

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XII.

THE BANE AND THE ANTIDOTE.

“Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through is philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ: for in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in Him ye are made full, who is the head of all principality and power.”—Col. ii. 8, 9, 10 (Rev. Ver.).

WE come now to the first plain reference to the errors which were threatening the peace of the Colossian community. Here Paul crosses swords with the foe. This is the point to which all his previous words have been steadily converging. The immediately preceding context contained the positive exhortation to continue in the Christ whom they had received, having been rooted in Him as the tree in a fertile place “by the rivers of water,” and being continually builded up in Him, with ever-growing completeness of holy character. The same exhortation in substance is contained in the verses which we have now to consider, with the difference that it is here presented negatively, as warning and dehortation, with distinct statement of the danger which would uproot the tree and throw down the building, and drag them away from union with Christ.

In these words the Bane and Antidote are both before us. Let us consider each.

I. *The Poison* against which Paul warns the Colossians is plainly described in our first verse, the terms of which may require a brief comment.

“*Take heed lest there shall be.*” The construction implies that it is a real and not a hypothetical danger which he sees threatening. He is not crying “wolf” before there is need.

“*Any one*”—perhaps the tone of the warning would be better conveyed if we read the more familiar “somebody”; as if he had said—“I name no names—it is not the persons but the principles that I fight against—but you know whom I mean well enough. Let him be anonymous, you understand who it is.” Perhaps there was even a single “somebody” who was the centre of the mischief.

“*That maketh spoil of you.*” Such is the full meaning of the word—and not “injure” or “rob,” which the translation in the Authorized Version suggests to an English reader. Paul sees the converts in Colossæ taken prisoners and led away with a cord round their necks, like the long strings of captives on the Assyrian monuments. He had spoken in the previous chapter (ver. 13) of the merciful conqueror who had “translated” them from the realm of darkness into a kingdom of light, and now he fears lest a robber horde, making a raid upon the peaceful colonists in their happy new homes, may sweep them away again into bondage. And the instrument which the man-stealer uses, or perhaps we may say, the cord, whose fatal noose will be tightened round them, if they do not take care, is “*philosophy and vain deceit.*”

If Paul had been writing in English, he would have put “philosophy” in inverted commas, to show that he was quoting the heretical teachers’ own name for their system, if system it may be called, which was really a chaos. For the true love of wisdom, for any honest, humble attempt to seek after her as hid treasure, neither Paul nor Paul’s master have anything but praise and sympathy and help. Where he met real, however imperfect, searchers after truth, he strove to find points of contact between them and his message, and to present the Gospel as the answer to their questionings, the declaration of that which they were groping to find. The thing spoken of here has no resemblance but in name to what the Greeks in their better days

first called philosophy, and nothing but that mere coincidence warrants the representation—often made both by narrow-minded Christians, and by unbelieving seekers—that Christianity takes up a position of antagonism or suspicion to it.

The form of the expression in the original shows clearly that “vain deceit,” or more literally “empty deceit,” describes the “philosophy” which Paul is bidding them beware of. They are not two things, but one. It is like a blown bladder, full of wind, and nothing else. In its lofty pretensions, and, if we take its own account of itself, it is a love of and search after wisdom, but if we look at it more closely, it is a swollen nothing, empty and a fraud. This is what he is condemning. The genuine thing he has nothing to say about here.

He goes on to describe more closely this impostor, masquerading in the philosopher’s cloak. It is “*after the traditions of men.*” We have seen in a former paper what a strange heterogeneous conglomerate of Jewish ceremonial and Oriental dreams the false teachers in Colossæ were preaching. Probably both these elements are included here. It is significant that the very expression, “the traditions of men,” is a word of Christ’s, applied to the Pharisees, whom He charges with “leaving the commandment of God, and holding fast the tradition of men” (Mark vii. 8). The portentous undergrowth of such “traditions” which, like the riotous fertility of creepers in a tropical forest, smothers and kills the trees round which it twines, is preserved for our wonder and warning in the Talmud, where for thousands and thousands of pages, we get nothing but Rabbi So and So said this, but Rabbi So and So said that; until we feel stifled, and long for one Divine Word to still all the babble.

