Colossians - Commentaries by William Kelly

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 1:1-8, Notes on

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It is hardly possible for the most careless reader to overlook the kindred truth set forth in this epistle and in that to the Ephesians. Union with Christ, the Head of His body the Church, has a place here beyond all other scriptures; for though 1 Corinthians may present the same doctrine (chap.12), it is evident that there it is a question of the assembly of God on earth, in which the Holy Ghost is actively at work through the members, distributing to each as He will, much more than of the saints viewed in Christ above, as in Ephesians, or Christ viewed in them below, as in Colossians.

Nevertheless, distinctions of great moment and full of interest characterize these two epistles, the chief of which lies in this, that, as in Ephesians we have the privileges of the body of Christ, the fullness of Him who filleth all in all, so in Colossians we have the glories of the Head, in whom dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. This difference, like others, was due, in the wisdom of the Spirit, to the moral condition of those addressed. In the former case the apostle launches out into the counsels of God, who has blessed the saints with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ; in the latter case there was a measure of departure into philosophy and Jewish traditions, not an abandonment of Christ, of course, but such an admixture of these foreign ingredients as threatened fatal results in the apostle's eyes, unless their souls were brought back to Christ, and Christ alone, in all the rights of His person and work. Thus the Epistle to the Colossians, in consequence of their state, does not admit of the vast scope and development of divine purposes and glory for the saints seen in and united to Christ; whereas in writing to the Ephesians there was then nothing in them to arrest or narrow the outgoing of the apostle's heart, as the Spirit led him to apprehend with all the saints the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the knowledge surpassing love of Christ. Here it is largely a question of exhortation, of recovering their souls, of grave warning. Hence the human element is more prominent here. Writing to the Ephesians the apostle associates none with himself in the address; yet was Ephesus the capital of proconsular Asia and well-known to his fellow-laborers and associated by a thousand tender ties with himself and others. The assembly at Colosse as such was among those that had never seen his face in the flesh. This makes it the more marked when he joins Timothy with himself in their case.

“Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and Timothy the brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colosse: grace to you and peace from God our Father.” (Ver. 1, 2.) For himself, he was not unauthorized, nor was his title human. He was an apostle, not of the Church, but of Christ Jesus by divine will; and Timothy stands with him simply as “the brother.” Again, the assembly at Colosse are also characterized not only as “saints and faithful,” as the Ephesians were, but as “faithful brethren.” It is evident that here again, while all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, this term “brethren” brings out their relations to one another, as the others suppose God's grace and their faith if not fidelity.1 His own apostolic place is named with quiet dignity and in the evident appropriateness for all that follows.

It has been well observed that the apostle quite omits anything answering to the magnificent introduction with which he begins his Ephesian Epistle. (Chap. 1:3-14) There was a check on his spirit; he felt the danger that threatened the Colossians. How could he then at once break forth into an unhindered strain of blessing? The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and deals with hearts and consciences. Still, if that high tone of worship could not find a place here with propriety, there is immediate thanksgiving. “We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ always when praying for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and love which ye have toward all the saints, on account of the hope that is laid up for you in the heavens, of which ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel that is present with you, even as also in all the world it is bearing fruit and growing even as also among you, from the day when ye heard and knew the grace of God in truth: even as ye learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow-bondman, who is a servant of Christ, faithful for you, that also declared to us your love in the Spirit.” (Ver. 7, 8.)

The apostle had heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus that was in the Ephesians, and their love toward all the saints, which drew out his heart in thanksgiving and prayer. He knew them personally and well, having labored with deep blessing in their midst; but it was sweet to hear of the working of the Spirit among them. So of the Colossians, though not known thus, he had similar tidings, for which he could thank God always in his prayers for them.

But is not the difference striking between the two as exemplified in his manner of presenting the hope? In Ephesians it is the hope of God's calling, the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. What can be more profound or boundless? Here he could scarcely say less. Their hope was laid up, it was safe, it was “in the heavens,” not (spite of philosophy or of ascetic ordinances) on the earth. Of all these they had to beware, whatever their looks and promises. Of their proper hope he would remind them, recalling them to the heavens where Christ is, the true and only deliverance from all the workings of mind in divine things and from earthly religiousness.

This heavenly hope, blessed as it is, was nothing new to them: they had heard it before in the word of the truth of the gospel. What the apostle taught would not weaken or undermine, but confirm that which they had heard in the good news which converted them originally, or (as he here styles it, to give it all possible weight in presence of their straining after novelties) “in the word of the truth of the gospel.” It was not intellectual groping, but “the word” definitely sent to them, God's revelation; it was not dabbling in legal forms, but “the truth,” the truth of the gospel. The law was given by Moses; but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. The gospel came to them, yea, was there present with them, no more changing than He does who is its sine and substance. Real truth, even when new, never sets aside the old, but on the contrary supplies missing links, deepens the foundations and enlarges the sphere. Had their philosophy, had their novel restrictions (chap. ii.) increased their sense of the value of the gospel? Had those things exalted Christ? There is no doubt what the effect of Paul's teaching would be either in general or in this epistle very specially.

Further, the gospel being thus the display of God's goodness in Christ, not the measure of human duty nor a system of religious shadows, its theater according to God's intentions is not a single land or family, but “all the world,” and its operation is not condemning and killing, but

producing fruit and growing, even as among the saints at Colosse. Was there this fruit-bearing, and expansion too, since they had taken up their newfangled notions and legal ways? The gospel is both productive of fruit and has propagative energy. This addition of its growth ( ) is lost to the common text, having been omitted in inferior copies. That it is genuine cannot be fairly questioned. Certainly both were known from the day they heard and really knew the grace of God in truth. And this gives the blessed apostle opportunity, as was his wont, to strengthen the hands of one who was Christ's minister and faithful on their behalf, “Epaphras, our beloved fellow-bondman,” as he is here affectionately called. The speculative views, the Judaistic forms, had, no doubt, their exponents, who would seek to ingratiate themselves at a faithful laborer's expense. We can readily conceive that the word thus commending Epaphras was needed at Colosse.

Scripture is throughout a moral book. God speaks to us according to this, not according to the (after all) petty discoveries of science. I call it petty, because it is only occupied with material things. All knowledge is the proof of ignorance; for what a man has learned, he did not know before. Yet, if he has rightly learned it, it was before, and he did not know it. As Pascal has said, All matter never produced a thought, and all intellect never produced charity.

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 1:9-18, Notes on

In the last portion we saw how the apostle could speak of the effects of the gospel from the day they had heard it and knew the grace of God in truth. Grace is not like the law. The ten words are chiefly negative. The law, for the most part, deals with what is evil and condemns it; but the gospel reveals Christ as a quickening power, and strengthening and fruit-producing power. Being a principle of life, it expands and grows as well as produces fruit, as the apostle describes it, “and bringeth forth fruit [and increaseth] since the day ye heard it,” &c.

But now he says, “For this cause we also, since the day we heard it [heard of this living witness to the power of the gospel], do not cease to pray for you.” This is a beautiful expression of the apostle's love which, spite of fear which he justly entertained about the tendencies of these Colossian saints, still only drew him out in prayer for them the more. “And to desire (or ask) that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will.” They had shown rather the reverse of this; they had proved a void in their hearts, which they had in vain sought by legal ordinances and philosophy to fill up. Nothing but an intelligent and growing acquaintance with Christ can satisfy the renewed heart. The very mercy that delivers a soul becomes a danger unless Christ Himself be the maintained, habitual object. Alas! the freedom which the gospel brings may be used to take things easily, and, more or less, retain or gain the world; but where this is the case, it is seldom a soul possesses any large measure of spiritual enjoyment, and it is never accompanied by solid peace. The soul becomes thus unsettled and uncertain. These oscillations may go on for a certain time, until God carry on the work more deeply in the heart. The Colossians were in some such state; they had not steadily advanced to a fuller knowledge of God's will: consequently Satan found means to trouble them. They had seen the first precious display of grace: it was real but not deep; still, knowing the grace of God in truth, is not the same thing as being filled with the knowledge or full knowledge of His will.

The law never gives that in the least degree; it is a righteous interdict upon man's will. Thus there is only one of the commandments—I mean the law about the sabbath-day—which has not distinctly this character, which never can form a Christian's ways. We want the bracing of the man morally to all that is good. How is this to be effected? As there is in Christ the communication of life, so also from Him comes the filling with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. The believer is not treated by God as a horse or a mule which have no understanding, but as an intelligent and loving being who is brought into fellowship with God. He would not be a delivered man if his own will ruled him; but this is the very reverse of being filled with the knowledge of God's will, and therefore it is that the apostle prays for them that they may be.

In Ephesians, though we read in wonderful terms about God's will (chap. 1.) the apostle did not as here require to ask the knowledge of it for them. There was an apprehension of heart in them that did not need that the apostle should thus pray for them. He does desire for them both a deeper knowledge of their standing, and a richer enjoyment of Christ within, that they might be filled with the fullness of God—“strengthened with might by his Spirit.” But to be filled with the knowledge of His will, as we have it here, evidently has to do with practical walk, “that ye might walk worthy of the Lord.” In other words, in the Colossians there is an important practical hearing upon the walk; it is more the forming of the child; it is the strengthening and guiding of one that can but feebly walk, to help it along. In Ephesians, it is the communication of the God and Father of Christ to His children, who are now no longer babes, but full-grown men. Hence, there we have the family relations, feelings, estates, interests, responsibilities, everything. The Colossians had been misled by the thoughts of teachers who were themselves far astray. Though the saints there were earnest, still there was something that blinded their eyes. “If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.” They must have been governed by their own thoughts, else they would surely have rejected these false notions. It is a simple truth, but very important to observe, that what is presented as God's will necessarily forms the mind, and consequently the walk, of a Christian man. If I am misled as to the mind or objects of God, the effect will be most fatal practically; and the more earnest, the farther one goes astray. But the apostle had prayed for the Colossians, and still continued, “that they might be filled with this full knowledge of him.” I do not the least doubt that in this passage there is a contrast with the walk of one who, however well-disposed, is under law. The more the Christian knows God's will, which is good as well as holy, happiness grows and strength too; whereas law works so as to produce misery and convince of utter weakness. No doubt if there were a deep sense of the presence of God, it would make but little difference with whom we might be, worldly men or children of God. Of course there would be a difference in our bearing to them according to their relation to God or ignorance of Him; but as a fact, we are always deeply affected by the company in which we are, we affect and are affected by those we are thrown with. Therefore, it is evident that when Christ was a revealed person before the soul, and just in proportion as the believer realized his right relationship to Him, so would his walk be. If I know my place as bound to Him, having Him as the object of my heart, and that He is my Head and Bridegroom, it is clear a totally different walk will be the result. The measure and character of the walk among the children of God is formed by the measure of our acquaintance with Christ, where the flesh is sufficiently judged to enjoy it.

But mark again that all through, until we come a little farther down, the apostle does not touch upon the matters in which they had been faulty. In the middle of chapter 2 he tells them plainly wherein they were to blame. This is very important for us to observe; because, if our aim be really the good and deliverance and help of souls, we should see what God's way is of meeting souls and enabling them to escape the snare. The way we best learn is by observing and cleaving to the guidance of the Holy Ghost as shown us in such scriptures as these. It is a rebuke to one's own too frequent bearing toward others, when we think of the marvelous grace and the slowness of the apostle in coming to

what people call the point. I have no doubt there is much to learn in this; and so much was it the case, that from the beginning of this epistle we might almost think these Colossians were in a very delightful condition. The apostle is most careful to approach gradually that which pained him and must pain them. He is sapping and milling, as it were, to take the citadel; but it is slow work, though sure.

There is another expression here that is well worthy of our notice: “That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing.” It is not worthy of the gospel, neither is it worthy of our calling, &e. These are not the ways in which it is put here. The Ephesians were sufficiently clear of this evil influence and could be instructed freely in the calling of God to which they were called; and therefore he says there “that they might walk worthy of the vocation,” &c. But he says to the Colossians, “worthy of the Lord.” It would not be so easy for them to get rid of the effects of occupation with philosophy and ordinances. The Ephesians had been kept quite clear of this error, and therefore they are exhorted to walk worthy of what they knew was their place.

As the Lord Jesus is pointed to here, so “unto all pleasing” is the measure; it is not as pleasing us or others, but pleasing Him. Now this is wholly different from the law, which just asked so much and no more. The ways of grace were to be unlimited, “worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing.” Therefore he adds immediately, “being fruitful in every good work.” It is all positive and not merely negative like the requirements of the law. “Increasing by the full knowledge of him” here appears to be the thought. It refers to the means of Christian growth. I think the “wisdom and spiritual understanding” means a perception of what is good and wise in God's sight, apart from its being His express command. I might do a thing simply because another wished it, and of course this is quite right where there is due authority. For instance, my father may bid me do such or such a thing, and I may do it without knowing why; but here it is my Father who at the same time skews me the importance of it. Thus “wisdom” sees the beauty and propriety of any given thing and “spiritual understanding” takes the right application. One seizes the cause, the other is occupied with the effect. Hence then the gospel differed from the law. Whether a person entered into the meaning of the law or not, he obeyed simply because God ordered This does not rise to the nature of the Christian's obedience, which enjoys the unfolding of the mind of God in Christ, so that one not only sees His authority, but also its admirably perfect character and its gracious effects. It is quite right a subject, a servant, a minor should learn to obey, if it were only for the sake of obedience. But this is not the Christian principle. The obedience of a Christian is not the blind leading the blind, nor is it the seeing leading the blind, but rather the seeing leading the seeing. But there is very much more in this. It is not merely that people are quickened and bear fruit, but besides that they grow either by or into a deeper knowledge of God Himself. That deepening acquaintance with God, which goes along with the knowledge of His will, is a very important thing in the path of obedience. One knows God better, one enters into His character better, one learns Himself intimately. Another thing which is of great importance, is that there is not only the growing knowledge, but the being strengthened with all might according to the power of His glory; for that is the idea—it is not “His glorious power,” but the power of His glory. It supposes that the glory of Christ has a most decided effect, as the way in which strength is formed or communicated.

If I look at Christ here on the earth, I see Him in weakness and shame and rejection, but in the deepest grace withal, and no where so much as on the cross; and although we cannot do without it (indeed Christ everywhere is unspeakably precious and absolutely necessary for us), yet for the Christian the place of strength is to look at Christ risen and glorified. No doubt this thought of Christ as one down here in this world is what draws out the affections, even as the cross meets the need of conscience; but neither gives strength in itself, neither is intended of God to give all that we want. Hence while those who know Christ at all will surely find in Him life and blessing, yet they are never strong where His earthly path is all that occupies their hearts. What then supplies our need as to this? Such should weigh what is said in 2 Cor. 3: “We all with open face beholding as in a glass, the glory of the Lord are changed into the same image from glory to glory.” This gives practical power. So here the question of power connects itself with His glory. If sympathy be in question, it is always connected with His life down here, for instance in Hebrews, though Christ is spoken of at the right hand of God, &c., yet it is chiefly as once tempted in all points like us, yet without sin, touched, with a feeling of our infirmities. This is most comforting as to the power of sympathy. Eternal life and strength are two very different things. The only idea with many is following Christ as an example. Of course it is admirable; but what is to give power? I must be in relationship with God first, a possessor of eternal life, and then power is wanted. I am not in the position till I know redemption through the blood of Christ, and power is only found in Christ risen and glorified. The spring of power is not in looking at what He was down here, but having the consciousness of the glory that is in Him, the power of that filling my own heart, and making the certainty of being with Him. I shall thus not shrink from the rejection that was Christ's portion down here, being strengthened “unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness.” It is an evil world that we are passing through; but we have this wonderful secret: we have the consciousness of better blessing we possess in Christ. Therefore, let me observe, it should be the very opposite of a man going through trial with his head bowed down. Let it be according to the power of His glory with joyfulness, “giving thanks unto the Father which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.”

This is a present meetness. Sharing the portion of the saints in light is a most wonderful favor; but the apostle does not hesitate to predicate it of these Colossians whom he was going to rebuke with all solemnity in the next chapter. Still he says the Father has qualified us for sharing the portion of the saints in light. It is purposely put “in light” to show how absolute is the effect of God's work in Christ. It is not simply the inheritance, because that would not of itself present the idea of unsparing holiness, as light does. Again, the portion of the saints in light is not upon the earth or in the heavens merely, but in the light where God dwells as such. Wondrous place for us! Our Father has made us meet for this. The effect of law is always to put God at a distance. Therefore here the Father is put forward. There are many persons who only look at God as the Creator and the Judge. Although they admit life in Christ, yet are they not at home with the Father. They make of Christ what the Papists make of the Virgin Mary. It is all false. This was what made the necessity of bringing the Father especially forward. In Ephesians it was not necessary to do so: they were intelligent in the truth. Here although the great object is to make Christ, the unqualified glory of Christ, to be that which shuts out ordinances, &c.; yet the apostle brings in the Father, sheaving that the Father was acting in His love. The combination of perfect love, and our being made meet for light now, is a wonderful truth. As to the light, the Christian is always in the light, but he may not always walk according to it. A Christian, if he sins, sins in the light, and this is what gives it such a daring character. He may be in a dark state himself practically, still he is always in the light. And it is precisely this which makes a Christian's sin to be so very serious. He is doing it in the presence of perfect love and in the presence of perfect light. There is therefore no excuse for it.

