance with the previous thought in chapter i. 27, where also "the mystery" is explained to be "Christ in you." A slight variation in the

conception is presented here. The "mystery" is Christ, not "in you," but "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." The great truth long hidden, now revealed, is that the whole wealth of spiritual insight (knowledge), and of reasoning on the truths thus apprehended so as to gain an ordered system of belief and a coherent law of conduct (wisdom), is stored for us in Christ.

Such being in brief the connexion and outline meaning of these great words, we may touch upon the various principles embodied in them. We have seen, in commenting upon a former part of the Epistle, the force of the great thought of Christ in His relations to us, as being the mystery of God, and need not repeat what was then said. But we may pause for a moment on the fact that the knowledge of that mystery has its stages. The revelation of the mystery is complete. No further stages are possible in that. But while the revelation is, in Paul's estimate, finished, and the long concealed truth now stands in full sunshine, our apprehension of it may grow, and there is a mature knowledge possible. Some poor ignorant soul catches through the gloom a glimpse of God manifested in the flesh, and bearing his sins. That soul will never outgrow that knowledge, but as the years pass, life and reflection and experience will help to explain and deepen it. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son—there is nothing beyond that truth. Grasped however imperfectly, it brings light and peace. But as it is loved and lived by, it unfolds undreamed-of depths, and flashes with growing brightness. Suppose that a man could set out from the great planet that moves on the outermost rim of our system, and could travel slowly inwards towards the central sun, how the disc would grow, and the light and warmth increase with each million of miles that he crossed, till what had seemed a point filled the whole sky! Christian growth is into, not away from Christ, a penetrating deeper into the centre, and a drawing

out into distinct consciousness as a coherent system, all that was wrapped, as the leaves in their brown sheath, in that first glimpse of Him which saves the soul.

These stages are infinite, because in Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. These four words, *treasures, wisdom, knowledge, hidden*, are all familiar on the lips of the later Gnostics, and were so, no doubt, in the mouths of the false teachers at Colossæ. The Apostle would assert for his gospel all which they falsely claimed for their dreams. As in several other places of this Epistle, he avails himself of his antagonists' special vocabulary, transferring its terms, from the illusory phantoms which a false knowledge adorned with them, to the truth which he had to preach. He puts special emphasis on the predicate "hidden" by throwing it to the end of the sentence—a peculiarity which is reproduced with advantage in the Revised Version.

All wisdom and knowledge are in Christ. He is the Light of men, and all thought and truth of every sort come from Him who is the Eternal Word, the Incarnate Wisdom. That Incarnate Word is the perfect Revelation of God, and by His one completed life and death has declared the whole name of God to his brethren, of which all other media of revelation have but uttered broken syllables. That ascended Christ breathes wisdom and knowledge into all who love Him, and still pursues, by giving us the Spirit of wisdom, His great work of revealing God to men, according to His own word, which at once asserted the completeness of the revelation made by His earthly life and promised the perpetual continuance of the revelation from His heavenly seat: "I have declared Thy name unto my brethren, and will declare it."

In Christ, as in a great storehouse, lie all the riches of spiritual wisdom, the massive ingots of solid gold which when coined into creeds and doctrines are the wealth of the

world. All which we can know concerning God and man, concerning sin and righteousness and duty, concerning another life, is in Him who is the home and deep mine where truth is stored.

In Christ these treasures are "hidden," but not, as the heretics' mysteries were hidden, in order that they might be out of reach of the vulgar crowd. This mystery is hidden indeed, but it is revealed. It is hidden only from the eyes that will not see it. It is hidden that seeking souls may have the joy of seeking and the rest in finding. The very act of revealing is a hiding, as our Lord has said in His great thanksgiving because these things are (by one and the same act) "hid from the wise and prudent, and revealed to babes." They are hid, as men store provisions in the Arctic regions, in order that the bears may not find them and the shipwrecked sailors may.

Such thoughts have a special message for times of agitation such as the Colossian Church was passing through, and such as we have to face. We too are surrounded by eager confident voices, proclaiming profounder truths and a deeper wisdom than the gospel gives us. In joyful antagonism to these, Christian men have to hold fast by the confidence that all Divine wisdom is laid up in our Lord. We need not go to others to learn new truth. The new problems of each generation to the end of time will find their answers in Christ, and new issues of that old message which we have heard from the beginning will continually be discerned. Let us not wonder if the lessons which the earlier ages of the Church drew from that infinite storehouse fail at many points to meet the eager questionings of to-day. Nor let us suppose that the stars are quenched because the old books of astronomy are in some respects out of date. We need not cast aside the truths that we learned at our mother's knees. The central fact of the universe and the perfect encyclopædia of all moral and spiritual truth is Christ,

the Incarnate Word, the Lamb slain, the ascended King. If we keep true to Him and strive to widen our minds to the breadth of that great message, it will grow as we gaze, even as the nightly heavens expand to the eye which stedfastly looks into them, and reveal violet abysses sown with sparkling points, each of which is a sun. "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."

The ordinary type of Christian life is contented with a superficial acquaintance with Christ. Many understand no more of Him and of His gospel than they did when first they learned to love Him. So completely has the very idea of a progressive knowledge of Jesus Christ faded from the horizon of the average Christian that "edification," which ought to mean the progressive building up of the character course by course, in new knowledge and grace, has come to mean little more than the sense of comfort derived from the reiteration of old and familiar words which fall on the ear with a pleasant murmur. There is sadly too little first-hand and growing knowledge of their Lord, among Christian people, too little belief that fresh treasures may be found hidden in that field which, to each soul and each new generation struggling with its own special forms of the burdens and problems that press upon humanity, would be cheaply bought by selling all, but may be won at the easier rate of earnest desire to possess them, and faithful adherence to Him in whom they are stored for the world. The condition of growth for the branch is abiding in the vine. If our hearts are knit together with Christ's heart in that love which is the parent of communion, both as delighted contemplation and as glad obedience, then we shall daily dig deeper into the mine of wealth which is hid in Him that it may be found, and draw forth an unfailling supply of things new and old.

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