The Oriental element in the heresy, on the other hand, prided itself on hidden teaching too sacred to be entrusted

to books, and passed from lip to lip in some close conclave of muttering teachers and listening adepts. The fact that all this, be it Jewish, be it Oriental teaching, had no higher source than men's imaginings and refinings, seems to Paul the condemnation of the whole system. His theory is that in Jesus Christ, every Christian man has the full truth concerning God, and man, their mutual relations, the authoritative Divine declaration of all that can be known, the perfect exemplar of all that ought to be done, the sun-clear illumination and proof of all that dare be hoped. What an absurd descent, then, from the highest of our prerogatives, to "turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven," in order to listen to poor human voices, speaking men's thoughts!

The lesson is as needful to-day as ever. The special forms of men's traditions in question here have long since fallen silent, and trouble no man any more. But the tendency to give heed to human teachers and to suffer them to come between us and Christ is deep in us all. There is at one extreme the man who believes in no revelation from God, and, smiling at us Christians, who accept Christ's words as final, and Himself as the Incarnate truth, often pays to his chosen human teacher a deference as absolute as that which he regards as superstition, when we render it to our Lord. At the other extremity, are the Christians who will not let Christ and the Scripture speak to the soul unless the Church be present at the interview, like a jailer, with a bunch of man-made creeds jingling at its belt. But it is not only at the two ends of the line, but all along its length, that men are listening to "traditions" of men and neglecting "the commandment of God." We have all the same tendency in us. Every man carries a rationalist and a traditionalist under his skin. Every Church in Christendom, whether it has a formal creed or no, is ruled as to its belief and practice, to a sad extent, by the "traditions of the

elders." The freest of the Nonconformist Churches, untrammelled by any formal confession, may be bound with as tight fetters, and be as much dominated by men's opinions, as if it had the straitest of creeds. The mass of our religious beliefs and practices have ever to be verified, corrected and remodelled, by harking back from creeds, written or unwritten, to the one Teacher, the endless significance of whose person and work is but expressed in fragments by the purest and widest thoughts even of those who have lived nearest to Him, and seen most of His beauty. Let us get away from men, from the Babel of opinions and the strife of tongues, that we may "hear the words of His mouth!" Let us take heed of the empty fraud which lays the absurd snare for our feet, that we can learn to know God by any means but by listening to His own speech in His Eternal Word, lest it lead us away captive out of the Kingdom of the Light! Let us go up to the pure spring on the mountain top, and not try to slake our thirst at the muddy pools at its base! "Ye are Christ's, be not the slave of men." "This is My beloved Son, hear ye Him."

Another mark of this empty pretence of wisdom which threatens to captivate the Colossians is, that it is "*after the rudiments of the world.*" The word rendered "rudiments" means the letters of the alphabet, and hence comes naturally to acquire the meaning of "elements," or "first principles," just as we speak of the A B C of a science. The application of such a designation to the false teaching, is, like the appropriation of the term "mystery" to the Gospel, an instance of turning the tables and giving back the teachers their own words. They boasted of mysterious doctrines reserved for the initiated, of which the plain truths that Paul preached were but the elements, and they looked down contemptuously on his message as "milk for babes." Paul retorts on them, asserting that the true