This blessing depends upon two things; first upon the effect of the blood of Christ in completely atoning for our sins, and next upon the fact that we have the life of Christ communicated to us, which life is capable of communing with God in the light. Both these gifts of grace are absolutely true of every Christian. He has the blood of Christ cleansing him as much as he ever can have, and he has life in Christ communicated to his soul as much as ever can be. What follows in after experience is simply having a deeper estimate of what Christ's blood has done and what He Himself is, who has shown us such infinite favor and done so much for us. Our Father has done more, as the apostle

shows further how we are thus qualified: “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness.” It is not merely a question of wicked works, but of the power of darkness; and how could they be delivered from Satan? He says they were delivered and, more than that, “translated into the kingdom of the Son of his love.” It is all perfectly done. The deliverance from the enemy of God is complete, and so is the translation into the kingdom of the Son of His love. “In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” “Through His blood” has been inserted in the vulgar text and followed in our version, but it really belongs to Ephesians. I do not doubt the copyists put it in here because it was there. There is greater fullness in Ephesians than in Colossians. Hence the former shows how we can be so blessed, spite of our sins entering into the statement of the account there. But here it is just summing up the blessing, “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; who is the image of the invisible God.”

The object evidently is not so much to dwell upon the work of Christ, but to show His personal glory. Christ is never said to be the likeness of the invisible God, because it might imply that He was not really God. This would be fatally false; for He is God (and without it God's glory and redemption are vain), but yet He is the image of the invisible God, because He is the only person of the Godhead that has declared Him. (See John 1:18.) The Holy Ghost does not manifest God. He does manifest His power, but not Himself, but Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” He has presented God in full perfection; He is the truth. He who has seen Him has seen the Father. He was always the One who made God manifest. The word “image,” as has been remarked, is continually used in Scripture for representation. Such is the first thought. Christ is the image of the invisible God.

The next glory is that He is the first-born of all creation. This seems obviously contrasted with His being the image of the invisible God. Christ as truly became a man as He was and is God. He was made flesh. He is never, nor could be, said to be made God. He partook of flesh and blood in time, but from everlasting He is God. Having shown that He was the image of the invisible God, the apostle then speaks of Him as the first-born of all creation. How could this be? Adam was the prototype. We might have thought he was first; but here, as elsewhere, the title of first-born is taken in the sense of dignity rather than of mere priority in time. Adam was the first man; but was not nor could be the first-born. How could Christ, so late in His birth here below, be said to be the first-born? The truth is, if Christ became a man and entered the ranks of creation, He could not be anything else. He is the Son and heir. Just so we are now by grace said to be the Church “of the first-born,” although there were saints before the Church. It is a question of rank not of date. Christ is truly first-born of all creation; He never took the creature place until He became a man, and then must needs be the first-born. Even if he had been the last-born literally, He must still be the first-born; for it has nothing to do with the epoch of His advent, but with His intrinsic dignity. All others were but the children of the fallen man Adam, and could in no sense be the first-born. He was as truly man as they but with a wholly peculiar glory. What makes it most manifest is, that He is here declared to be first-born of all creation, “for by Him were all things created.” This makes the ground perfectly plain. He was first-born of all creation, because He w he entered the sphere of manhood's creaturedom was the Creator, and therefore must necessarily be the first-born. This is the plain and sure meaning of the passage, in the strongest way confirming the deity of Christ, instead of weakening it in the least, as some have conceived through strange misunderstanding. Hence they have changed the rendering to “born before all creation.” It is impossible to take it so. But indeed there is no need for a change. God's word is wiser than men. There is no Scripture which shows His dignity more than this.

First, then, He is said to be the image of the invisible God. Then we have His human place, in which He was first-born; because, being God, it could not be otherwise. In Hebrews, He is said to be constituted heir, because He was the Son of God. But here it is “all things were created in virtue of Him;” it is not merely “by” Him but in virtue of His own divine power.

“For by him were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created by Him and for Him.” All this reaches to things of which we know little, and beyond our ken. As we had before what was in virtue of His power; so now it is by Him, because Christ was both one who acted in His own divine right, and also one who acted instrumentally for God the Father's glory. All things were created by Him. The word created is different; in one case it is a past action, but in the other it is the present effect of a past action, the first being the power that made to exist, the second rather the present result of it. “And he is before all things,” &c. Not merely was He before all things, but before all (God only, of course, excepted). Nor was it merely that all things were, but they were created for His pleasure. “And by [or, in virtue of] him all things consist.” In virtue of Him gives a clearer and more intimate idea. The object here is to take away all vagueness in exalting Christ.

But, again. “He is the head of the body, the Church, who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence.” We shall find a reason for this in what follows. It is interesting to see that there are two very distinct firstborns: first-born of all creation, because He is the Creator; and first-born from the dead, as a plain and weighty matter of fact. Thus Christ is not only the head of creation as man, but He is first-born from the dead as risen. It is in connection with this that He is Head of the Church. He was not in this relationship upon earth; He was not so simply as taking humanity. Incarnation is an entirely distinct truth from His headship of the Church, which involves the further truth of union. It is evident that His headship of the body, the Church, is introduced by His being risen from the dead, and having taken His place in heaven. But Colossians does not at once begin with the heavenly place of Christ. Ephesians presents Him plainly as risen and seated as Head. Here it is more general, and does not speak of His being in heaven; He is “the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence.” Many confound union with incarnation; but union is not His taking flesh and blood here below, but our being made members of His body, now that He is risen and glorified. There could have been no union with Him until death and resurrection, and the Holy Ghost was given to unite us with Him in that risen condition; then and not before we have the body, the assembly. He had a human body, of course; but the mystical body is formed by the Holy Ghost sent down after He rose from the dead. The one was connected with the earth, the other with heaven.

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 1:19-23, Notes on

With the pre-eminence of Christ in all things two great considerations are connected. First, all fullness was pleased to dwell in Him. It was not a partial nor any manifestation of God: this might have been in any man; but here all fullness was pleased in Him to dwell. This is the truth of Christ's person, the glory of the incarnate Lord. “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” “If I by the Spirit of God cast out devils, the kingdom of God is come unto you.” “The Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works.” Yet we know it was always by the power of the Holy Ghost that everything was done and said. So truly was all the fullness pleased to dwell in Him.

We observed in an earlier verse that it was because of His being a divine person that He could be said to be the first-born of all creation. It was founded upon the fact that He was God who created all and sustains all. But here there is more. In Him all fullness was pleased to dwell. It was not alone a question of acting, but of dwelling, whether He acted or not. Thus it is a very full and rich statement indeed.

But again (ver. 20), there is another unfolding of the truth which sets forth His glory, another reason assigned for His indisputable pre-eminence. By Him, the Christ, is reconciliation effected. All fullness of the Godhead was pleased in Him to dwell and by Him to reconcile all things unto God. There is a peculiar phraseology in the passage, which may have led the English translators to put in “Father” in verse 19. If the conjecture be correct, they did it not so much because of this verse as of the following, the 20th— “to reconcile.... unto himself.” They could not make out how it could be unto Him unless it were the Father; but I think the context is purposely so framed, because it is intended to show us, unless I am greatly mistaken, that all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Christ, not one person of that divine fullness acting to the exclusion of the rest. They all had one counsel, not barely similar counsels, as so many creatures might, but one and the same. Hence the object is not to contrast one person with another, but to state that all the fullness was pleased in Him to dwell. It is put in this general form purposely. Then the Spirit of God glides with a scarce perceptible transition from His being the God-man to the work God has done by Him; so that you cannot separate clearly the two thoughts, as far as the construction goes in . Afterward, as before, the person of Christ is distinct and prominent.

But man was utterly gone, hostile, dead. No moral glory even of the Godhead in Christ could win him back. A deeper work was needed. “Having made peace by the blood of his cross by him to reconcile all things unto himself.” All creation was ruined in the fall; and here we have the vast plan of God first sketched before us, the reconciliation of all things, not of men but of things. It was the good pleasure of the Godhead to reconcile all things unto God. Even the Word made flesh, even all the fullness dwelling in Him, failed to reach the desperate case. There was rebellion, there was war. Peace must be made—it could only be made by the blood of Christ's cross. In a word, reconciliation is not the fruit of the Incarnation, most blessed as it is; for it was altogether powerless, as far as that is concerned. It brings before us grace and truth in Christ—God Himself in the most precious display of holy love. Nothing is in itself more important than, for a person who has found Christ, to delight in and dwell upon Him and His moral ways here below. Everything was in exquisite harmony in Him; matchless grace shone out wherever He moved. All was perfect, and yet would it all have been fruitless; for man was as the barren sand. Therefore we have another and wholly distinct step— “by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself.” All the fullness dwelling in Him was insufficient: it brought God to man, not man to God. All the Godhead was pleased to dwell in Him, and not as a mere passing thing. This was quite independent of the anointing in due time by the Holy Ghost. It was the continual delight of the whole Godhead to dwell in Him as man. But so far gone was man that this could not deliver him: sin cannot be so got over. Even God Himself coming down to earth in Christ's person, His unselfish goodness, His unwearied patient love, not anything found in Christ nor all together could dispel sin or righteously recover the sinner. Therefore it became manifestly a question of reconciliation “through the blood of His cross.”

All things then are to be reconciled, as we see; peace has been made “by the blood of His cross.” It is sweet and assuring to think that all has been done to secure the gathering of all things round Christ. It is merely now a question of the time suited in God's wisdom for the manifestation of Christ at the head of all.

As far as the efficacious work is concerned, nothing more is to be done. Meanwhile God is calling in the saints who are to share all along with Christ. As it is said in Rom. 8 all creation groaneth, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. They are the first fruits. All was subjected to vanity by sin; but now He who came down, God manifest in the flesh, has taken upon Himself the burden of sin, and has made peace by the blood of His cross. Thus He has done all that is needed for God and man. Morally all is done, the price is paid, the work is accepted, so that here too we may say “all things are ready.” God would be now justified in purging from the face of creation every trace of misery and decay; if He waits, it is but to save more souls. His longsuffering is salvation. The darkness and the weakness will disappear when our Lord comes with His saints. For the world, His appearing with them in glory is the critical time. The revelation of Christ and the Church from heaven is not the epoch of the rapture which comes first. The revelation is the manifestation of the Bridegroom and the Bride then glorified before the world.

Thus having brought in the universal reconciliation of created things, the apostle turns to that with which it was so intimately connected “and you that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled.” I do not doubt there is an intended contrast. The reconciliation of all things is not yet accomplished. The foundation is laid; but it is not applied. But reconciliation is applied to us who believe. Us who were in this fearful condition, “now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death.” Again, observe, the body of His flesh, the incarnation in itself did not, could not avail, no, nor all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Him bodily. For guilty man it must be “through death.” It was not through Christ's birth or living energy, but “through death” —not by His doing, divinely blessed as it all was, but by His suffering. “The blood of his cross” brings in much more the idea of a price paid for peace. His “death” seems to be more suitable as the ground of our reconciliation. At any rate “in the body of His flesh through death” contradicts the notion that incarnation was the means of reconciliation. This brings in moral considerations and shows the most solemn vindication of God, the righteous basis for our remission and peace and clearance from all charge and consequence of sin.

“To present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in His sight.” Blessed as the death of Christ is, so that God Himself can find no flaw in us or charge against us, which is the meaning here—so perfectly efficacious is this death of Christ in our favor, yet still it supposes our holding fast— “if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” Now I take that word “if” decidedly as a condition and nothing else.

It is quite different from chapter 3, “If ye then be risen with Christ,” &e. It is the same word, but there should always be a regard to the context. Here, I believe, there is a condition implied, whereas chapter 3 simply reasons and exhorts from an allowed fact. This would not make sense in chapter 1.

Unless under specially modifying circumstances, every man, almost every person before conversion is naturally disposed to be an Arminian, i.e. to build on his own righteousness; but when he finds himself undone, yet justified by faith of God's pure grace in Christ, there is often a tendency to rebound violently over to the opposite extreme. When he becomes more matured in the truth, it is no longer a question of party views, but of that which is infinitely larger, even of God's mind as revealed in His word. The unconditional parts should be taken in all their absoluteness, and the conditional should be pressed in all their force. The apostle does not bring this in as a condition of our justification. There grace justifies the ungodly; a condition cannot enter. It would be a denial of grace. For all that, there are unquestionable conditions; but in what? God does not let us certainly know who they are among those who profess the name of Jesus that really believe in Him. Some there

were even in those early days who followed the truth for a season and then gave it up. Others were slighting the pure gospel for philosophy and ordinances, or at least were disposed to add them to it. Hence the apostle says, “If ye continue in the faith.” There he warns, no doubt, that those born of God continue in the faith; but along with this, other things have to be borne in mind. May not persons truly born of God waver and even slip for a season into error? Now I cannot say of any who abandon the faith that they are holy and blameless in the sight of God. One may have a hope from previous facts perhaps; but as long as a soul is thus led of the enemy away from fundamental truth, I cannot, I ought not, to speak too confidently of him as of God. It would be a trifling with the unbelief and increasing the danger to his soul by making light of it. Therefore the Apostle says,” If ye continue.” A similar principle applies to him who lives under a cloud of unjudged sin.

So in 1 Cor. 5 we see that a man guilty of gross sin and therefore put away is to be treated as a “wicked person,” although the Holy Ghost in the same chapter speaks of the aim that his spirit might be saved, &c. And the second epistle proves that, spite of all, he was a true believer and on his repentance to be restored to fellowship. The Holy Ghost of course knows perfectly; but we can only judge what God permits to be brought forth before our eyes. This is of practical value to our souls; for it is often difficult to behave rightly to a person out of communion. We are apt to think too slightly of such cases, and what is the effect of thus treating them? They drag on outside. There is feeble power within of restoration. The sin is superficially judged. If we feel it much, we desire earnestly to get the person back. It ought to be a pain, a deep grief, whenever souls are put away from the Lord's table. Our desire would then be continually to know them and see them restored.

It is not, If ye continue in faith, but “in the faith.”

When Paul speaks about the common faith, he means the thing believed. So when he speaks about the “one faith,” he does not refer to the reality of our faith, but to the objective truth received. Real believers or not, if they forsook the faith, how could they be owned as such? Modern times have greatly thrown people upon what is inward or subjective: whereas “the faith” is revelation that is offered to faith, outside the man. It is a great mercy that in these last days, to truth, the truth in the person of Christ, great prominence has been given. One cannot absolutely pronounce on an individual's faith, but one can judge of the faith he owns, and tell whether what he professes is the truth or not. Love would assume, if a man professes the faith and there is nothing clean contrary to it in his words and ways, that it is real faith. A person may be sincere in what is wrong, or insincere in what is right; but the truth is an unbending standard. If one judged on the ground of an individual's heart, one could never speak at all; for of that who can pronounce but God? If one acts on the ground of the faith, the moment man goes against the truth, giving up what he professed, we are bound to judge it, leaving the question of his heart's faith in God's hands.

The apostle urges also, “and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” The Colossian saints were in danger of slipping away, for they were striving to make themselves holier by asceticism or other efforts, not by the application of Christ to judge themselves. But no, says the apostle; it is in the body of His flesh through death that you are presented holy and unblameable, if ye continue in the faith, &c., and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye have heard, &c. What is “the hope of the gospel?” It is in a heavenly Christ who died for us giving us the assurance of being with Himself there. The hope of Israel (one can hardly say of the law), was the earth; this “hope of the gospel” is above. The Colossians were most unwittingly but practically losing sight of their heavenly hope, because the thought of adding to Christ philosophy or ordinances tends to deprive one of Christ. He calls it the gospel which they had heard; he would not admit of any other. It was that which had been “preached to every creature which is under heaven, whereof I Paul am made a minister.” How the apostle puts forward that which some then, as now, would make cheap—the being a minister of the gospel! He does not regard what would exalt himself in the eyes of the would-be professionists, but what gives glory to God and His grace in Christ. There is a stress accordingly upon “I” here.

The Body, the Church, Body, the Church, The: 3

Col. 1:18

The character, also, of the Abrahamic blessing of the Gentiles is totally different from that of “the mystery.” “In blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, etc.” (Gen. 22). All the nations are to be blessed in the Seed; but they are, and are here regarded as being, distinct from it. They are no more to be confounded with the Seed, so as to form one common body, than are the enemies whose gate is to be the possession of Israel. It and the nations are assuredly to inherit a blessing. But if it be the same blessing, will any one maintain that it is after the same mode or in the same measure? If it be so—if the seed and all the nations of the earth are blessed indiscriminately and alike, where is the marked and characteristic prerogative of the seed of Abraham? Or is there, in truth, no peculiar privilege for his seed after all? If, on the other hand, it be not so, and the seed is to have its own proper promised place by divine favor, higher than all the nations who are blessed in Christ, then is the oath to Abraham most clearly distinguished from “the mystery” wherein no such differences exist, but the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and joint-partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel.

Let it be repeated, that Eph. 2; 3 do not teach the permanent and unlimited setting aside of Jewish exaltation above the Gentile. To such a superiority in this world the Jews had a lawful title, until Christ, in rejection, ascended into heaven; and such a superiority will be theirs when He returns again. But there is the abolition of everything of the sort for that which spans the interim, in other words, for the intermediate calling of the church. Because the church is not a mere aggregate of units or of believing persons throughout all ages, but a special body gathered by virtue of the Holy Ghost, now present and dwelling in them as a temple too, for association with the heavenly glory of Christ; as the redeemed Jews in the millennium will be the nearest and most favored objects of His earthly rule, when He appears in glory.

