

## THE BRETHREN AT COLOSSE

What a wonderful thing that, after the lapse of eighteen centuries, we have the words of the apostle Paul to read in our midst this morning. We are so familiar with these words that the privilege of possessing them may not at all times strike us as it ought. It is a privilege even from a merely literary and archaeological point of view. But how much greater the privilege becomes when we realise that these words of Paul are not the enunciation of truth "*in words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches,*" as Paul testifies in 1 Cor. 2:13. What noble and sweet and pure and instructive words they are. Let us follow the drift of some of them in the consideration of the portion read this morning—the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of his epistle to the Colossians.

We will not stay to ask anything about Colosse or its inhabitants. Suffice it that this epistle was addressed to that portion of its inhabitants only which he describes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse as "*saints and faithful brethren in Christ.*" We are interested in what he has to say to this class, because the class exists today, and stands related to the same things. Let us ponder what he has to say to them in words "*which the Holy Spirit teacheth.*" First, he gives thanks for the brethren at Colosse:

*"We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you."*

This suggests the question whether the giving of thanks for such a reason belongs to Paul only. Does it not belong to all Paul's brethren? —of the nineteenth as well as the first century? If we could have any doubt, it must give way before Paul's command to be followers of him (1 Cor. 11:1)—and to "*pray for one another*" and "*for all saints.*" Therefore let us not forget, in the luxury of our private petitions—and public, too, for the matter of that—that it is an acceptable thing with God that we thank God for one another, and pray for one another—yea, even for our enemies, as Jesus commands.

Let us not omit to notice, however, the ground of Paul's thankfulness for the brethren. It was not merely for their numbers—it was not merely for the increase of men called "*brethren.*" He had prayed always for them—

*"Since we heard of **your faith** in Christ Jesus, and of **the love which ye have** to all the saints; for (or on account of) the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; which (gospel) is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and **bringeth forth fruit**, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth."*

There is much to ponder here. What is there to be thankful for in brethren who not only show a poor faith, but scarcely show faith at all? And we know how faith is shown according to the Scriptural standard:

*"I will show thee my faith **BY MY WORKS**" (Jas. 2:18).*

And what is there to be thankful for in brethren who not only manifest no "*love to all the saints,*" but no love to any as such—brethren who are "*lovers of their own selves,*" and interested in other people in so far as other people are likely in some way or other to minister to their advantage, or whose love of others is limited to the love of "friends" in the Gentile sense—the narrow sense—the animal sense? Give us brethren who love the saints **as saints**, and who can wake up to a disinterestedness extreme enough, if necessary, to "*lay down their lives for the brethren.*" This is the apostolic standard: and no other standard is worth a moment's regard. Paul had no thankfulness for any other kind of brethren. He spoke of others, "*even weeping,*" as the enemies of the cross of Christ, who minded earthly things (Phil. 3:18).

And the love of the brethren which Paul commended was a love entertained by the Colossians "*on account of the hope*"—not a love cherished for the qualities of individuals as men in the flesh, but a love felt because of their living addiction to the hope of the Gospel. This hope is the bond every way in the "New Testament" system. Men are members of the house of Christ, "*if they hold fast **the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end***" (Heb. 3:6). Men are brethren beloved if they are "*partakers of the hope*" in which all the saints have their standing before God—the hope of return to the bosom of God from which the race was expelled at the beginning—a hope to be effected in the form and the way made known in the gospel—a hope which is "*the hope of Israel.*" To love a man who shows no living interest in the hope which is laid up for us in heaven with Christ, who is coming, is not according to the new man, and not according to what was before Paul's mind in this letter. If a

man love God, he cannot but be keenly alive to the hope of his promised mercy in the day of Christ; and if a man is dead to this hope, he is dead to God, and, therefore, outside the pale of an active fellowship with those who are alive to both. The admiration of a man's personal qualities, apart from the relation of his sympathies to God, becomes more and more impossible with the new man: for sympathy with God is the first and increasing principle of his mental being. He is not indifferent to personal quality: far from it—odious personal qualities belong to the outer darkness.

*"If any man say he love God, and walk in darkness, he is a liar":*

So says John, and it is true, however shocking such plain speaking may be to modern Gentile sensibilities. The sublimest personal qualities belong only to the circle of divine light and sympathy, and are to be found only there. But there are qualities in the unenlightened natural man, of the educated sort, that are supposed rightfully to call for admiration. Such admiration is faint with the divinely enlightened. The qualities in question do not afford a basis of fellowship, and friendship apart from fellowship is impossible with the spiritual man. Excellent personal qualities, apart from a recognition of God and His will, are in the nature of the majesty of the lion, or the beauty of the rose, or the glory of a sunset—an ephemeral phenomenon, without roots. In few cases are they so beautiful as those: in none are they truly so, for Gentile accomplishments are skin deep: selfish diabolism lurks under all the gloss.