mystery, the profound truth long hidden and revealed, is the word which he preached, and that the poverty-stricken elements, fit only for infants, are in that swelling inanity which called itself wisdom and was not. Not only does he brand it as "rudiments," but as "rudiments of the *world*," which is worse—that is to say, as belonging to the sphere of the outward and material, and not to the higher region of the spiritual, where Christian thought ought to dwell. So two weaknesses are charged against the system: it is the mere alphabet of truth, and therefore unfit for grown men. It moves, for all its lofty pretensions, in the region of the visible and mundane things, and is therefore unfit for spiritual men. What features of the system are referred to in this phrase? The expression in the Epistle to the Galatians (iv. 3), as a synonyme for the whole system of ritual observances and ceremonial precepts of Judaism, and the context here, which passes on immediately to speak of circumcision, point to a similar meaning, though we may include also the ceremonial and ritual of the Gentile religions, in so far as they contributed to the outward forms which the Colossian heresy sought to impose on the Church. This then is Paul's opinion about a system which laid stress on ceremonial and busied itself with forms. He regards it as a deliberate retrogression to an earlier stage. A religion of rites had come first, and was needed for the spiritual infancy of the race—but in Christ we ought to have outgrown the alphabet of revelation, and, being men, to have put away childish things. He regards it further as a pitiable descent into a lower sphere, a fall from the spiritual realm to the material, and therefore unbecoming for men who have been enfranchised from dependence upon outward helps and symbols, and taught the spirituality and inwardness of Christian worship.

We need the lesson in this day no less than did these Christians in the little community in that remote valley of

Phrygia. The forms which were urged on them are long since antiquated, but the tendency to turn Christianity into a religion of ceremonial is running with an unusually powerful current to-day. We are all more interested in art, and think we know more about it than our fathers did. The eye and the ear are more educated than they used to be, and a society as "æsthetic" and "musical" as much cultured English society is becoming, will like an ornate ritual. So, apart altogether from doctrinal grounds, much in the conditions of to-day works towards ritual religion. Nonconformist services are less plain; some go from their ranks because they dislike the "bald" worship in the chapel, and prefer the more elaborate forms of the Anglican Church, which in its turn is for the same reason left by others who find their tastes gratified by the complete thing, as it is to be enjoyed full blown in the Roman Catholic communion. We may freely admit that the Puritan re-action was possibly too severe, and that a little more colour and form might with advantage have been retained. But enlisting the senses as the allies of the spirit in worship is risky work. They are very apt to fight for their own hand when they once begin, and the history of all symbolic and ceremonial worship shows that the experiment is much more likely to end in sensualising religion than in spiritualising sense. The theory that such aids make a ladder by which the soul may ascend to God is perilously apt to be confuted by experience, which finds that the soul never gets above the steps of the ladder. The gratification of taste, and the excitation of æsthetic sensibility, which is the result of such aids to worship, is not worship, however it may be mistaken as such. All ceremonial is in danger of becoming opaque instead of transparent as it was meant to be, and of detaining mind and eye instead of letting them pass on and up to God. Stained glass is lovely, and white

windows are "barnlike," and "starved" and "bare"; but perhaps, if the object is to get light and to see the sun, these solemn purples and glowing yellows are rather in the way. I for my part believe that of the two extremes, a Quaker's meeting is nearer the ideal of Christian worship than High Mass, and so far as my feeble voice can reach, I would urge as eminently a lesson for the day Paul's great principle here, that a Christianity making much of forms and ceremonies is a distinct retrogression, and a distinct descent. You are men in Christ, do not go back to the picture book A B C of symbol and ceremony, which was fit for babes. You have been brought in to the inner sanctuary of worship in spirit; do not decline to the beggarly elements of outward forms.

Paul sums up his indictment in one damning clause, the result of the two before. If the heresy has no higher source than men's traditions, and no more solid contents than ceremonial observances, it cannot be "after Christ." He is neither its origin, nor its substance, nor its rule and standard. There is a fundamental discord between every such system, however it may call itself Christian, and Christ. The opposition may be concealed by its teachers. They and their victims may not be aware of it. They may not themselves be conscious that by adopting it they have slipped off the foundation; but they have, and if in their own hearts they are loyal to Him, they have brought an incurable discord into their creeds which will weaken their lives, if it does not do worse. Paul cared very little for the dreams of these men, except in so far as they carried them and others away from his Master. They might have as many ceremonies as they liked, and welcome; but when these interfered with the sole reliance to be placed on Christ's work, then they must have no quarter. It is not because the teaching was "after the traditions of men, after the rudiments of the world," but because

being so, it was "not after Christ," that Paul will have none of it. He that touches his Master touches the apple of his eye, and shades of opinion, and things indifferent in practice, and otherwise unimportant elaborateness of forms of worship, have to be fought to the death if they obscure one corner of the perfect and solitary work of the One Lord, who is at once the source, the substance, and the standard of all Christian teaching.