It is, then, the personal presence of the Holy Ghost, descended from heaven, which acts as the power of the unity established here below in the church: a unity not merely of life—of doctrine—of service, but of the Spirit; the unity formed and perpetuated by the Holy Ghost Himself (Eph. 4:3). The disciples, like saints before them, were believers before Pentecost; but they were then, and not before, united to Christ in heavenly places as His body. That which unites to Christ, constituting us members of His body, as Scripture so often declares, is not the faith which the Spirit communicates as He has ever done, but the Spirit Himself subsequently and personally given, as was the case at Pentecost.

Observe, it is not “unity of spirit.” This is the theme pressed upon the Philippians (Phil. 1:27): “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ; that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one

mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel;” and compare chap. 3:16. Nor has the apostle forgotten elsewhere to pray for the saints at Rome, that the God of patience and consolation would grant them to be like-minded one toward another according to Christ Jesus, that they might with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace as this surely is, the exhortation in Eph. 4 is of a higher order. It is not so much the spirit of themselves, or of one another that they were to think of; it is the Spirit given, the unity of the Spirit. Moreover, the apostle does not tell them to form a society by community of object, agreement of opinion, or likeness of manners. Certainly it was not an optional alliance which they were called upon to frame. The Spirit present makes the unity. Their business is, “endeavoring to keep (or, observe,) it in the bond of peace.” How humbling to man and exalting to God: how encouraging, wholesome, and strengthening for His saints!

To one who has entered, howsoever little, into the divine estimate of what the church is and will be in the counsels of God, or even of what the church originally was when, gazing into the heavenly face of Him Who loved her, she reflected by the Spirit somewhat of the light of God's glory which she had seen there, to the heart of such a one, grieving over the wreck of the deposit that was committed to the frail and treacherous hands of man, and humbled at his puny and ineffectual and proud efforts to repair the ruin which he can no longer disguise—to such, I say, oh! what a relief to know and feel that even here in the desert it is not “my flock,” nor “our church,” but the church of God, the body of Christ, the unity of the Spirit!

These are the living realities with which we have to do; and at all cost to repudiate in ourselves, or in others, corporately and individually, all that denies them. That single-eyed unflinching allegiance to the wideness of God's heart about His people must, in a time of general departure from Him, lead into an isolated path, I do not doubt, however paradoxical it may seem. That it may appear to be a severe exclusive narrowness, to those who are not weaned from the worldliness and unbelief of essays on a grand scale, is possible; but for the faithful there is no choice. “Let us go forth, therefore, unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach.”

None of course would deny that, as men, as sinners, as Jews or Gentiles, there are certain things possessed in common with others. There is a unity of mankind, as such or fallen, as under law and without law. There is a continuity in the administration of the promises dispensationally on earth, according to which Rom. 11 views, first, the Jews as the natural branches of the olive-tree; then, some of them broken off because of unbelief, and the Gentiles, or wild olive-tree, grafted among them; and afterward, upon the Gentiles not continuing in the goodness of God, the Jews grafted again into their own olive-tree.1 Again, there is a unity which dates higher up than the olive-tree of earthly witness—that of all the faithful, who, in the acknowledgment of common sin, look to a common Savior, as there will be a blessed and holy communion of such as have part in the first resurrection.

But all these varied groups are demonstrably distinct from “the unity of the Spirit.” With the redeemed, it is true, the Spirit had to do, inasmuch as He it is Who had given souls to believe God's salvation in Christ. This therefore was not, whereas the unity of the Spirit is, a new thing; for never before had He come to abide in sinners redeemed, and thus to make them one with Christ glorified on high and one with each other here below. Satan had his union of Jews and Gentiles in the cross of the Son of God; and in that cross the foundation was laid for God's union, effected by the presence and indwelling of the Spirit in those who enjoy the exceeding riches of the grace of God in His kindness toward them through Christ Jesus. “There is one body and one Spirit.”

Another remark, connecting itself with the foregoing, needs to be made. Those who form the church, whatever may be their distinctive endowments, share many blessings with all saints who ever have been and ever may be. Election, redemption, faith, saintship, and heirship in the kingdom are doubtless our privileges; but they are not the exclusive property of the church. They are common to all believers. So true is this, that they may be traced in the spared and blessed Gentiles of the striking scene described in Matt. 25:31-46.

There the Son of man is supposed to be already come and seated upon the throne of His glory, and He separates, among all the Gentiles ( ) gathered before Him, the sheep from the goats. The gospel of the kingdom had been preached, it may be observed, for a witness to all those Gentiles ( ) before the end came; and the ground of the sentence is laid in the reception or rejection of those whom Jesus, as the King (for His royal rights are now enforced, displayed, and acknowledged), designates as His brethren, a class evidently distinct from, though coming in contact with, the sheep and the goats. To the sheep, set at His right hand, the King says “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” That these are believing souls, redeemed by the blood of Christ, none perhaps would dispute; and the passage affirms that the kingdom which they inherit was prepared for them from the foundation of the world: terms which differ indeed from those in Eph. 1 (which show how the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ chose us in Him before the foundation of the world), but sufficiently decisive of the fact that God prepared a special inheritance for these living Gentiles, whatever might be the small amount of their spiritual intelligence.

But if there are blessings common to all believers of every age, the Holy Ghost, on the other hand, could not personally come down, and abide in men on earth, according to the scriptural figure springing up in them as well as flowing out, until Jesus was glorified in heaven. But when He took His seat there as the exalted head, the Holy Ghost was sent down for the purpose of gathering a body for Christ.

This and this only is called in the Scriptures “"the church of God;” and its unity, hinting upon the baptism of the Holy Ghost, is, as we have seen, “the unity of the Spirit.” Matt. 16:18 is the first occurrence of the word “church,” i.e. assembly, in the New Testament. It is important to observe that there it is spoken of as a thing not merely unmanifested, and unordered, but not yet existing. It was not built, nor building yet: “upon this rock I will build my church.” Secondly, the promise that the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it cannot allude to the indefectibility, much less to the infallibility, of the church on earth. Thirdly, Christ's church is mentioned as altogether distinct from the kingdom of heaven, the keys of which (not of His church) the Lord promises to give to Peter. (To be continued, D. V.)

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 1:10-18

But mark again that all through, until we come a little farther down, the Apostle does not touch upon the matters in which they had been faulty. In the middle of Colossians 2 he tells them plainly wherein they were to blame. This is very important for us to observe; because, if our aim be really the good and deliverance and help of souls, we should see what God’s way is of meeting souls and enabling them to escape the

snare. And this we best learn by observing and cleaving to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as shown us in such scriptures as these.

It is a rebuke to one's own too frequent bearing toward others, when we think of the marvelous grace and the slowness of the Apostle in coming to what people call the point_ I have no doubt there is much to learn in this; and so much was it the case, that from the beginning of this epistle we might almost think these Colossians were in a very delightful condition. The Apostle is most careful to approach gradually that which pained him and must pain them. He is sapping and mining, as it were, to take the citadel; but it is slow work, though sure.

There is another expression here that is well worthy of our notice: "That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing." It is not worthy of the gospel, neither is it worthy of our calling. These are not the form of the exhortation here. The Ephesians were sufficiently clear of this evil influence and could be instructed freely in the calling of God to which they were called; and therefore he says there "that they might walk worthy of the vocation," and so forth. But he says to the Colossians, "worthy of the Lord." It would not be so easy for them to get rid of the effects of occupation with philosophy and ordinances. The Ephesians had been kept quite clear of this error, and therefore they are exhorted to walk worthy of what they knew to be their place.

As the Lord Jesus is pointed to here, so "unto all pleasing" is the measure; it is not as pleasing us or others, but pleasing Him. Now this is wholly different from the law, which just asked so much and no more. The ways of grace were to be unlimited, "worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing." Therefore he adds immediately, "being fruitful in every good work." It is all positive and not merely negative like the requirements of the law.

"Increasing by the full knowledge of Him" here appears to be the thought. It refers to the means of Christian growth. I think the "wisdom and spiritual understanding" means a perception of what is good and wise in God's sight, apart from its being His express command. I might do a thing simply because another wished it, and of course this is quite right where there is due authority. For instance, my father may bid me do such or such a thing, and I may do it without knowing why; but here it is my Father who at the same time shows me the importance of it. Thus "wisdom" sees the beauty and propriety of any given thing, and "spiritual understanding" takes the right application. One seizes the cause; the other is occupied with the effect.

In this then the gospel differed from the law. Whether a person entered into the meaning of the law or not, he obeyed simply because God ordered. This does not rise to the nature of the Christian's obedience, which enjoys the unfolding of the mind of God in Christ, so that one not only sees His authority, but also its admirably perfect character and its gracious effects. It is quite right that a subject, a servant, a minor, should learn to obey, if it were only for the sake of obedience. But this is not the Christian principle. The obedience of a Christian is not the blind leading the blind, nor is it the seeing leading the blind, but rather the seeing leading the seeing.

But there is very much more in this. It is not merely that people are quickened and bear fruit; but, besides that, they grow either by or into a deeper knowledge of God Himself. That deepening acquaintance with God, which goes along with the knowledge of His will, is a very important thing in the path of obedience. One knows God better, one enters into His character better, one learns Himself intimately. Another thing which is of great importance is, that there is not only the growing knowledge, but the being strengthened with all might according to the power of His glory; for this is the idea — it is not "his glorious power," but the power of His glory. It supposes that the glory of Christ has a most decided effect, as the way in which strength is formed or communicated.

If I look at Christ here on the earth, I see Him in weakness and shame and rejection, but in the deepest grace withal, and nowhere so much as on the cross; we cannot do without it, we would not if we could (indeed Christ everywhere is unspeakably precious and absolutely necessary for us); yet for the Christian the place of strength is to look at Christ risen and glorified. No doubt this thought of Christ as one down here in this world is what draws out the affections, even as the cross meets the need of the conscience; but neither gives strength in itself, neither is intended of God to give all that we want. Hence while those who know Christ at all will surely find in Him life and blessing, yet they are never strong where His earthly path is all that occupies their hearts.

What then supplies our need as to this? Such should weigh what is said in 2 Corinthians 3: "We all with open face beholding, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord are changed into the same image from glory to glory." This gives practical power. So here the question of power connects itself with His glory

. If sympathy be in question, it is always connected with His life down here; for instance, in Hebrews, though Christ is spoken of at the right hand of God, and so forth, yet it is as One who was once tempted in all points like us, sin excepted, and hence touched with a feeling of our infirmities. This is most comforting as to the power of sympathy. Eternal life and strength are two very different things.

The only idea with many is following Christ as an example. Of course it is admirable; but what is to give power? I must be in relationship with God first, a possessor of eternal life, and then power is wanted. I am not in the position till I know redemption through the blood of Christ, and power is only found in Christ risen and glorified. The spring of power is not in looking at what He was down here, but having the consciousness of the glory that is in Him, the power of that filling my own heart, and making the certainty of being with Him.

I shall thus not shrink from the rejection that was Christ's portion down here, "being strengthened... unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness." It is an evil world that we are passing through; but we have this wonderful secret: we have the consciousness of better blessing we possess in Christ. Therefore, let me observe, it should be the very opposite of a man going through trial with his head bowed down. Let it be according to the power of His glory with joyfulness, "giving thanks unto the Father which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."

This is a present meetness. Sharing the portion of the saints in light is a most wonderful favor; but the Apostle does not hesitate to predicate it of these Colossians whom he was going to rebuke with all solemnity in the next chapter. Still he says the Father has qualified us for sharing the portion of the saints in light. It is purposely put "in light" to show how absolute is the effect of God's work in Christ. It is not simply the inheritance, because that would not of itself present the idea of unsparing holiness, as light does. Again, the portion of the saints in light is not upon the earth or in the heavens merely, but in the light where God dwells as such. Wondrous place for us! Our Father has made us meet for this. The effect of law is always to put God at a distance. Therefore here the Father is put forward.

There are many persons who only look at God as the Creator and the Judge. Although they admit life in Christ, yet are they not at home with the Father. They make of Christ what the Papists make of the virgin Mary. It is all false. This was what made the necessity of bringing the

Father especially forward. In Ephesians it was not necessary to do so; they were intelligent in the truth. Here, although the great object is to make Christ, the unqualified glory of Christ, to be that which shuts out ordinances, and so forth, yet the Apostle brings in the Father, showing that the Father was acting in His love.

The combination of perfect love and our being made meet for light now is a wonderful truth. As to the light, the Christian is always in the light; but he may not always walk according to it. A Christian, if he sins, sins in the light; and this is what gives it such a daring character. He may be in a dark state himself practically; still, he is always in the light. And it is precisely this which makes a Christian's sin to be so very serious. He is doing it in the presence of perfect love and in the presence of perfect light. There is therefore no excuse for it.

This blessing depends upon two things: first, upon the effect of the blood of Christ in completely atoning for our sins; and next, upon the fact that we have the life of Christ communicated to us, which life is capable of communing with God in the light. Both these gifts of grace are absolutely true of every Christian. He has the blood of Christ cleansing him as much as he ever can have, and he has life in Christ communicated to his soul as much as ever can be. That which follows in after experience as regards this (for I speak not of service, but of growth in intelligence) is simply having a deeper estimate of what Christ's blood has done and what He Himself is, who has shown us such infinite favor and done so much for us.

Our Father has done more, as the Apostle shows further how we are thus qualified: "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness." It is not merely a question of wicked works, but of the power of darkness; how could we, then, be delivered from Satan? He says they were delivered and, more than that, "translated into the kingdom of the Son of His love." It is all perfectly done. The deliverance from the enemy of God is complete, and so is the translation into the kingdom of the Son of His love. "In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." "Through His blood" has been inserted in the vulgar text and followed in our version, but it really belongs to Ephesians. I do not doubt the copyists put it in here because it was there. There is greater fullness in Ephesians than in Colossians. Hence the former shows us how we can be so blessed, spite of our sins entering into the statement of the account there. But here it is just summing up the blessing, "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; who is the image of the invisible God."

The object evidently is not so much to dwell upon the work of Christ as to bring out His personal glory. Christ is never said to be the likeness of the invisible God, because it might imply that He was not really God. This would be fatally false; for He is God (and without it God's glory and redemption are vain), but yet He is the image of the invisible God, because He is the only Person of the Godhead that has declared Him (see John 1:18). The Holy Spirit does not manifest God. He does manifest His power, but not Himself; but Christ is "the image of the invisible God." He has presented God in full perfection; He is the truth objectively. He who has seen Him has seen the Father. He was always the Word, the One who made God manifest. The word "image," as has been remarked, is continually used in Scripture for representation. Such is the first thought. Christ is the image of the invisible God.

The next glory is that He is the first-born of all creation. This seems obviously contrasted with His being the image of the invisible God. Christ as truly became a man as He was and is God. He was made flesh. He is never, nor could be, said to be made God. He partook of flesh and blood in time, but from everlasting He is God. Having shown that He was the image of the invisible God, the Apostle then speaks of Him as the first-born of all creation. How could this be? Adam was the prototype; we might have thought he was first. But here, as elsewhere (Psalm 89:28), the title of first-born is taken in the sense of dignity rather than of mere priority in time.

Adam was the first man, but was not nor could be the firstborn. How could Christ, so late in His birth here below, he said to be the first-born? The truth is, if Christ became a man and entered the ranks of creation,1 He could not be anything else. He is the Son and Heir. Just so we are now by grace said to be the church "of the firstborn," although there were saints before the church. It is a question of rank, not of date. Christ is truly first-born of all creation; He never took the creature place until He became a man, and then must needs be the first-born. Even if He had been the last — born literally, He must still be the first-born; for it has nothing to do with the epoch of His advent, but with His intrinsic dignity.

All others were but the children of the fallen man Adam, and could in no sense be the first-born. He was as truly man as they, but with a wholly peculiar glory. What makes it most manifest is, that He is here declared to be first-born of all creation, "for by Him were all things created." This makes the ground perfectly plain. He was first-born of all creation, because He who entered the sphere of human creaturedom was the Creator, and therefore must necessarily be the first-born. This is the plain and sure meaning of the passage, in the strongest way confirming the deity of Christ, instead of weakening it in the least, as some have conceived through strange misunderstanding. Hence these have changed the rendering to "born before all creation." It is unnatural to take it so, spite of some ancients and moderns. But indeed there is no need for a change. God's Word is wiser than men. There is no scripture which assumes His dignity more than this.

First, then, He is said to be the image of the invisible God. Then we have His human place, in which He was first-born; because, being God, it could not be otherwise. In Hebrews, He is said to be constituted heir of all things, as the Son of God. But here it is said, "all things were created in virtue of Him"; it is not merely "by" Him, but in virtue of His own divine power.

"For by Him were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created by Him and for Him." All this reaches to things of which we know little, or even beyond our ken. As we had before what was in virtue of His power, so now it is by Him, because Christ was both one who acted in His own divine right, and also one who acted instrumentally for God the Father's glory. All things were created by Him. The word "created" is different; in one case it is a past action, but in the other it is the present effect of what is past, the first expressing the power that made to exist, the second rather the present result of it. "And He is before all things," and so on. Not merely was He before all things, but before all (God only, of course, excepted). Nor was it merely that all things were, but they were created for His pleasure. "And by [or, in virtue of] him all things consist." In virtue of Him gives a clearer and more intimate idea. The object here is to take away all vagueness in exalting Christ.