The Colossians loved the saints on account of the hope in which they rejoiced. It is easy and pleasant to indulge this love, where the hope evidently, and without affectation, dwells in the heart. Part of the unspeakable gladness of the muster and assortment of the saints in the day of Christ will lie in the unfeigned joy in God that will glow in every breast. We cannot but be thankful for the number, and the increasing number, of those who rejoice in the hope for its own sake, and who regulate their friendships by this rule, and in whom the hope is bringing forth fruit, as it did also in the Colossians. In the midst of much humiliation and mortification and desolation, it is a source of refreshi8ng and joy. It is a preparation for the day of the manifestation of the sons of God. Such will be no strangers to Paul and Epaphras, when they awake from their slumber of centuries—short and sweet to them. It is the characteristic of the family of God, that they are "*all one*." Epaphras reported to Paul the love the Colossian brethren entertained for him "*in the spirit*." This love will be felt by every true modern brother—a love for Paul, but not after the flesh: a love for Paul "*in the spirit*," even as they love one another, after the spirit, and not after the flesh; a style of discourse which is all Greek to the children of the flesh, but which is founded in truth for all that. The love of the brethren is not a love entertained for one another as persons (though that element blends); it is a love in God—because of God—with God in view—because of his glorious purpose, and with reference to that glorious purpose, which opens out and lights up the future with an endless perspective of glory and comfort and joy in him who is The Rock and Foundation of all. The love that operates from that direction blends with it a view that is destructive of merely personal love, the view that the present is but a vain show—a fading scene—a passing picture—the flesh a wind that passeth away and grass that withers. Men of merely personal friendships disrelish this aspect of the case, which is truth.

When Paul heard from Epaphras of the love of the Colossian brethren bore him in the spirit, he was led more earnestly to pray on their behalf, and to foster benevolent desires towards them. He tells us what these desires were and what he prayed for. This is deserving of our most serious consideration, for in Paul's specifications of his desires for the Colossian brethren, we see a portrait of what we ought to be—in our leading features of all events—and what, therefore, we will be helped to strive after if we realise that they are an inspired apostle's solicitude on our account. Paul's desire and prayer for the Colossian brethren, then, are thus expressed:

*"That ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light" (v 9 & 12).*

What a comprehensive and profound definition of what Paul would have us to be—of what God would have us to be; for Paul was nothing to us apart from the Spirit of God, which was in him. We shall find it profitable to dwell on it for a few moments.

Are we “*filled with the knowledge of the Lord’s will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*”? This is Paul’s wish and prayer, and it will be our desire and aim, in so far as we are in sympathy with Paul. To each of us there is doubtless a different measure of attainment in this matter; but to all of us there is a common standard and a common duty of aiming at attainment—a common salvation to be reached—a common fearful looking for of judgment, in case of rejection as out of harmony with the Divine image. There is no mistaking the meaning of the words, “*filled with the knowledge of His will*”—the mind primed with the knowledge of what God has revealed, and possessing it in such a form as to be available for every moment’s requirements. Is it not a desirable condition? Is it an unattainable one? The fact of Paul wishing and praying for it forbids the idea of its being unattainable. It is not only not unattainable, but its attainment is imperative in degree. If we are not filled with the knowledge of His will, how can we do it? And if we do not the Lord’s will, how can we hope to stand well with our Judge, who has said,

“*My brethren are they who do the will of my Father*”?