II. *The Antidote.*—"For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in Him ye are made full, who is the head of all principality and power."

These words may be a reason for the warning—"Take heed, *for*"; or they may be a reason for the implied exclusion of any teaching which is not after Christ. The statement of its characteristics carries in itself its condemnation. Anything "not after Christ" is *ipso facto* wrong, and to be avoided—"for" etc. "In Him" is placed with emphasis at the beginning, and implies "and nowhere else." "Dwelleth" that is, has its permanent abode; where the tense is to be noticed also, as pointing to the ascended Christ. "All the fulness of the Godhead," that is, the whole unbounded powers and attributes of Deity, where observe the use of the abstract term Godhead, instead of the more usual God, in order to express with the utmost force the thought of the indwelling in Christ of the whole essence and nature of God. "Bodily," that points to the Incarnation, and so is an advance upon the passage in the former chapter (ver. 19), which speaks of "the fulness" dwelling in the Eternal Word, whereas this speaks of the Eternal Word in whom the fulness dwelt becoming flesh. So we are pointed to the glorified corporeal humanity of Jesus Christ in His exaltation as the abode, now and for ever, of all the fulness of the Divine nature, which is thereby brought very near to us. This grand truth seems to Paul to

shiver to pieces all the dreams of these teachers about angel mediators, and to brand as folly every attempt to learn truth and God anywhere else but in Him.

If He be the one sole temple of Deity in whom all Divine glories are stored, why go anywhere else in order to *see* or to *possess* God? It is folly; for not only are all these glories stored in Him, but they are so stored on purpose to be reached and possessed by us. Therefore the Apostle goes on, "and in Him ye are made full;" which sets forth two things as true in the inward life of all Christians, namely, their living incorporation in and union with Christ, and their consequent participation in His fulness. Every one of us may enter into that most real and close union with Jesus Christ by the power of continuous faith in Him. So may we be grafted into the Vine, and builded into the Rock. If thus we keep our hearts in contact with His heart, and let Him lay His lip on our lips, He will breathe into us the breath of His own life, and we shall live because He lives, and in our measure, as He lives. All the fulness of God is in Him, that from Him it may pass into us. We might start back from such bold words if we did not remember that the same apostle who here tells us that that fulness dwells in Jesus, crowns his wonderful prayer for the Ephesian Christians with that daring petition, "that ye may be filled with all the fulness of God." The treasure was lodged in the earthen vessel of Christ's manhood that it might be within our reach. He brings the fiery blessing of a Divine life from Heaven to earth enclosed in the feeble reed of His manhood, that it may kindle kindred fires in many a heart. Freely the water of life flows into all cisterns from the ever fresh stream into which the infinite depth of that unfathomable sea of good pours itself. Every kind of spiritual blessing is given therein. That stream, like a river of molten lava, holds many

precious things in its flaming current, and will cool into many shapes and deposit many rare and rich gifts. According to our need it will shape itself, being to each what the moment most requires,—wisdom, or strength, or beauty, or courage, or patience. Out of it will come whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, as Rabbinical legends tell us that the manna tasted to each man like the food he wished for most.