But, again, "He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence." We shall find a reason for this in what follows. It is interesting to see that there are two very distinct first-borns: first-born of all creation, because He is the Creator; and first-born from the dead, as a new, plain and weighty matter of fact. Thus Christ is not only the Head of creation as man, but He is first-born from the dead as risen. It is in connection with this that He is Head of the church. He was not in this relationship upon earth; He was not so simply as taking humanity. Incarnation is an entirely distinct truth from His headship of the church, which involves the further truth of union. It is evident that His headship of the body, the church, is introduced by His being risen from the

dead, and by the place given to Him in heaven.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 1:19-23

But Colossians does not at once begin with the heavenly place of Christ. Ephesians presents Him plainly as risen and seated as Head. Here it is more general, and does not speak of His being in heaven; He is “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence.” Many confound union with incarnation; but union is not His taking flesh and blood here below, but our being made members of His body, now that He is risen and glorified. There could have been no union with Him until death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit was given to unite us with Him in that risen condition. Then and not before we have the body, the assembly. He had a human body, of course; but the mystical body is formed by the Holy Spirit sent down after He rose from the dead. The one, as woman-born, was connected with the earth; the other is with heaven.

With the pre-eminence of Christ in all things, two great considerations stand before us. First, all fullness was pleased to dwell in Him. It was not a partial nor ever so full manifestation of God; this might have been in any man; but here all fullness was pleased in Him to dwell. This is the truth of Christ’s Person, the glory of the incarnate Lord. “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.” “If I by the Spirit of God cast out devils, the kingdom of God is come unto you.” “The Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works.” Yet we know it was always by the power of the Holy Spirit that everything was done and said. So truly was all the fullness pleased to dwell in Him.

We observed in an earlier verse that it was because of His being a divine person that He could be said to be the first-born of all creation. It was founded upon the fact that He was God who created all and sustains all. But here there is more. In Him all fullness was pleased to dwell. It was not alone a question of acting, but of dwelling, whether He acted or not. Thus it is a very precise and rich statement indeed.

But again (Col. 1:20), there is another unfolding of the truth which sets forth His glory, another reason assigned for His indisputable pre-eminence. By Him, the Christ, is reconciliation effected. All fullness of the Godhead was pleased in Him to dwell and by Him to reconcile all things unto God.

There is a peculiar phraseology in the passage which may have led the English translators to put in “Father” in verse 19. If the conjecture be correct, they did it not so much because of this verse as of the following, the 20th — “to reconcile... unto Himself.” They could not make out how it could be unto Him unless it were the Father; but I think the context is purposely so framed, because it is intended to show us, unless I am greatly mistaken, that all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Christ, not one person of that divine fullness acting to the exclusion of the rest. They all had one counsel, not barely similar counsels, as so many creatures might, but one and the same. Hence the object is not to contrast one person with another, but to state that all the fullness was pleased in Him to dwell. It is put in this general form purposely. Then the Spirit of God glides with a scarce perceptible transition from His being the God-man to the work God has done by Him; so you cannot separate clearly the two thoughts, as far as the construction goes in (ELS AVTON). Afterward, as before, the Person of Christ is distinct and prominent.

But man was utterly gone, hostile, dead. No moral glory even of the Godhead in Christ could win him back. A deeper work was needed. “Having made peace by the blood of his cross by him to reconcile all things unto Himself.” All creation was ruined in the fall; and here we have the vast plan of God first sketched before us, the reconciliation of all things, not of men but of things. It was the good pleasure of the Godhead to reconcile all things unto God. Even the Word made flesh, even all the fullness dwelling in Him, failed to reach the desperate case. There was rebellion, there was war. Peace must be made — it could only be made by the blood of Christ’s cross. In a word, reconciliation is not the fruit of the incarnation, most blessed as it is; for it was altogether powerless, as far as that is concerned. It brings before us grace and truth in Christ — God Himself in the most precious display of holy love. Nothing is in itself more important than for a person who has found Christ to delight in and dwell upon Him and His moral ways here below. Everything was in exquisite harmony in Him; matchless grace shone out wherever He moved. All was perfect, and yet would it all have been fruitless; for man was as the barren sand.

Therefore we have another and wholly distinct step — “by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself.” All the fullness dwelling in Him was insufficient; it brought God to man, not man to God. All the Godhead was pleased to dwell in Him, and not as a mere passing thing. This was quite independent of the anointing in due time by the Holy Spirit. It was the continual delight of the whole Godhead to dwell in Him as man. But so far gone was man that this could not deliver him; sin cannot be thus got over. Even God Himself coming down to earth in Christ’s Person, His unselfish goodness, His unwearied patient love, not anything found in Christ nor all together, could dispel sin or righteously recover the sinner. Therefore it became manifestly a question of reconciliation “through the blood of His cross.”

All things then are to be reconciled, as we see; peace has been made “by the blood of His cross.” It is sweet and assuring to think that all has been done to secure the gathering of all things round Christ. It is merely now a question of the time suited in God’s wisdom for the manifestation of Christ at the head of all. As far as the efficacious work is concerned, nothing more is to be done. Meanwhile God is calling in the saints who are to share all along with Christ. As it is said in Romans 8, all creation groaneth, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. They are the first fruits. All was subjected to vanity by sin; but now He who came down, God manifest in the flesh, has taken upon Himself the burden of sin, and has made peace by the blood of His cross. Thus He has done all that is needed for God and man.

Morally all is done, the price is paid, the work is accepted; so that here too we may say “all things are ready.” God would be now justified in purging from the face of creation every trace of misery and decay; if He waits, it is but to save more souls. His long-suffering is salvation. The darkness and the weakness will disappear when our Lord comes with His saints. For the world, His appearing with them in glory is the critical time. The revelation of Christ and the church from heaven is not the epoch of the rapture, which comes first. The revelation is the manifestation of the Bridegroom and the bride then glorified before the world.

Thus having brought in the universal reconciliation of created things, the Apostle turns to that with which it was so intimately connected: “and you that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled.” I do not doubt there is an intended contrast. The reconciliation of all things is not yet accomplished. The foundation for all is laid, but it is not applied. But meanwhile it is applied to us who believe. Us who were in this fearful condition, “now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death.” Again,

observe, the body of His flesh, the incarnation in itself did not, could not avail; no, nor all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Him bodily. For guilty man it must be “through death.” It was not through Christ’s birth or living energy, but “through death” — not by His doing, divinely blessed as it all was, but by His suffering. “The blood of His cross” brings in much more the idea of a price paid for peace. His “death” seems to be more suitable as the ground of our reconciliation. At any rate “in the body of His flesh through death” contradicts the notion that incarnation was the means of reconciliation. This brings in moral considerations and shows the most solemn vindication of God, the righteous basis for our remission and peace and clearance from all charge and consequence of sin.

“To present you holy and unblamable and unreprovable in His sight.” Blessed as the death of Christ is, so that God Himself can find no flaw in us or charge against us, which is the meaning here — so perfectly efficacious is this death of Christ in our favor, yet still it supposes our holding fast: “if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” Now I take that word “if” decidedly as a condition and nothing else.

It is quite different from Colossians 3, “If ye then be risen with Christ,” and so forth. It is the same word, but there should always be a regard to the context. Here, I believe, there is a condition, implied, whereas chapter 3 simply reasons and exhorts from an allowed fact. This would not make sense in chapter 1.

Unless under specially modifying circumstances, every man, almost every person before conversion, is naturally disposed to be an Arminian (that is, to build on his own righteousness); but when he finds himself undone, yet justified by faith of God’s pure grace in Christ, there is often a tendency to rebound violently over to the opposite extreme. When he becomes more matured in the truth, it is no longer a question of party views, but of that which is infinitely larger, even of God’s mind as revealed in His Word. The unconditional parts should be taken in all their absoluteness, and the conditional should be pressed in all their force.

The Apostle does not bring this in as a condition of our justification. There grace justifies the ungodly; a condition cannot enter. It would be a denial of grace. For all that, there are unquestionable conditions; but in what? God does not let us certainly know who they are among those who profess the name of Jesus that really believe in Him. Some there were even in those early days who followed the truth for a season and then gave it up. Others gradually slighted the pure gospel for philosophy and ordinances, or at least were disposed to add them to it. Hence the Apostle says, “If ye continue in the faith.” There he warns those born of God that they should continue in the faith; but along with this, other things have to be borne in mind. May not real children of God waver and even slip for a season into error? Now I cannot say of any who abandon the faith that they are holy and blameless in the sight of God. One may have a hope from previous facts perhaps; but as long as a soul is thus led of the enemy away from fundamental truth, I cannot, I ought not, to speak too confidently of him as of God. It would be a trifling with such unbelief and increasing the danger to his soul by making light of it. Therefore the Apostle says, “If ye continue.” A similar principle applies to him who lives under a cloud of unjudged sin.

So in 1 Corinthians 5 we see that a man guilty of gross sin and therefore put away is to be treated as a “wicked person,” although the Holy Spirit in the same chapter speaks of the aim that his spirit might be saved. And the second epistle proves that, spite of all, he was a true believer and on his repentance to be restored to fellowship. The Holy Spirit of course knows perfectly, but we can only judge what God permits to be brought plainly before our eyes. This is of practical value to our souls, for it is often difficult to behave rightly to a person out of communion. We are apt to think too slightly of such cases, and what is the effect of thus treating them? They drag on outside. There is feeble power within of restoration. The sin is superficially judged. If we feel it much, we desire earnestly to get the person back. It ought to be a pain, a deep grief, whenever souls are put away from the Lord’s table. Our desire would then be continually to know they judged themselves and see them restored.

It is not, If ye continue in faith, but “in the faith.” When Paul speaks about the common faith, he means the thing believed. So when he speaks about the “one faith,” he does not refer to the reality of our faith, but to the objective truth received. Real believers or not, if they forsook the faith, how could they be owned as such? Modern times have greatly thrown people upon what is inward or subjective; whereas “the faith” is the revelation that is offered to faith, outside the man. It is a great mercy that in these last days, to truth, the truth in the Person of Christ, great prominence has been given. One cannot absolutely pronounce on an individual’s faith; but we can judge of the faith he owns, and tell whether what he professes is the truth or not. Love would assume, if a man professes the faith and there is nothing clean contrary to it in his words and ways, that it is real faith. A person may be sincere in what is wrong, or insincere in what is right; but the truth is an unbending standard. If one judged on the ground of an individual’s heart, one could never speak at all; for of that who can pronounce but God? If one acts on the ground of the faith, the moment a man goes against the truth, giving up what he professed, we are bound to judge it, leaving the question of his heart’s faith in God’s hands.

The Apostle urges also, “and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” The Colossian saints were in danger of slipping away; for they were striving to make themselves holier by asceticism or other efforts, not by the application of Christ to judge themselves. But no, says the Apostle; it is in the body of His flesh through death that ye are presented holy and unblamable, if ye continue in the faith, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye have heard, etc. What is “the hope of the gospel”? It is in a heavenly Christ who died for us, giving us the assurance of being with. Himself there. The hope of Israel (one can hardly say of the law) was the earth; this “hope of the gospel” is above. The Colossians were most unwittingly but practically losing sight of their heavenly hope, because the thought of adding to Christ philosophy or ordinances tends to deprive one of Christ. He calls it the gospel which they had heard; he would not admit of any other. It was that which had been “preached to every creature which is under heaven, whereof I Paul am made a minister.” How the Apostle puts forward that which some then, as now, would make cheap — the being a minister of the gospel! He does not regard what would exalt himself in the eyes of the would-be professionists, but what gives glory to God and His grace in Christ. There is a stress accordingly upon “I” here.

I should judge that there was a slight put upon the gospel by some of those who were exercising an evil influence at Colosse. They may have thought it good in its place as awakening the unconverted; but what had Christians to do with it? The Apostle insists not only on the dignity but also on the depths of the gospel. No doubt, a Christian does not need it in the same way as the unconverted; for he is the one who has found rest, has remission of sins, justification, and sonship while the other has no real link with God. A Christian, therefore, does not listen to the gospel as if it were an unknown sound, or as if he had not certainly received it. But he rejoices in it still, and admires with increasing fervor the matchless display of God’s grace therein. The Apostle therefore takes particular pains to say that he, Paul, was made a minister of the gospel. He did not consider it a thing merged in his apostleship, but emphatically declares himself a minister, not only of the church, but of the glad tidings to every creature under heaven. It was evident then that if any at Colosse had been induced to regard that message as a

thing too elementary for the saints to occupy themselves with, the Apostle did not sympathize with such feelings. He served and gloried in the gospel.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 1:24-29

It is wrong, of course, to put myself on the same ground as the unconverted person, as if I needed it; but it is also depriving myself of much if I do not delight in it, for its own sake, so to speak, as the vindication of God Himself. No other part of the truth brings out such a display of grace and divine righteousness as the gospel. As far as the testimony to souls is concerned, it may be more what relates to their need as lost sinners; but for Christians it is of no small importance to have the heart engaged with its active grace, and the mind filled with its vast scope, and the conscience invigorated by the truth which proclaims how perfectly the blood of Christ cleanses from all sin. It is impossible to see how the gospel vindicates God until a soul has peace with Him. This is practically important. A person that barely knows God's mercy in Christ, has relief, has the remedy for sin; but such a remedy does not always bring in the sight of God fully vindicated. It is more the idea of the scapegoat, than of the goat that was killed. In the gospel we see not only the resource of our sins, but God's truth and majesty and love and whole character glorified. It is not only a question of evil judged and sins forgiven, but a testimony to His rich grace in Christ.

But the Apostle adds here, "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church; whereof I am made a minister" (Col. 1:24-25). It appears that the two ministries, the connection of them, and the assertion of the Apostle's relation to both, are intimated. As to the gospel, he says, "Whereof I, Paul, am made a minister." So also it is here; but, inasmuch as this was a more intimate thing, it is added, "According to the dispensation of God," and so forth. The gospel of which he was made the minister leads him at once to speak of his sufferings for them, not exactly the sufferings of the gospel, but his sufferings for them.

Next, he speaks of filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ for His body's sake, which is the church. No doubt there was that which pertained exclusively to the Savior in substitution for us. But in all other respects Christ did not suffer, however perfectly, so as to shut out others, His saints, from fellowship with Him. His sufferings were absolutely perfect, as the witness of righteousness, as man upon earth and the witness of grace as on God's part. But there was far more than testimony in the cross when made sin for us, and all that God was as judging it fell on Him there. Righteousness and grace were the occasion of His sufferings in life here below; the holy judgment of sin was that which characterized His sufferings upon the cross, that God might be able righteously to show His grace to us who believe without any question of judgment remaining.

Again, the Apostle rejoices in his sufferings, instead of thinking them hard or shrinking from them. What a contrast with Peter in the close of Matthew 16! Christ did not monopolize them, as it were; He left some for others. The sufferings spoken of here are mainly sufferings of love for the Church, for the saints of God; but they also include what the Apostle suffered as being a witness for Christ in this world. They were real external sufferings from enemies, as he says, "in my flesh." He does not make it merely a question of his spirit; although, if this had not gone along with the trials, there would have been no value in the suffering. But he did not take it easily even as to his body. Some at Colosse, we know from the end of Colossians 2, were contending for ascetic practice 'in mortification of the body, which, the Apostle lets them know, is quite compatible with thorough puffing up of the flesh. But, as for him, he would fill up the afflictions of Christ for His body's sake. Paul was pre-eminently a minister of the church, in a sense in which others were not. No doubt, the mystery was revealed by the Spirit unto the holy apostles and prophets. But God had entrusted it to Paul to complete His Word.

There are two great parts in this hid but now manifest mystery (Col 1:26). The first is that Christ should be set in heaven above all principalities and powers, and have the entire universe given to Him, as Head over the inheritance on the footing of redemption — Himself exalted as Head over all things heavenly and earthly, and the church united to Him as His body, He being thus given as Head to the church over all things. Then the other side of the mystery is Christ in the saints here below, and in such a sort as to bring in the Gentiles with the utmost freedom. "To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles [or nations], which is Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). The hope of glory is the hope of all the glory that flows out of His heavenly place as now at God's right hand.

In Ephesians the Apostle dwells more upon the first of these aspects, in Colossians on the second. Hence the point here is not our being in Christ as Head over all, but Christ in us, the hope of all. But it is in contrast in both cases with Jewish things. The Messiah's reigning on earth over Israel, with the nations rejoicing also, is a true expectation gathered from the Old Testament prophets. In Colossians it is Christ now in us, but the glory not yet come. Christ in us is the hope of the glory that is coming by-and-by when we shall be glorified and appear with Christ. This was a state of things entirely foreign to Jewish anticipations. Christ in heaven and the saints not yet with Him there, but waiting to be with Him, and meanwhile Christ in them the hope of glory, but of a glory not yet come. There was nothing like this in the older oracles. Then they could not have expected that Christ would be in heaven and a people be one with Him there, still less that Christ should be in them, Gentiles or not, here.