Where shall we learn the Lord’s will? We do not require to discuss that here. We all agree that the Scriptures alone are able to make a man wise in this respect, and to thoroughly furnish the man of God unto all good works. We are here assembled because of this agreement. What follows? That if we are earnestly in sympathy with Paul’s prayers and desires concerning the brethren, we shall give ourselves to that daily study of the written Word, which will “*fill us with the knowledge of the Lord’s will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*.” It is impossible in our day that we can otherwise attain to this excellent condition. The knowledge of God’s will is stored in a written form. It is latent in these divinely-inscribed documents. How to transfer it from these documents to the tablets of heart—this is the problem. It is a vital one. Upon our solution depends our whole future. Theoretically, the way to succeed in it is obvious enough: **read what is written**. But to understand a theory and to work it out are two different things. To work out this theory, we must read ponderingly—read regularly—read with earnest desire—read with prayer. And as all wise men avoid whatever acts hinderingly to the result of any difficult or delicate process they may be conducting, the man who aims to have the will of God, as Biblically embodied, inscribed vitally and enduringly on his mind, will avoid all books and occupations and habits and friendships and companions, that tend to erase the Divine writing, or to interfere with the power of the heart to receive it. This may seem a hard saying to some; but none can dispute its wisdom, and none will regret acting in harmony with it, when he comes into the actual presence of life’s issues as determinable at the judgment seat. By what other process can we attain to this most precious and most difficult knowledge—the knowledge of **His will**, which is divulged here a little, and there a little, in shades of varying depth throughout the entire course of the Scriptures? The natural mind is inveterately prone to its own notions, prejudices, views, and feelings, which are all as far below divine ideas as the earth is below the sun. It is only by daily contact with divine ideas that human ideas are displaced, and the mind so tinctured with divine thought as to become spiritually minded. This is true of the mere “*knowledge of His will*,” but how much more so of the richness of mental harmony with God expressed in the further words, “*in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*.” This ripeness cannot be attained if we give the study of the Scriptures a slack-handed place, or immerse our faculties in the animal excitements connected with the various forms of pleasure in the world, or the light reading which is so prevalent and so blighting. Unless we set our faces resolutely against “*the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life*,” so rampant in the world universally, it is impossible we can ever attain to the “*knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*.”

And in what other state of mind can we hope to “*walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing*”? A man who is carnally minded cannot please the Lord; and a man can never attain to any other than this, the natural state, who does not set himself with all diligence to become “*filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*.” “*Walking worthy of the Lord*” refers to doing, and doing is the finish of all mental process. A man’s mind must be in love with the Lord’s will before he will do it. Let the mind be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, and he will “*walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work*.”

This touches a feature we need to look at strongly. Jesus says, “*Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit*”—a figure truly, but one that we may understand. It was a complaint against Israel that he “*brought forth fruit unto himself*” (Hos. 10:1). Most people bring forth some kind of

fruit; they do something; they achieve something; but as regards the mass of mankind, wherever found, the complaint is the same as against Israel: they bring forth fruit **unto themselves**. All that they scheme and contrive and carry out is for their own benefit. This, God calls emptiness, saying—

*“Israel (in bringing forth fruit unto himself) is an **empty vine**.”*

We could understand this in the case of a fruit-bearing tree we might plant in our garden. Suppose the fruit was never in a pluckable state, and always absorbed into the tree, we should say the tree was useless. It is God’s own illustration. Our lives must show fruit brought forth to him; something done for his sake; something done because he has required it—and not a little.

*“Bring forth **much fruit**”*—these are Christ’s words.

*“**FRUITFUL in every good work**”*—these are Paul’s words and Christ’s also.

They express a much heartier, and more liberal, service to Christ in all things than is reckoned at all necessary or even prudent in our day, when men are so discreet concerning the present life, and so unwise as to the future; so circumspect towards man and so indifferent towards God; so careful of human opinion, and so regardless of divine opinion, as to which they have little faith of its existence at all. It is a poor, stunted, blighted age altogether. Even men called saints partake of its characteristics. It is considered a wonderful triumph of righteousness for a man to abstain from doing wrong; where are the men who emulate Christ who went about doing **good**? They are not quite extinct; but they are reckoned among the fools. The day that is coming will show us that wisdom dwelt in their course alone.

Among other things that Paul prayed for the brethren was this, that they might be *“strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, **unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness**.”* Here is an insight into a mental pattern that belongs only to the system of truth. Human wisdom does not prescribe *“long-suffering with joyfulness,”* but, on the contrary, asks you why you should suffer. It recommends the assertion of your rights, the resentment of your injuries. The strength that comes with the truth (*“the spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind,”* as Paul elsewhere expresses it) enables us even to perform this wonder—to *“endure grief, suffering wrongfully,”* which Peter tells us is well-pleasing to God—avenging not ourselves, but rather giving place unto wrath, in the calmness coming with the conviction that God in His own good time will repay all injustice. If it be asked, why should God allow injustice, why should He permit His people to suffer, there will be an abundant answer in the results made manifest in the day of Christ. As God has constituted human nature—and who will say that he could have shown Him a better way? —character cannot be developed without evil; patience, and faithfulness, and obedience cannot be brought out and put to the proof without injustice and the temporary triumph of evil. By such means, in these days of darkness, does God help His people to attain to the wisdom that cannot grow in prosperity. In such rough but loving ways (as they will be seen to be when the work is all done) does He make them meet for the inheritance of the saints in light.

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