This process of receiving of all the Divine fulness is a continuous one. We can but be approximating to the possession of the infinite treasure which is ours in Christ, and since the treasure is infinite, and we can indefinitely grow in capacity of receiving God, there must be an eternal continuance of the filling and an eternal increase of the measure of what fills us. Our natures are elastic, and in love and knowledge, as well as in purity and capacity for blessedness, there are no bounds to be set to their possible expansion. They will be widened by bliss into a greater capacity for bliss. The indwelling Christ will “enlarge the place of His habitation,” and as the walls stretch and the roofs soar, He will fill the greater house with the light of His presence, and the fragrance of His name. The condition of this continuous reception of the abundant gift of a Divine life is abiding in Jesus. It is “in Him” that we are being “being filled full”—and only so long as we continue in Him that we continue full. We cannot bear away our supplies, as one might a full bucket from a well, and keep it full. All the grace will trickle out and disappear unless we live in constant union with our Lord, whose Spirit passes into our deadness only so long as we are joined to Him.

From all such thoughts Paul would have us draw the conclusion—how foolish, then, it must be to go to any other source for the supply of our needs! Christ is “the head of all principality and power,” he adds, with a

reference to the doctrine of angel mediators, which evidently played a great part in the heretical teaching. If He is sovereign head of all dignity and power on earth and heaven, why go to the ministers, when we have access to the King; or have recourse to erring human teachers, when we have the Eternal Word to enlighten us; or flee to creatures to replenish our emptiness, when we may draw from the depths of God in Christ?

Why should we go on a weary search after goodly pearls when the richest of all is by us, if we will have it? Do we seek to know God? Behold Christ, and let men talk as they list. Do we crave a stay for our spirit, guidance and impulse for our lives? Let us cleave to Christ, and we shall be no more lonely and bewildered. Do we need a quieting balm to be laid on conscience, and a sense of guilt to be lifted from our hearts? Let us lay our hands on Christ, the one sacrifice, and leave all other altars and priests and ceremonies. Do we look longingly for some light on the future? Let us stedfastly gaze on Christ as He rises to heaven bearing a human body into the glory of God. Though all the earth were covered with helpers and lovers of my soul, "as the sand by the sea shore innumerable," and all the heavens were sown with angel faces who cared for me and succoured me, thick as the stars in the milky way,—all could not do for me what I need. Yea, though all these were gathered into one mighty and loving creature, even he were no sufficient stay for one soul of man. We want more than creature help. We need the whole fulness of the Godhead to draw from. It is all there in Christ, for each of us. Whosoever will, let him draw freely. Why should we leave the fountain of living waters to hew out for ourselves, with infinite pains, broken cisterns that can hold no water? All we need is in Christ. Let us lift our eyes from the low earth and all creatures, and behold

“no man any more,” as Lord and Helper, “save Jesus only,” “that we may be filled with all the fulness of God.”

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

THE BIBLE AND WINE.

As I was sitting last year, engaged in familiar converse with a friend, in a vine arbour near to the bank of the glorious German Rhine—I with a glass of beer beside me, he with a bottle of the generous growth of his home land, which I had ordered for him as my guest—I exclaimed in a little burst of enthusiasm, “Is it not so? Just as this view of the Rhine charms us both, so the Jordan once laved the roots of Christianity not less than those of Judaism; for through the Jordan, Israel coming out of Egypt entered into Canaan; and through the Jordan, too, Jesus passed after He had returned out of Egypt, in order, accompanied by His disciples, to traverse the Holy Land as a Preacher of the kingdom of Heaven.” When I observed that this parallel did not indeed repel my friend, but yet startled him, I gave a more inoffensive turn to the discourse, and said: “Well, then, in one thing contradiction is impossible, namely, in this, that as we two are sitting under one and the same arbour encircled with vine branches, so the Old Testament and the New Testament Scriptures are equally inwrought with figures of wine, vines, vineyards and vine-culture. Though the two may differ in many respects, yet as regards wine they are one. They resemble an arbour whose foreground and whose background is covered with tendrils, is fragrant of the vine. Upon this we will touch. The subject is worthy of it.

In vino veritas
Atque sinceritas.

Quidquid latebit
Mox apparebit.

In wine is verity
And sheer sincerity.

Whate'er lies concealed
Shall soon be revealed.