It is well to weigh the expression, "to complete the word of God" (Col. 1:25). It is not the mere idea of writing a book; for James and Peter and John had done this, and yet they could not be said "to complete the Word of God." It was not only bringing out truths already revealed, but adding a certain portion that was unrevealed. Even Revelation did not do this in the same sense. We have there a fuller development of what had been previously referred to, a giving further revelations as to prophecy, but all that was not completing the Word of God. It does not mean that Paul was the last of inspired writers; for if he had written before the others of the New Testament, it would still have been true that he completed the Word of God.

Christ is said to be in us here, not dwelling in our hearts by faith, but actually the hope of glory. The hope of glory is contrasted with the Jews having Christ to reign over them in Palestine, bringing in manifested glory. The Apostle speaks of saints as now down here, but Christ in them the hope of the glory they will have with Him by-and-by above. It is Christ's life in us in its full risen character of display. The epistle to the Colossians never rises above it.

The Holy Spirit, it has been noticed, is hardly spoken of in this epistle. In their then state the introduction of Him would not have been good for them; they would have used the Holy Spirit apart from Christ, as something to draw the eye away from Christ. A religion completely of forms makes much of the Holy Spirit, but it puts the Holy Spirit in the clergy as dispensers of blessing, and thus Christ is dishonored. Again, there are Christians who have no forms at all and who consequently make much of the Holy Spirit but apart from Christ. There was much of the old legal feeling that had come in at Colosse; therefore the Apostle presses upon them the truth of the riches of the glory of this mystery being among the Gentiles. God did not reveal this mystery when the church was at Jerusalem; indeed it was only fully brought out among the Gentiles. That is, the full heavenly character of it is only properly known when the Gentiles are in the foreground. Hence Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, is the very one who especially handles it. The full gospel is not mere forgiveness, but deliverance, liberty, and union with Christ above in Spirit.

“Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” Perfect in Christ means full grown. A man may be very happy, may enjoy the pardon of his sins, but without the unfolding of this heavenly secret (that is, Christ in the saints and the heavenly glory connected with it), he can hardly be said to be full grown in Christ. This “every man” is very striking here; the repeated individualizing is the more beautiful in connection with the body. The two truths are singularly characteristic of Christianity, which unites the more opposite things in a way that nothing else does. In the Millennium, individuals will not have such an important place as now; nor will there be “the body” on earth. Now “he that hath an ear” comes in as well as “what the Spirit saith unto the churches”; there is the richest place of blessing given both to the individual and the church, the body of Christ; and both are brought out in the fullness. The human way, on the contrary, is that if what is public and corporate be much pressed, the individual suffers; so also vice versa.

Christianity makes every individual of eternal value to God, and also shows the church’s place wherein you find the large feeling of desire and self-sacrifice and seeking the good of the whole. Paul who brings in the Church so prominently, says pointedly, “every man.” “Warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” “Whereunto” has reference to the need. “I also labor striving according to His working which worketh in me mightily.” Strong words are used here, to show what it cost him. It all supposes great difficulty, and the need of a power entirely beyond himself. It proves the necessity of Christ working in it all. It was not only for those who had seen his face, but for others, too, as we see from Colossians 2:1. What is to be noted is this: while the Apostle loved those whom he had seen, there was no such thing as oversight or insensibility as to those whom he had never seen. It was for the church he felt, for the saints as such, whether known or unknown; and more than this, he had a keen conflict for them because of their difficulties.

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 1:24-29 and 2:1-3, Notes on

I should judge that there was a slight put upon the gospel by some of those who were exercising an evil influence at Colosse. They may have thought it good in its place as awakening the unconverted; but what had Christians to do with it? The apostle insists not only on the dignity but also on the depths of the gospel. No doubt, a Christian does not need it in the same way as the unconverted; for he is one who has found rest, has remission of sins, justification, sonship, &c., while the other has no real link with God. A Christian, therefore, does not listen to the gospel as if it were an unknown sound, or as if he had not certainly received it. But he rejoices in it still, and admires with increasing fervor the matchless display of God's grace therein. The apostle therefore takes particular pains to say that he, Paul, was made a minister of the gospel. He did not consider it a thing merged in his apostleship, but emphatically declares himself a minister, not only of the Church, but of the glad tidings to every creature under heaven. It was evident, then, that if any at Colosse had slightingly regarded that message as a thing too elementary for the saints to occupy themselves with, the apostle did not sympathize with such feelings. He served and gloried in the gospel. It is wrong, of course, to put myself on the same ground as the unconverted person, as if I needed it; but it is also depriving myself of much if I do not delight in it, for its own sake, so to speak, as the vindication of God Himself. No other part of the truth brings out such a display of grace and divine righteousness as the gospel. As far as the testimony to souls is concerned, it may be more what relates to their need as lost sinners; but for Christians it is of no small importance to have the heart engaged with its active grace, and the mind filled with its vast scope and the conscience invigorated. It is impossible to see how the gospel vindicates God until a soul has peace with Him. This is practically important. A person that barely knows God's mercy in Christ, has relief, has the remedy for sin, but such a remedy does not always bring in the sight of God fully vindicated. It is more the idea of the scapegoat, than of the goat that was killed. In the gospel we see not only the resource for our sins, but God's truth and majesty and love and whole character glorified. It is not only a question of evil judged and sins forgiven, but a testimony to His rich grace in Christ. But the apostle adds here, “Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church; whereof I am made a minister,” &c. It appears that the two ministries, the connection of them, and the assertion of the apostle's relation to both, are intimated. As to the gospel, Paul says, “Whereof I am made a minister.” So also it is here: but inasmuch as this was a more intimate thing, it is added, “According to the dispensation of God,” &c. The gospel of which he was made the minister leads him at once to speak of his sufferings for them, not exactly the sufferings of the gospel, but his sufferings for them. Next, he speaks of “filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ,” &e., for his body's sake, which is the Church. No doubt there was that which pertained exclusively to the Savior in substitution for us. But in all respects Christ did not suffer, however perfectly, so as to shut out others, His saints, from fellowship with Him. His sufferings were absolutely perfect, as the witness of righteousness, as man upon earth and the witness of grace as on God's part. But there was far more than testimony in the cross when made sin for us, and all that God was as judging it fell on Him there. Righteousness and grace were the occasion of His sufferings in life here below: the holy judgment of sin was that which characterized His sufferings upon the cross, that God might be able righteously to show us who believe His grace, without any question of judgment remaining.

Again, the apostle rejoices in his sufferings, instead of thinking them hard or shrinking from them. What a contrast with Peter in the close of Matt. 16. Christ did not monopolize them, as it were; He left some for others—the sufferings spoken of here are mainly sufferings of love for the Church, for the saints of God, but they also include what the apostle suffered as being a witness for Christ in this world. They were real external sufferings from enemies, as he says, “in my flesh.” He does not make it merely a question of his spirit, although if this had not gone along with the trials, there would have been no value in the suffering. But he did not take it easily even as to his body. Some at Colosse, we know from the end of Col. 2, were contending for ascetic practice, mortification of the body, &c., which, the apostle lets them know, might be compatible with a much puffing up of the flesh. But, as for him, he would fill up the afflictions of Christ for His body's sake. Paul was

pre-eminently a minister of the Church, in a sense in which others were not. No doubt, the mystery was revealed by the Spirit unto the holy apostles and prophets. But God had entrusted it to Paul “to complete the word of God.” There are two great parts in this mystery, the first is that Christ should be set in heaven above all principalities and powers, and have the entire universe given to Him, as Head over the inheritance on the footing of redemption. Himself exalted as Head over all things heavenly and earthly, and the Church united to Him as His body, He being thus given as Head to the Church over all things. Then the other side of the mystery is Christ in the saints here below, and in such a sort as to bring in the Gentiles with the utmost freedom. “To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles [or nations], which is Christ in you the hope of glory.” The hope of glory is the hope of all the glory that flows out of His heavenly place as now at God's right hand. In Ephesians the apostle dwells more upon the first of these aspects, in Colossians, on the second. Hence the point here is not our being in Christ as Head over all, but Christ in us, the hope of all. But it is in contrast in both cases with Jewish things. The Messiah's reigning on earth over Israel, with the nations rejoicing also, is a true expectation gathered from the Old Testament prophets. In Colossians it is Christ now in us, but the glory not yet come. Christ in us is the hope of the glory that is coming by and by when we shall be glorified and appear with Christ. This was a state of things entirely foreign to Jewish anticipations. Christ in heaven and the saints not yet with Him there, but waiting to be with Him, and meanwhile Christ in them the hope of glory, but of a glory not yet come. There was nothing like this in the older oracles. Then they could not have expected that Christ would be in heaven and a people be one with Him there, still less that Christ should be in them, Gentiles or not, here. It is well to weigh the expression, “to complete the word of God.” It is not the mere idea of writing a book; for James and Peter and John had done this, and yet they could not be said “to complete the word of God.” It was not only bringing out truths already revealed, but adding a certain portion that was unrevealed. Even Revelation did not do this in the same sense. We have there a fuller development of what had been previously referred to, a giving further revelations as to prophecy, but all that was not completing the word of God. It does not mean that Paul was the last of inspired writers; for if he had written before all the others, it would still have been true that he completed the word of God. The sense in which Christ is said to be in us here is not merely as dwelling in us, but in us the hope of glory. The hope of glory is contrasted with their having Christ to reign over them in Palestine, bringing in manifested glory. The apostle speaks of them as now down here, but Christ in them the hope of the glory they will have with Him by and by. It is Christ's life in us in its full risen character of display. Colossians never rises above it.

The Holy Ghost, it has been noticed, is hardly spoken of in this epistle, and the reason is, the introduction of Him would not have been good for them; they would have used the Holy Ghost apart from Christ, as something to draw the eye away from Christ. A religion completely of forms makes much of the Holy Ghost, but it puts the Holy Ghost in the clergy as the dispensers of blessing, and thus Christ is dishonored. Again there are Christians who have no forms at all and who consequently make much of the Holy Ghost but apart from Christ. There was much of the old legal feeling that had come in at Colosse, therefore the apostle presses upon them the truth of the riches of the glory of this mystery being among the Gentiles. God did not bring out this mystery when the Church was at Jerusalem; indeed it was only fully brought out among the Gentiles. That is, the full heavenly character of it is only properly known when the Gentiles are in the foreground. Hence Paul the apostle of the Gentiles is the very one who especially brings it out. The full gospel is not mere forgiveness, but deliverance, liberty, and union with Christ above in Spirit. “Whom we preach warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” Perfect in Christ means full grown. A man may be very happy, may enjoy the pardon of his sins, &c, but without the unfolding of this heavenly secret (that is, Christ in the saints and the heavenly glory connected with it), he can hardly be said to be full grown in Christ. This “every man” is very striking here; the repeated individualizing is very beautiful in connection with the body. The two truths are singularly characteristic of Christianity, which unites the most opposite things in a way that nothing else does, and it also individualizes. In the Millennium, individuals will not have such an important place as now; nor will there be the Body on earth. Now “He that hath an ear” comes in as well as “what the Spirit saith unto the churches,” there is the richest place of blessing given both to the individual and to the Church, the Body of Christ, and both are brought out in their fullness. The human way, on the contrary, is that if what is public and corporate be much pressed, the individual suffers and vice versa.

Christianity makes every individual of eternal value to God, and also shows the Church's place and there you find the large feeling of desire and self-sacrifice and seeking the good of the whole. Paul who brings in the Church so prominently, says pointedly, “every man.” “Warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” “Whereunto” has reference to the need. “I also labor striving according to his working which worketh in me mightily.” Strong words are used here, to show what it cost him. It all supposes great difficulty, and the need of a power entirely beyond himself. It shows the necessity for Christ to work in it all. It was not only for those who had seen his face, but the contrary, as we see from chapter 2:1. What is to be noted is this: while the apostle loved those whom he had seen, there was no such thing as forgetting or not feeling deeply about those whom he had never seen. It was for the Church, for the saints as such, whether known or unknown; and more than this, he had a keen conflict for them because of their difficulties. Now (chap. 2:1) he commences to show them their danger, but he first wished them to know what a combat he had for them, and for them also at Laodicea, and as many as had not then seen his face in the flesh. “That their hearts might be comforted.” They were not happy now: they were oppressed, they were getting clouded in their thoughts, and losing the clearness of view they had, “being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, in which mystery [for that is the point] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” There were hindrances to their apprehension of this mystery. His great desire was, nevertheless; that they should understand it well. A person may be a Christian, seeing the grace of God in Christ, and yet be comparatively poor in his thoughts and very feeble in his apprehension of the counsels and ways of God He may never have been led into this fullness of the understanding of this mystery. Without this it is impossible to have all these treasures. “In which [mystery] are hid all the treasures of wisdom an knowledge.” This brings us into another atmosphere as it were. Failure in apprehension shows a moral hindrance. “If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.”

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 2:4-12, Notes on

To some minds there may be a difficulty in the strong language on the one hand, in which the apostle speaks of the Colossians' faith and order; and on the other, in the solemn warnings with which the epistle abounds. It might seem hard at first sight to reconcile the steadfastness of their faith in Christ with the warning we have seen given them— “If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled.” All we have to do is to believe both. What it really proves is, that no blessed order or steadfastness can guarantee a soul that admits wrong thoughts and corrupt principles that shroud, weaken, or lower the glory of Christ. Thus, the seeming incongruity makes the danger more apparent and

striking. The fact of their order and the steadfastness of the faith in Christ that had characterized them, were in themselves no effectual bulwark against the evil that menaced them. The apostle felt, and lets them know, that, though they were so blessed, yet by admitting the enticing words of others, their souls would be injured and undermined. No soul, no matter what the blessing in time past or present, can afford to trifle with that which upsets the person or glory of Christ. The Colossians had been remarkably favored; and the apostle rejoiced in beholding their order and steadfast faith in Christ; still in the very verse before he cautions them “lest any man should beguile you with enticing words.” (Ver 4.) What he presses upon them is, that as they had received the Christ, Jesus the Lord, they should walk in Him (ver. 6), abiding as they had begun. Speculation covered over with plausible language, was what they had to guard against. Therefore, though absent in the flesh, the apostle says he was with them in spirit, joying and beholding their order, &c., for this very reason they were to be warned of what would mar the Savior's glory in their testimony. The finest fruit is most easily injured. They would thus practically lose Christ. He does not in the least call in question their real blessing thus far. On the contrary, he reminds them of it, and tells them to walk in Christ, “rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught;” not downcast because of perils, but “abounding therein with thanksgiving.” It is very close work, the object being to exclude the persuasive speech of false men that, if received, would steal them away imperceptibly from Christ.

When we are at rest in Christ before God, we can enter in and behold the manifestation of Himself in Christ, after the most blessed sort. It is very important to see Christ not only in His work of reconciliation but as revealing the Father. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” The Holy Ghost does exalt Christ, no doubt, but then the Son is never exalted, so to speak, at the expense of the Father, any more than the Father can accept honor where the Son is degraded.

The important thing for Christians is to be true to what they believe and confess, or rather to what God has revealed for their faith and confession. Whatever takes us away from the grace and truth which came by Christ, always subverts grace, truth, and Christ. The Colossians had been heretofore happy and really steadfast in their faith in Christ, but they were now allowing doctrines among them which, if not rooted out, would infallibly lead them away from Christ. Here lay their danger. It is astonishing how eagerly and easily Christians are apt to admit something new. The apostle in this case refers to philosophical speculations, which seem to have been brought in at Colosse, as well as Jewish elements, if indeed they were not combined. It was not enough for them to have Christ: they were to walk in Him rooted and built up in Him, assured in the faith, and not caught by these novel dreams, whether of an intellectual or a religions kind. It was thus an early error, that philosophy might be united to Christianity in order to make divine revelation more palatable to earnest, thoughtful minds. It has been all very well, they thought, to preach Christ at first simply, but now that it was no longer a question of a few lowly Galileans, why not address themselves to the great and wise of the earth, sick as many were of heathenism, and repelled by cold Judaism? And, if so, why not meet them as much as possible on their own ground? Why not engraft into Christianity some of the common sense of Aristotle, or, still better, the lofty aspirings of Plato, or yet more readily such high and noble sentiments as Philo represents in his Biblical essays?

Philosophy is one great bane of Christianity now as in these early days. The whole scheme of God's truth and ways is blotted out or has no room left for it in the teaching of philosophy. They overlook creation and the fall. They deify conscience, which man acquired by the fall. They ignore sin and God's judgment of sin. So also God's grace is unknown and the atonement its fruit. Rationalists would reduce divine truth to a mere conclusion that people draw. But truth is never a conclusion. The moment I draw a conclusion, I am on the ground of science. Thus logic is a natural science, the root, one may say, of all others, which submit facts to it; but what has this with submitting to the truth of God? Revelation may pronounce on things as they are in man, as it also gives us things as they are from God; it does not merely show us that such or such a thing must be, which is the province of human reasoning. The truth reveals to us that a thing is. A poor soul might be perplexed to understand what must be; but no one that hears the testimony can avoid receiving or rejecting, if God declares that a given thing or person is. Hence the vast importance of faith.

The Colossians were beginning to let in two snares—a reasoning mind, and certain ascetic mortifications of the body. The one was in connection with philosophy, the other in connection with Judaism. These were the two great errors then slipping in, of whose real character and source they were not aware. The apostle warns them (ver. 8) though he had just told them he rejoiced in their faith and order. How sad in them to slip! But this is not all. He as good as says, Take care of what you are doing, of letting go what has produced such fruits for the fair promises some are holding out to you. They tell you these new thoughts and ways can be held along with Christ; but let me say that you are embracing and taking up that which will frustrate, sooner or later, the truth which you now profess. The effect invariably is, that those who are not really born of God receive these inner dreams and outer forms instead of Christianity, while true believers are seriously damaged and lose their delight in Christ, and their testimony for Him. The one error suits the speculative, the other would meet those of a more practical turn of mind. No wonder, therefore, he exhorts them to be “rooted and built up in Christ, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.” This last word is much to be weighed. I suppose their thanksgivings were beginning to wane, for such is the immediate effect of other things intruding into the place of Christ.

“See lest there shall be any one that leads you as his prey through philosophy and vain deceit according to the tradition of men, according to the rudiments of the world and not according to Christ.” The earth gives clouds and not light. Man promises and undertakes much; but he can really give nothing but the blinding deceits of the master he is enslaved to. There is the deepest possible necessity for these warnings. Speculation about the origin of things, in which the Orientals, Gnostics, &c., delighted, as about the eternity of matter for instance, might not have seemed directly dangerous. People are ready enough to say, my philosophy is one thing, my religion another. They might reason then, as since, that the world must have been made out of something always in existence. This might sound plausible to the mind, but it has a great flaw for the believer; it makes nothing of God and gives His word the lie. Matter becomes the great circumstance before the mind, and God is made like man, a mere active mind, a manufacturer, &c. How grandly the scripture of the Galilean fisherman rebukes Colossian dreamers! “All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made.” How aptly the error had been already met in chapter 1:16! “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him and for him.” The idea of the eternity of matter brings in from the first something outside God, independent and antagonistic; for this was the further deduction from the actual state of the world. Hence they reasoned of the two first principles, the one good, the other evil. This was the very error which was so much followed out and interwoven into heathen philosophy; especially in the East, as indeed to this day. It is evident that the principle as to the eternity of matter, once admitted, leads the way to an abyss of falsehood and moral evil; and he would soonest fall into these inward or outward excesses who reasons most from his false starting-point. Faith repudiates philosophy, not only as a rival but as an ally; it rests only on God's word; it accepts that word as absolute and exclusive. Therefore had the apostle the best reason for warning them against philosophy and vain deceit, “according to the

rudiments of the world and not according to Christ." They savor of, as they spring from, man as he is, not Christ; they suit the world, not heaven, nor those who belong to it, even while they are upon the earth. "For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." What gives a more wonderful view of Christ than this truth which the simplest believer knows, or ought to know, however little able to explain it? There is nothing like it. There alone we have the truth. We know God now; and how? Not by reasoning, as if thus we could search and find Him out. We know Him in Christ as a living person who lived once bodily in this world, who still has His body above the world. We know from God, from His word, that in the person of Christ "dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily," not merely in His spirit, but really in Him bodily, though He be now glorified. He had a real, true body from the incarnation, but He had all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Him thus.

Nor is this all. The apostle adds, "Ye are complete in him;" so that you do not want philosophy even if it contained anything good, still less since it is positively bad. What we want is to enjoy Christ better and to walk more according to Him—not to glean other things from man as if they could enrich Christ, whereas they do but corrupt the truth. Man fallen is away from God, and under the power of the devil. This is the fact that makes these human notions so false and ruinous. Philosophical principles spring from death and can only produce death. In all heathenism (and perhaps one might say as much of Christendom) there is nothing more deadly than its philosophy. It is only less deceitful than the world's religion. It sounds reasonable, and a man gets charmed with the beauty or boldness of thoughts, imaginations, language, &c. Faith destroys both superstition and infidelity by the truth of God, and this by the revelation of Christ. The fullness of the Godhead never dwelt in the Father bodily or in the Holy Ghost but only in Christ. He was the only One of whom this wonderful reality could be affirmed. The whole fullness in Him dwelt and dwells still. "The Father that dwelleth in me (said He here below), he doeth the works." Again, "If I by the Spirit of God cast out devils," &c. Here we have not only the Son, but in and by Him the three Persons of the Godhead active in grace in this evil world. And faith receives what Scripture says of the unseen and eternal: faith acts on God's revealed mind as to the present. Unbelieving man refuses what is above himself and draws inferences from what he knows or does not know; but God will destroy both him and them. It is not only that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ, but we are (not that fullness) but filled full in Him. We may be and are said to be the fullness of Christ (Eph. 1), but never, of course, of the Godhead.

Hence we "are complete in him who is the head of all principality and power. In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body [of the sins] of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." This is expressly in contrast with the external ordinance of circumcision. It should be "putting off the body of flesh," not the body "of the sins" of the flesh. The true reading makes it a more complete thing: it is not a question of sins, but rather of sin in the nature. "Sins" would hardly be in keeping with the scope of the passage or phrase. It does not refer to the literal fact of circumcision, but to Christ's death. When we believe in Christ, we have all the value of His death made true of us. This is here called circumcision not made by hands in contrast with the ancient ordinance. The meaning and spiritual thought of circumcision is the mortification of human nature, man as he is being treated as a dead thing. It is Christ's death that gives us this privilege. We are brought into association with His death and have all its value in parting with all our ruined condition, the body of the flesh, when we receive Him by faith. His circumcision supersedes all other which in no way stripped off our evil state as man in the flesh.

"Buried with him in baptism whereunto also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God who hath raised him from the dead." This brings in, not so much Christ's personal glory as His work. The first chapter gave us chiefly His personal glory and even though it spoke of His work, it was the reconciliation of all things, and of the saints withal, meanwhile, before the glory is revealed. Chapter 2 presses His work upon the saints. I have no doubt the wisdom of the Holy Ghost is shown in this: we have first Himself and His work in general, then the specific value and effect of His work for us and on us. There His headship is doubly unfolded with precision; here the fact of His being the Head of all principality and authority, is just alluded to, giving emphasis to our completeness in Him. The reference to circumcision is clearly bound up with Christ's death, &c.; not the legal act to which He submitted, nor a question of His person, but of His work applied to us. This is entirely confirmed by the statement of our being buried with Him in baptism, in which, says he, ye have also been raised with Him, &c. The great point is the linking us to Christ. By Him alone the work was done; but when we believe in Him, we are brought into its efficacy and acquire by grace a common position with Him. It is not merely, that it was by virtue of Him, but in Him this great work was wrought, whereby we have a place in and with Him. The initiatory institution of Christianity sets forth this immense distinctive blessing of the Christian. We owned in baptism that we died in Christ's death out of the condition in which we naturally lived; and now we are risen with Him by faith of the operation of God who raised Him out of the dead. We are thus entered on a new state (not, of course, our bodies yet, in fact, but our souls). The practical application of both death and resurrection with Christ, we shall soon see in the hands of the apostle.

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 2:13-19, Notes on

Much as the Spirit of God brings out the quickening power of Christ in this epistle, He never pursues the ultimate or highest consequences of the work of Christ. Quickened or raised up by Him, or rather raised together with Him, is the utmost we find here; but there He stops. Again in chapter 3, although He says, "seek those things that are above," He does not say we are there, but on the contrary, looks at the saint as being on earth, while seeking the things that are above. Thus, this epistle never goes so far as Ephesians; it never says we are seated in heavenly places. As we have seen and as is clear, the current of the communications of grace was interrupted; there was a hindrance before the apostle. The Holy Ghost cannot freely show the saints the things of Christ, where He has to show them their own things. He turns aside to occupy himself with the truth practically and apply it to them, which is never the sign of souls being thoroughly bright; for there ought not to be such a need for arresting the flow of grace and truth. In Ephesians, on the contrary, the work of Christ is carried out to all its fullest consequences; the healthy state of the saint is unfolded; and exhortations follow proportionately high.

We have an instance here of the way in which the apostle, having brought in a general principle, turns to them and says, "you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;" then in verse 16, he goes aside to show how very pointedly and completely the work of God would take them away from the things of the flesh and law— "Having blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us," &c. Yet you want to get ordinances again! The only effect of this handwriting must be against you: it is very strongly expressed; and the apostle repeats it in a double form. These Colossian saints were not so far gone in legalism as to put Christians under the ten commandments as a rule of life. To bring in ordinances even, was not so ruinous; because they at least derive their entire value from the truth of Christ, couched and shadowed forth in them; whereas, there is nothing like making a rule of life of the law for awakening the spirit of self-righteousness in the confident, and of distrust and despair in more diffident souls, reversing exactly the way of grace with both. The apostle insists, that even to let in the principle of ordinances now is to renounce the fundamental

truth of death and resurrection, that is, of Christianity, because they suppose men alive in the world, not dead and risen in Christ. Those led aside may not mean to do anything of the sort; but the enemy does who misleads them. It is going back to dealings of a preparatory kind, into flesh and the world, and in effect a forsaking of the glorious privileges of Christ to do so. The apostle does not dwell here as in Galatians on the consequences of our being made debtors to fulfill the whole law, if we venture under it at all; but he shows, that it is a denial of Christ, as we know Him, if we allow of going back to law in any form, ordinances or not. It is the folly of making a merit of a return to the discipline of the rod and the value of the letter-game and the dissected map and the toy—rewards for full-grown men.

It is evident that, in the handling of men of philosophic tone, the rite of circumcision might be made a much more spiritual thing than any man could work out of the law as a rule of life. For they might say, as men have said, that circumcision was pressed only as the emblem of what we have in Christ, an ancient and divine though of course outward sign of spiritual grace. But the step was fatal; for if they admitted that sign, it was a recurrence to shadows when the substance was come; it was a relinquishment of grace too for the principle of law. The fathers had circumcision, no doubt, before Moses, which was then especially connected with promise. Still, although it was originally before the nation's responsibility to the law was pledged at Sinai, it was after that so embedded in the law that they cannot be separated. Take up circumcision now; and if you do not put yourself, the law puts you, under its whole system, and separates you, in principle, front Christ as an exalted heavenly Head who has accomplished redemption. Thus, if there was one ordinance that more than any might symbolize with promise and grace, it was circumcision; yet so strong was the apostle, that he tells the Galatians, that, admitting it at all, they became debtors to do the whole law. To the Colossians he goes farther, and shows how it contradicts and sets aside the work of Christ, and the place of association with Him, into which we are thereby brought before God. Hence he here intimates what sort of circumcision we already have as Christians; it is of divine operation and not human: “In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the flesh,” &c.: “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him,” &c.

In Galatians, the law is in connection with justification; in Colossians, with Christ risen from the dead and in heaven. Christ, at any rate, is there; and although we are not seen to be in Him there, His exaltation to God's right hand really decides our place as dead with Him and risen with Him; not merely as justified by His blood, but dead and risen with Him. Of all this exceeding rich roll of blessing, subjection to ordinances is the denial; for what has Christ to do with the law now? And it is with Christ as He is, not as He was under law, that we are associated. In Hebrews we have another thing; it is not our death and resurrection with Christ, but Christ now appearing in the presence of God for us in glory, which is founded upon the perfection of His work, His one offering, which has forever put away sin. He is there, at the right hand of God, because He has by Himself purged our sins. The law as a code or system for us is inconsistent with Christ's place in glory as the bright exhibition of our triumph through God's grace; and such is the Christian way of looking at Christ. We do not, it is true, find our association with Christ dead or risen in Hebrews; still less is it the display of our union with Him above; neither is it justification, as in Romans and Galatians, but the value of His work measured by His position in heaven shines there with special luster. Any allowance of ordinances now is proved to be a gainsaying of His work and of the glory He has in heaven, in danger, too, of leading to apostasy.

From verse 13, then, the apostle takes great pains to set before the saints at Colosse their condition without and with Christ: “You being dead in your sins, &c., hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” The very life we have received as believers is the token that our trespasses are gone. If God has quickened us with the life of Christ, He has forgiven us all trespasses. It is impossible that life in Christ dead and risen could have anything against it. There was everything against the believer once, but the possession of life in a risen Savior necessarily attests that all is righteously forgiven to him who believes. It is a remarkable way of putting the case, an exactly parallel case to which you can scarce find in any other part of Scripture.

In general, as we too well know, recourse is had to ordinances for meeting shortcomings, whetting spiritual appetite, &c. It is never in Christendom the open, despised denial of Christ, but the supply of certain aids to faith (!) or feeling besides Christ. This is precisely what the apostle affirms to be so unbelieving and evil. “Blotting out the hand-writing of ordinances that was against us,” observe, not against you, but against us. When the apostle comes to speak of the operation of the law, he will not say “you,” but “us;” as, again, “which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.” The fact is, the Colossian saints, being Gentiles, had never been under law at all, and therefore he does not say “you;” but when he spoke of sins just before, he said you: “You being dead in your sins,” &c. This makes the distinction very striking. “You” occurs in verse 13, because it applies to any sinner now, Jew or Gentile; while it is “us” in verse 14, because none but Jews, strictly speaking, were under law. The allusion to handwriting was very notable also; for the Gentiles had never put their hands to it, whereas the. Jews had affirmed “all that the Lord hath spoken we will do,” and thereon had been sprinkled with the blood as a seal of the legal covenant they had signed under penalty of death.

The apostle declares this was contrary to them and only brought in as we know, condemnation, darkness, and death. What has Christ done in respect to all this? He has blotted it out, taken it out of the way. Do you want, like the Colossians, to bring it back again? Christ nailed it to His cross—an expression of entire triumph over it. “And having spoiled principalities and powers he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.”

It is very interesting to see the way in which the power of evil is viewed according to the place we are in. When the Church appears, it is not so much Satan's power on earth which was the way the Jews felt it chiefly; but we have the special disclosure, that he is the prince of the power of the air, and that the wicked spirits are in heavenly places. (Eph. 2 and 6.) This in no way clashes with what we have in the Old Testament; only now it is brought out more fully, and shown to be the position in which they are as opposed to the Christian. In Rev. 12 we see them (the dragon and his angels) ejected from heaven. They wanted to keep the heavenly places; they desired to hinder the Church, and dishonor God in His saints, that they might have a righteous claim over them as it were. It was intolerable to them that such as had behaved badly on earth should be at last with the Son of God in heavenly places. Alas I how many here below of the very race whom God so distinguishes in His mercy betray that they are of their father the devil, by love of falsehood and by hatred of God's grace and truth. Here we have the effect of the work of Christ upon these powers—leading them in triumph on the cross. It is not so high a tone of triumph as in Eph. 4, where, it is said, Christ led captivity captive. The powers that led believers into captivity were themselves vanquished. The reason is manifest. It was when He ascended up on high. Here we hear of what was done on the cross, the power of the cross; but there it is the public manifestation of the victory, in ascending up on high. The great battle was won. Christ had forever defeated the powers of evil for the joint-heirs. This ascending up on high, and leading captivity captive, is the witness that they are powerless against the Christian. The language is always adapted to the point of view which the Holy Ghost is taking—whether it be of earth or heaven, whether of Israel or the Church. More than this, it depends on how and where He looks at the saints now. If they are viewed as in the wilderness, there is a different

style and figure. Satan is spoken of as “a roaring lion,” which suits the wilderness, and hence that is not the way he is spoken of in Ephesians, but in 1 Peter.

Now comes the practical turn to which the apostle applies this. “Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink, or in respect of a feast, or new-moon, or sabbaths; which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.” (Ver. 16, 17.) A Christian man who knows the victory of Christ for us should not surely entertain the idea of going back to these elementary forms of working good. Hold fast your actual place in Christ, act consistently with it. As to eating and drinking or ordinances relative to the year, month, and week (and the apostle takes particular care to speak not merely of feast or new moon but of sabbaths) remember that these things but prefigure the body or substantial good found really and only in Christ. In fact, these times and seasons point chiefly to what God will give His people by and by. The new moon was a remarkable type of Israel, being renewed after fading away; as the sabbath was the type of the rest of God which He will yet enjoy and share. But whether it be peace or drink-offerings or the feasts in general, they are connected as the shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. This we have. The Jew had the shadow, and he will have the things to come by the grace of God under the new covenant by and by. We are given the substance of Christ now. It is a question here of Jewish days. The Lord's day has nothing to do with Judaism, it is not only apart from but in contrast with that system. The Lord's day is as distinctly a Christian institution as the Lord's supper, the Jew having nothing to do with either. It is very important to see that God has put honor upon the day of resurrection and grace. When people are radically loose or begin to slip away from the Lord, an early symptom is carelessness about this day. There ought to be an exercised conscience about it, not only for our own selves, but also as to servants within and others without our houses. It is of very great consequence that sense of liberty and grace should not even have the appearance of laxity or selfishness.

It is not exactly said the body is Christ. It is said “the Lord is that spirit,” not that body, which was within the letter of the law. “The body” is used in contrast with “the shadow.” There is no substance in a shadow, but we have the body which is of Christ. The twofold idea is, that while the substance is of Him, He is the spirit of all. Verse 16 deals chiefly with a Judaizing character of evil; but verse 18 goes farther and shows a kind of prying into the unseen, not so much the religious use or misuse of the seen, which was the Jewish snare, but dabbling with philosophy, specially of the Orientals. There was a great appearance of humility in all this, as there always is in false systems. The worship of angels seemed right and due; especially as no term peculiar to divine worship was used. Let it be ever so modified, still the apostle speaks of it strongly. “Let no man deprive you of your reward, doing his will in humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen,1 vainly puffed up by the mind of his flesh.” The Orientals indulged in abundant speculation about angels. It is true there are such beings; but it is the prying into such subjects that is so evil. They have to do with us, but not we with them. Our business is with God. Now it seemed to be a reasonable inference that, if angels had to do with us, we must have to do with them; and inasmuch as they had to do with God immediately, why should we not have recourse to them with Him? It was a not unnatural thought: what then makes it so grievous an error? It is the setting aside of Christ who is the Head of all and so above angels. Christ is the One who determines our relation before God; and for all our need with God we have Christ the great high priest. Thus the putting angels in this place is a double dishonor to Christ. Such a speculator was “vainly puffed up by the mind of his flesh.” It might be plausible; but it injured not only the soul's enjoyment of Christ but His nature and glory to indulge in thoughts of the kind. “And not holding fast the Head, from whom all the body, by joints and bands being ministered to and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.” (Ver. 19.) It was false teachers who were thus depriving the saints of their blessing. These men habitually and instinctively seek to ingratiate themselves with the children of God whose unsuspecting simplicity exposes them to be carried away by them. The worship of angels was one method in which the evil showed itself there and evinced its false character. The Holy Spirit is come down to glorify Christ, not angels. He who went beyond Scripture after angels, certainly did not hold fast the Head. The reference here to ministry is not at all the same as in Ephesians, where the apostle enters into it copiously and shows the spiritual gifts in their chief forms from the highest down to the least, by which the body works for itself the building of itself up in love. Hence, if souls came together in a very simple way, it might still be for edification. Here all is put together, not expanded and distinguished as in Ephesians.

If God has led such into the place where Christ's headship (I may add, too, the Holy Ghost's presence) is held and acted, how can they expect blessing from those who do not see nor act upon it? These truths are fundamental for the Church, ministry, &c. We have to hold to the will of God, and God has His own will as to all this, and His own wisdom and way, which ought to be something in our eyes. Here we are told of joints and bands—the various means which Christ employs for the spiritual blessing and profit of His people. It enables the body to work better; it concentrates the saints around Christ, and for His glory. It is well to seek the diffusion of blessing to others; but for the saints the truest thing is the power of gathering to Christ Himself, not merely sending out servants, but gathering to Christ as Lord where there is need of spiritual power to hold together. This is to increase “with the increase of God.” There is then enlargement, comfort, and consolation. The power that is expressed is not in conversion only but works within in positive blessing and self-judgment.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 2

W.K. Translation of chapter 2

(1) For I wish you to know how great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and as many as have not seen my face in flesh; (2) that their hearts may be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding unto full knowledge of the mystery of God, (3) in which are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (4) And this I say that no one may beguile you by persuasive speech. (5) For if even in the flesh I am absent, yet I am with you in the spirit, rejoicing and seeing your order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. (6) As therefore ye received the Christ, Jesus the Lord, in Him walk, (7) rooted and built up in Him, and confirmed in the faith, even as ye were taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.

(8) See that there shall be no one that leadeth you a prey through philosophy and vain deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elements of the world, and not according to Christ. (9) For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; (10) and ye are complete in him who is the head of all principality and authority; (11) in whom also ye were circumcised with circumcision not wrought by hand, in the putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of the Christ; (12) buried with him in baptism, in which ye were also raised with [Him] through faith in the working of God that raised Him out of the dead. (13) And you, being dead in offenses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He quickened you together with Him, having forgiven us all the offenses, (14) having blotted out the handwriting in ordinances [that was] against us, which was contrary to us; and he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to his cross; (15) having stripped the principalities

and the authorities, He made show openly, triumphing over them in it. (16) Let none therefore judge you in eating and in drinking, or in respect of feast or new moon or sabbaths, (17) which are a shadow of things to come; but the body [is] of Christ. (18) Let no one defraud you of your prize, doing his will in humility and worship of the angels, intruding into things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by the mind of his flesh, (19) and not holding fast the head, from whom all the body, ministered to and knit together by the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God.

(20) If ye died with Christ from the elements of the world, why, as alive in [the] world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances? (21) Handle not, neither taste, nor even touch (22) (which are all for destruction in the using), according to the injunctions and trainings of men; (23) which have a reputation indeed of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and unsparingness of [the] body, not in any honor to satisfying of the flesh.

Chapter 2

Now he commences showing them their danger, but he first wished them to know what a combat he had for them, and for them also at Laodicea, and as many as had not then seen his face in the flesh (vs. 1). “That their hearts might be comforted.” They were not happy now; they were oppressed; they were getting clouded in their thoughts, and losing the clearness of view they had, “being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, in which mystery [for that is the point] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2-3). There were hindrances to their apprehension of this mystery. His great desire was, nevertheless, that they should understand it well.

A person may be a Christian, seeing the grace of God in Christ, and yet be comparatively poor in his thoughts and very feeble in his apprehension of the counsels and ways of God. He may never have been led into this fullness of the understanding of this mystery. Without this it is impossible to have all these treasures. “In which [mystery] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” This brings us into another atmosphere, as it were. Failure in apprehension shows a moral hindrance. “If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.”

To some minds there may be difficulty in the strong language on the one hand, in which the Apostle speaks of the Colossians’ faith and order; and on the other, in the solemn warnings with which the epistle abounds. It might seem hard at first sight to reconcile the steadfastness of their faith in Christ with the warning we have seen given them — “If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled.” All we have to do is to believe both. What it really proves is, that no blessed order or steadfastness can guarantee a soul that admits wrong thoughts and corrupt principles that shroud, weaken, or lower the glory of Christ. Thus, the seeming incongruity makes the danger more apparent and striking. The fact of their order and the steadfastness of the faith in Christ that had characterized them (vs. 5) were in themselves no effectual bulwark against the evil that menaced them. The Apostle felt, and lets them know, that, though they were so blessed, yet by admitting the enticing words of others, their souls would be injured and undermined. No soul, no matter what the blessing in time past or present, can afford to trifle with that which upsets the Person or glory of Christ. The Colossians had been remarkably favored, and the Apostle rejoiced in beholding their order and steadfast faith in Christ; still in the very verse before, he cautions them “lest any man should beguile you with enticing words” (Col. 2:4).

What he presses upon them is, that as they had received the Christ, Jesus the Lord, they should walk in Him (vs. 6), abiding as they had begun. Speculation, covered over with plausible language, was what they had to guard against. Therefore, though absent in the flesh, the Apostle says he was with them in spirit, joying and beholding their order. For this very reason they were to be warned of what would mar the Savior’s glory in their testimony. The finest fruit is most easily injured. They would thus practically lose Christ. He does not the least call in question their real blessing thus far. On the contrary, he reminds them of it, and tells them to walk in Christ, “rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught”; not downcast because of perils, but “abounding therein with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:7). It is very close work, the object being to exclude the persuasive speech of false men that, if received, would steal them away imperceptibly from Christ.

When we are at rest in Christ before God, we can enter in and behold the manifestation of Himself in Christ, after the most blessed sort. It is very important to see Christ not only in His work of reconciliation, but as revealing the Father. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.” The Holy Spirit does exalt Christ, no doubt, but then the Son is never exalted, so to speak, at the expense of the Father, any more than the Father can accept honor where the Son is degraded.

The important thing for Christians is to be true to what they believe and confess, or rather to what God has revealed for their faith and confession. Whatever takes us away from the grace and truth which came by Christ, always tends to subvert even Christ Himself. The Colossians had been heretofore happy and really steadfast in their faith in Christ; but they were now allowing doctrines among them which, if not rooted out, would infallibly lead them away from Christ. Here lay their danger. It is astonishing how eagerly and easily Christians are apt to admit something new. The Apostle in this case refers to philosophical speculations, which seem to have been brought in at Colosse, as well as Jewish elements, if indeed they were not combined.

It was not enough for them to have Christ; they were to walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him, assured in the faith, and not caught by these novel dreams, whether of an intellectual or a religious kind. It was thus an early error, that philosophy might be united to Christianity in order to make divine revelation more palatable to earnest, thoughtful minds. It had been all very well, they thought, to preach Christ at first simply; but now that it was no longer a question of a few lowly Galileans, why not address themselves to the great and wise of the earth, sick as many were of heathenism, and repelled by cold Judaism? And, if so, why not meet them as much as possible on their own ground? Why not engraft into Christianity some of the common sense of Aristotle, or, still better, the lofty aspirings of Plato, or yet more readily such high and noble sentiments as Philo represents in his Biblical essays?

Philosophy is one great bane of Christianity now as in these early days. The whole scheme of God’s truth and ways is blotted out or has no room left for it in the teaching of philosophy. They overlook creation and the fall. They defy conscience, which man acquired by the fall. They ignore sin and God’s judgment of sin. So also God’s grace is unknown and the atonement its fruit. Rationalists would reduce divine truth to a mere set of inferences that people draw. But truth is never a conclusion. The moment I draw a conclusion, I am on the ground of science. Thus logic is a natural science, the handmaid, one may say of all others, which submits facts to it; but what has this to do with submitting to the truth of God? Revelation may pronounce on things as they are in man, as it also gives us things as they are from God; it does not merely show us that such or such a thing must be, which is the province of human reasoning; the truth reveals to us that a thing is. A poor soul might be

perplexed to understand what must be; but no one that hears the testimony can avoid receiving or rejecting, if God declares that a given thing or person is. Hence the vast importance of faith.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 2:8-12

The Colossians were beginning to let in two snares — a reasoning mind, and certain ascetic mortifications of the body. The one was in connection with philosophy, the other had its root in Judaism. These were the two great errors then slipping in, of whose real character and source they were not aware. The Apostle warns them (Col. 2:8), though he had just told them he rejoiced in their faith and order. How sad in them to slip! But this is not all. He as good as says: Take care of what you are doing, of letting go what has produced such fruits, for the fair promises some are holding out to you. They tell you these new thoughts and ways can be held along with Christ; but let me say that you are embracing and taking up that which will frustrate, sooner or later, the truth which you now profess.

The effect invariably is, that those who are not really born of God receive these inner dreams and outer forms instead of Christianity, while true believers are seriously damaged, and lose their delight in Christ and their testimony for Him. The one error suits the speculative, the other would meet those of a more practical turn of mind. No wonder, therefore, he exhorts them to be “rooted and built up in Christ, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.”

This last word is much to be weighed. I suppose their thanksgivings were beginning to wane, for such is the immediate effect of other objects intruding into the place of Christ.

“See lest there shall be any one that leads you as his prey through philosophy and vain deceit according to the tradition of men, according to the rudiments of the world, and not according to Christ.” The earth gives clouds and not light. Man promises and undertakes much, but he can really give nothing but the blinding deceits of the master he is enslaved to. There is the deepest possible necessity for these warnings.

Speculation about the origin of things, or about the eternity of matter, for instance, in which the Orientals, Gnostics, and so forth, delighted, might not have seemed directly dangerous. People are ready enough to say, Our philosophy is one thing, our religion another. They might reason then, as since, that the world must have been made out of something always in existence. This may sound plausible to some minds, but it has a great flaw for the believer; it makes nothing of God and gives His Word the lie. Matter becomes the great circumstance before the mind, and God is made like man — a mere active mind, a manufacturing power.

How grandly the scripture of the Galilean fisherman rebukes all such dreamers! “All things were made by Him and without him was not anything made that was made.” How aptly the error had been already met in Colossians 1:16! “For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him and for Him.” The idea of the eternity of matter brings in from the first something outside God, independent and antagonistic; for this was the further deduction from the actual state of the world. Hence they reasoned of the two first principles, the one good, the other evil. This was the very error which was so much followed out in and interwoven into heathen philosophy, especially in the east, as indeed to this day. It is evident that the principle as to the eternity of matter, once admitted, leads the way to an abyss of falsehood and moral evil; and he would soonest fall into these inward or outward excesses who reasons most from his false starting point.

Faith repudiates philosophy, not only as a rival but as an ally; it rests only on God’s Word; it accepts that Word as absolute and exclusive. Therefore had the Apostle the best reason for warning them against philosophy and vain deceit, “according to the rudiments of the world and not according to Christ.” They savor of, as they spring from, man as he is, not Christ; they suit the world, not heaven, nor those who belong to it, even while they are upon the earth. “For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (vs. 9).

What gives a more wonderful view of Christ than this truth which the simplest believer knows, or ought to know, however little able to explain it? There is nothing like it. There alone we have the truth. We know God now; and how? Not by reasoning, as if thus we could search and find Him out. We know Him in Christ as a living Person who lived once bodily in this world, who still has His body above the world. We know from God, from His Word, that in the Person of Christ “dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily,” not merely in His spirit, but really in Him bodily, though He be now glorified. He had a real, true body from the incarnation; but He had all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Him thus.

Nor is this all. The Apostle adds, “Ye are complete in Him” (vs. 10); so you do not want philosophy even if it contained anything good, still less since it is positively bad. What we want is to enjoy Christ better and to walk more according to Him — not to glean other things from man as if they could enrich Christ, whereas they do but corrupt the truth. Man fallen is away from God, and under the power of the devil. This is the fact that makes these human notions so false and ruinous. Philosophical principles spring from death and can only produce death. In all heathenism (and perhaps one might say as much of Christendom) there is nothing more deadly than its philosophy. It is only less deceitful than the world’s religion. It sounds reasonable, and a man gets charmed with the beauty or boldness of thoughts, imaginations, and language. Faith destroys both superstition and infidelity by the truth of God, and this by the revelation of Christ.

The fullness of the Godhead never dwelt in the Father or in the Holy Spirit, but only in Christ. He was the only One of whom this wonderful reality could be affirmed. The whole fullness in Him dwelt and dwells still. “The Father that dwelleth in me [said He here below], he doeth the works.” Again, “If I by the Spirit of God cast out devils..." Here we have not only the Son, but in and by Him the three Persons of the Godhead active in grace in this evil world. And faith receives what Scripture says of the unseen and eternal; faith acts on God’s revealed mind as to the present. Unbelieving man refuses what is above himself and draws inferences from what he knows or does not know; but God will destroy both him and them. It is not only that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ, but we are (not that fullness, but) filled full in Him. We may be and are said to be the fullness of Christ (Eph. 1), but never, of course, of the Godhead.

Hence we “are complete in Him who is the head of all principality and power: in whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body [of the sins] of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:10-11). This is expressly in contrast with the external ordinance of circumcision. It should be “putting off the body of the flesh,” not the body “of the sins” of the flesh. The true reading makes it a more complete thing; it is not a question of sins, but rather of sin in the nature. “Sins” would hardly be in keeping with the scope of

the passage or phrase. It does not refer to the literal act of circumcising, but to Christ's death. When we believe in Christ, we have all the value of His death made true of us. This is here called circumcision not made by hands, in contrast with the ancient ordinance. The meaning and spiritual thought of circumcision is the mortification of human nature, man as he is being treated as a dead thing. It is Christ's death that gives us this privilege. We are brought into association with His death and have all its value in parting with our own ruined condition, "the body of the flesh," when we receive Him by faith. This circumcision supersedes all others, which in no way stripped off our evil state as man in the flesh.

"Buried with Him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with Him through the faith of the operation of God who raised him out of the dead." This brings in not so much Christ's personal glory, as His work. The first chapter gives us chiefly His personal glory; and even though it spoke of His work, it was the reconciliation of all things, and of the saints withal, meanwhile, before the glory is revealed. Chapter 2 presses His work upon the saints. I have no doubt the wisdom of the Holy Spirit is shown in this; we have first Himself and His work in general, then the specific value and effect of His work for us and on us. There His headship is doubly unfolded with precision; here the fact of His being the Head of all principality and authority, is just alluded to, giving emphasis to our completeness in Him.

The reference to circumcision is clearly bound up with Christ's death, and so forth — not the legal act to which He submitted, nor a question of His Person, but of His work applied to us. This is entirely confirmed by the statement of our being buried with Him in baptism, in which, says he, ye have also been raised with Him. The great point is the linking us to Christ. By Him alone the work was done; but when we believe in Him, we are brought into its efficacy and acquire by grace a common position with Him. It is not merely that it was by virtue of Him, but in Him this great work was wrought, whereby we have a place in and with Him. The initiatory institution of Christianity sets forth this immense distinctive blessing of the Christian. We owned in baptism that we died in Christ's death out of the condition in which we naturally lived; and now we are raised with Him by faith of the operation of God who raised Him out of the dead. We are thus entered on a new state (not, of course, our bodies yet, but our souls). The practical application of both death and resurrection with Christ, we shall soon see in the hands of the Apostle.

Much as the Spirit of God brings out the quickening power of Christ in this epistle, He never pursues the ultimate or highest consequences of the work of Christ. Quickened or raised up by Him, or rather raised together with Him, is the utmost we find here; hence there He stops. Again in chapter 3, although He says, "Seek those things that are above," He does not say we are there, but, on the contrary, looks at the saints as being on earth, while seeking the things that are above. Thus, this epistle never goes so far as the Ephesians; it nowhere says we are seated in heavenly places.

As we have seen and as is clear, the current of the communications of grace was interrupted; there was a hindrance before the Apostle. The Holy Spirit cannot freely show the saints the things of Christ, where He has to show them their own things. He turns aside to occupy Himself with the truth practically, and apply it to them, which is never the sign of souls being thoroughly bright; for there ought not to be such a need for arresting the flow of grace and truth. In Ephesians, on the contrary, the work of Christ is carried out to all its fullest consequences; the healthy state of the saint is unfolded, and exhortations follow proportionately high.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 2:13-19

(Chapter 2:13-19)

We have an instance here of the way in which the Apostle, having brought in a general principle, turns to them and says, "you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses"; then in verse 16, he goes aside to show how very pointedly and completely the work of God would take them away from the things of the flesh and law — "Having blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us," and so forth. Yet you want to get ordinances again! The only effect of this handwriting must be against you; it is very strongly expressed, and the Apostle repeats it in a double form.

These Colossian saints were not so far gone in legalism as to put Christians under the ten commandments as a rule of life. To bring in ordinances even, was not so ruinous, because they at least derive their entire value from the truth of Christ, couched and shadowed forth in them; whereas, there is nothing like making a rule of life of the law for awakening the spirit of self-righteousness in the confident, and of distrust and despair in more diffident souls, reversing exactly the way of grace with both.

The Apostle insists, that even to let in the principle of ordinances now is to renounce the fundamental truth of death and resurrection (that is, of Christianity), because they suppose men alive in the world, not dead and risen in Christ. Those led aside may not mean to do anything of the sort, but the enemy does who misleads them. It is going back to dealings of a preparatory kind, into flesh and the world, and is in effect a forsaking of the glorious privileges of Christ to do so.

The Apostle does not dwell here as in Galatians on the consequences of our being made debtors to fulfill the whole law, if we venture under it at all; but he shows, that it is a denial of Christ, as we know Him, if we allow of going back to law in any form, ordinances or not. It is the folly of making a merit of a return to the discipline of the rod and to the value of the letter game and of the dissected map and of the toy rewards for full grown men.

It is evident that, in the handling of men of philosophic tone, the rite of circumcision might be made a much more spiritual thing than any man could work out of the law as a rule of life. For they might say, as men have said, that circumcision was pressed only as the emblem of what we have in Christ, an ancient and divine, though of course, outward sign of spiritual grace. But the step was fatal; for if they admitted that sign, it was a recurrence to shadows when the substance was come; it was a relinquishment of grace too for the principle of law. The fathers had circumcision, no doubt, before Moses, which was then especially connected with promise. Still, although it was originally before the nation's responsibility to the law was pledged at Sinai, it was after that so imbedded in the law that they cannot be separated. Take up circumcision now; and if you do not put yourself, the law puts you, under its whole system, and separates you in principle from Christ as an exalted heavenly Head who has accomplished redemption.

Thus, if there was one ordinance that more than any might symbolize with promise and grace, it was circumcision; yet so strong was the Apostle, that he tells the Galatians, that, admitting it all, they became debtors to do the whole law. To the Colossians he goes farther, and shows how it contradicts and sets aside the work of Christ, and the place of association with Him, into which we are thereby brought before God. Hence he here intimates what sort of circumcision we already have as Christians; it is of divine operation and not human: “In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the flesh,” and so forth. “Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him,” and so forth.

In Galatians, the law is in connection with justification; in Colossians, with Christ risen from the dead and in heaven. Christ, at any rate, is there; and although we are not seen to be in Him there, His exaltation to God’s right hand really decides our place as dead with Him and risen with Him; not merely as justified by His blood, but dead and risen with Him. Of all this exceeding rich roll of blessing, subjection to ordinances is the denial; for what has Christ to do with the law now? And it is with Christ as He is, not as He was under law, that we are associated. In Hebrews we have another thing; it is not our death and resurrection with Christ, but Christ now appearing in the presence of God for us in glory, which is founded upon the perfection of His work, His one offering, which has forever put away sin. He is there at the right hand of God because He has by Himself purged our sins.

The law as a code or system for us is inconsistent with Christ’s place in glory as the bright exhibition of our triumph through God’s grace; and such is the Christian way of looking at Christ. We do not, it is true, find our association with Christ dead or risen in Hebrews; still less is it the display of our union with Him above; neither is it justification, as in Romans and Galatians; but the value of His work measured by His position in heaven shines there with special luster. Any allowance of ordinances now is proved to be a gainsaying of His work and of the glory He has in heaven, in danger too of leading to apostasy.

From verse 13, then, the Apostle takes great pains to set before the saints at Colosse their condition without and with Christ: “You being dead in your sins... hath He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” The very life we have received as believers is the token that our trespasses are gone. If God has quickened us with the life of Christ, He has forgiven us all trespasses. It is impossible that life in Christ dead and risen could have anything against it. There was everything against the believer once; but the possession of life in a risen Saviour necessarily attests that all is righteously forgiven to him who believes. It is a remarkable way of putting the matter, an exactly parallel case to which you can scarce find in any other part of Scripture.

In general, as we too well know, recourse is had to ordinances for meeting shortcomings and whetting spiritual appetite. It is never in Christendom the open or despite denial of Christ, but the supply of certain aids to faith (!) or feelings besides Christ. This is precisely what the Apostle affirms to be so unbelieving and evil. “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us,” observe, not against you, but against us. When the Apostle comes to speak of the operation of the law, he will not say “you,” but “us”; as, again, “which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.” The fact is, the Galatian saints, being Gentiles, had never been under law at all; and therefore he does not say “you”; but when he spoke of sins just before, he said “you”; “You being dead in your sins,” This makes the distinction very striking. “You” occurs in verse 13, because it applies to any sinner now, Jew or Gentile; while it is “us” in verse 14, because none but Jews, strictly speaking, were under law. The allusion to handwriting was very notable also; for the Gentiles had never put their hands to it, whereas the Jews had affirmed “all that the Lord hath spoken we will do,” and thereon had been sprinkled with the blood as a seal of the legal covenant they had signed under the penalty of death.

The Apostle declares this was contrary to them and only brought in, as we know, condemnation, darkness, and death. What has Christ done in respect to all this? He has blotted it out, taken it out of the way. Do you want, like the Colossians, to bring it back again? Christ nailed it to His cross — an expression of entire triumph over it. “And having spoiled principalities and powers he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.”

It is very interesting to see the way in which the power of evil is viewed according to the place we are in. When the Church appears, it is not so much Satan’s power on earth (which was the way the Jews felt it chiefly); but we have the special disclosure, that he is the prince of the power of the air, and that the wicked spirits are in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). This in no way clashes with what we have in the Old Testament! only now it is brought out more fully, and shown to be the position in which they are as opposed to the Christian. In Revelation 12 we see them (the dragon and his angels) ejected from heaven. They wanted to keep the heavenly places; they desired to hinder the Church, and dishonor God in His saints, that they might have a righteous claim over them, as it were. It was intolerable to them that such as had behaved badly on earth should be at last with the Son of God in heavenly places.

Alas! how many here below of the very race whom God so distinguishes in His mercy betray that they are of their father the devil, by love of falsehood and by hatred of God’s grace and truth. Here we have the effect of the work of Christ upon these powers — leading them in triumph on the cross. It is not so high a tone of triumph as in Ephesians 4, where it is said, Christ led captivity captive. The powers that led believers into captivity were themselves vanquished. The reason is manifest. It was when He ascended up on high. Here we hear of what was done on the cross, the power of the cross; but there it is the public manifestation of the victory, in ascending up on high. The great battle was won. Christ had forever defeated the powers of evil for the joint heirs.

This ascending up on high, and leading captivity captive, is the witness that they are powerless against the Christian. The language is always adapted to the point of view which the Holy Spirit is taking — whether it be of earth or heaven, whether of Israel or the Church. More than this, it depends on how and where He looks at the saints now. If they are viewed as in the wilderness, there is a different style and figure. Satan is spoken of as “a roaring lion,” which suits the wilderness; and hence this is not the way he is spoken of in Ephesians, but in 1 Peter.

Now comes the practical turn to which the Apostle applies this. “Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink, or in respect of a feast, or new-moon, or Sabbaths; which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ” (Col. 2:16-17). A Christian man who knows the victory of Christ for us should not surely entertain the idea of going back to these elementary forms of working good. Hold fast your actual place in Christ, act consistently with it. As to eating and drinking or ordinances relative to the year, month, and week (and the Apostle takes particular care to speak not merely of Feast or New Moon but of Sabbaths) , remember that these things but prefigure the body or substantial good found really and only in Christ.

In fact, these times and seasons point chiefly to what God will give His people by-and-by. The new moon was a remarkable type of Israel being renewed after fading away, as the Sabbath was the type of the rest of God which He will yet enjoy and share. But whether it be peace or drink

offerings or the feasts in general, they are connected as the shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. This we have. The Jew had the shadow, and he will have the things to come by the grace of God under the new covenant by-and-by. We are given the substance of Christ now. It is a question here of Jewish days. The Lord's day has nothing to do with Judaism; it is not only apart from, but in contrast with that system.

The Lord's Day is as distinctly a Christian institution as the Lord's Supper, the Jew having nothing to do with either. It is very important to see that God has put honor upon the day of resurrection and grace. When people are radically loose or begin to slip away from the Lord, an early symptom is carelessness about this day. There ought to be an exercised conscience about it, not only for our own selves, but also as to servants within and others without our houses. It is of very great consequence that the sense of liberty and grace should not even have the appearance of laxity or selfishness.

It is not exactly said the body is Christ. It is said "the Lord is that spirit," not that body, which was within the letter of the law. "The body" is used in contrast with "the shadow." There is no substance in a shadow, but we have the body which is of Christ. The twofold idea is that, while the substance is of Him, He is the spirit of all.

Verse 16 deals chiefly with a Judaizing character of evil; but verse 18 goes farther and shows a kind of prying into the unseen, not so much the religious use or misuse of the seen, which was the Jewish snare, but dabbling with philosophy, specially of the Orientals. There was a great appearance of humility in all this, as there always is in false systems. The worship of angels seemed right and due, especially as no term peculiar to divine worship was used. Let it be ever so modified, still the Apostle speaks of it strongly. "Let no man deprive you of your reward, doing his will in humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen,1 vainly puffed up by the mind of his flesh." The Orientals indulged in abundant speculation about angels. It is true there are such beings; but it is the prying into such subjects that is so evil. They have to do with us, but not we with them. Our business is with God. Now it seemed to be a reasonable inference that if angels had to do with us, we must have to do with them; and inasmuch as they had to do with God immediately, why should we not have recourse to them with Him? It was not an unnatural thought; what then makes it so grievous an error?

It is the setting aside of Christ who is the Head of all and so above angels. Christ is the One who determines our relation before God; and for all our need with God, we have Christ the great High Priest. Thus the putting angels in this place is a double dishonor to Christ. Such a speculator was "vainly puffed up by the mind of his flesh." It might be plausible, but it injured not only the soul's enjoyment of Christ but His nature and glory to indulge in thoughts of the kind. "And not holding fast the Head, from whom all the body, by joints and bands being ministered to and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God" (Col. 2:19).

It was false teachers who were thus depriving the saints of their blessing. These men habitually and instinctively seek to ingratiate themselves with the children of God, whose unsuspecting simplicity exposes them to be carried away by them. The worship of angels was one method in which the evil showed itself there and evinced its false character. The Holy Spirit is come down to glorify Christ, not angels. He who went beyond Scripture after angels, certainly did not hold fast the Head. The reference here to ministry is not at all the same as in Ephesians, where the Apostle enters into it copiously and shows the spiritual gifts in their chief forms from the highest down to the least, by which the body works for itself the building of itself up in love. Hence, if souls came together in a very simple way, it might still be for edification. Here all is put together, not expanded and distinguished as in Ephesians.

If God has led such into the place where Christ's headship (I may add, too, the Holy Spirit's presence) is held and acted on, how can they expect blessing from those who do not see nor act upon it? These truths are fundamental for the church and ministry. We have to hold to the will of God; and God has His own will as to all this, and His own wisdom and way, which ought to be something in our eyes.

Here we are told of joints and bands — the various means which Christ employs for the spiritual blessing and profit of His people. It enables the body to work better; it concentrates the saints around Christ, and for His glory. It is well to seek the diffusion of blessing to others; but for the saints, the truest thing is the power of gathering to Christ Himself, not merely sending out servants, but gathering to Christ as Lord where there is need of spiritual power to hold together. This is to increase "with the increase of God." There is then enlargement, comfort, and consolation. The power that is expressed is not in conversion only, but works within in positive blessing and self-judgment.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 2:20-23

(Chapter 2:20-23)

Here we have the application spiritually of these two great truths, the death and the resurrection of Christ. They had been already put together in verse 12. "Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him." "And you, being dead in your sins, hath He quickened together with Him" (Col 2:13). Now, from verse 20 to 23, we have the consequences of being thus dead with Christ, as in Colossians 3, from the first verse onward, we have the meaning of the resurrection of Christ — that which it secures and to which the Holy Spirit calls us as thus risen with Christ.

The use that is made of our death with Christ is not that we are redeemed. In this point of view the blood of Christ is ever made prominent. It is not that the forgiveness of all trespasses is omitted, but the death of Christ and our association with Him goes much farther here and introduces us to another line of truth altogether. We might have seen the offering of His body, the shedding of His blood, and there might have been no presentation of death with Him. What is here founded upon our being dead with Christ is the having nothing to do with nature or the world in the things of God. The whole force of the world's religion denies death with Christ; it does not see and will not admit the total ruin of man as he is. What the world thinks of in a religion is that which will suit people in every variety of condition. Human wisdom provides for each and all, for the becoming religious observance of the entire population of a land. Thus all decent people, all who are not scandalous livers, and so forth, are made worshipers, and have a religion adapted to their thoughts of themselves and God, mainly occupied with what man essays to do for God. It is a mixture of heathenism with Jewish forms, and finds its element in certain abstinences as its holiness. As there can be no positive enjoyment of Christ, the negative must be its essential characteristic. God embodied these very elements in Judaism, which was a religion of the flesh and a worldly sanctuary. He Himself made the experiment, so to speak, of an immense system of restrictions, which

is the only conceivable plan for a man as such to be holy to the Lord. Hence we find the trial under every advantage of this kind of worship in the Levitical law. Besides the restraint put on man's will morally in the ten words, particular meats and drinks were forbidden. They were not even to touch certain ceremonially unclean objects. All this had to do with man in the flesh, though I doubt not that every ordinance in the Jewish system had a weighty meaning as shadowing better things in Christ. There were always precious truths couched under these forms and ceremonies. The letter kills (that is, the mere outward husk of the system), but the Spirit gives life, wherever there was faith to lay hold of the spiritual import.

Now if we are "dead with Christ," where is the application to us of "touch not, taste not, handle not"? Such injunctions disappear entirely, because, if already and really dead with Christ, I am outside this kind of language and ideas. You may as well exhort a dead man as to his old wants or duties. The old religious system for man in the flesh is absolutely done with for the Christian. It is to contradict the foundation on which he stands, yea, his very baptism. In Christ he is dead to the world. Hence, if a Christian mingle with the world's religion, he invariably loses the sense of being dead with Christ, as well as the true judgment of the world and man. The only means by which the world could ever be religious is by a resort to the law, as we see in every national system, and indeed in every effort to win the acceptance of man as such. But this is now to give up Christ dead and risen, little as men think it.

Here the Apostle seems to allude to the general system of human restriction in religious matters rather than to any particular part of the Old Testament. When a man dies, he leaves behind him his wealth, rank, ease, reputation, energy, that constituted his enjoyment in this life. So does the Christian from the starting point, by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection. Thus it is a great truth on which he is called to act while he is still on the earth. In Christ he is now dead to the world. There is in many Christians the entire overlooking of this truth either as a privilege for enjoyment or as a reality for practice. To them it is a mere mysticism, the idea of being dead and risen with Christ, which they are too humble and reverent to look on and think about. Let me add that it is not the same thing as having life in Christ, for this was of course ever true of believers before there was or could be such a standing as that of being dead and risen with Christ. After the death and resurrection of Christ, such was the great change in this respect that then came in.

It is thus evident that to be dead with Christ takes a person not only out of the world in spirit, but out of the whole system of its religion. "If ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?" Such had been the condition of men, at best, before Christ. They were at the letters, so to speak; the rudiments or elements had their place and trial. But now, the Son of God being come and having given us to know Him that is true, it is the substance and fullness of the truth that we know in knowing Christ. The work of Christ rested on by faith fits the believer now for this place where old things are passed away and all things are made new. "Why, as though living in the world" is a most remarkable expression. It shows that we are not true to our standing, as well as to Christ, if we are as men alive in the world. We have a new life, which is the life of Him who is dead and risen; and this has now brought us into the condition of death to all that is of the world. Hence as to the religion of the world, the Christian has in principle as really done with it as Christ Himself had after His death. What had our Lord from His cross to do with the fasts and feasts of the Jews? Absolutely nothing; neither ought we; and by "we" I mean every real Christian. The time of patience with the Christian Jews is long passed away; there is no longer the smallest ground of excuse in Christendom.

I admit that the great mass of Christians will not hear of such a breach with the world; and thus comes one severe trial of those who see it thus a foundation truth of Christ. Have they in grace made up their minds for His sake to be counted fanatical, foolish, proud, hard, narrow, committing these and all other calumnies to Him who loves them, and knows the end from the beginning? The taking up the rudiments of the world is then a flat practical contradiction to our death with Christ.

The Colossians were in danger of this snare. They did not see why, because they were Christians, they should leave off what seemed good enough done among the Jews or Gentiles. They wanted to hold on to the truth of Christ, but to keep up, or adopt along with it, religious forms which had been observed in olden times. No, says the Apostle, it is Christ who is all our good, and nothing but Christ; we need nothing else. Christ is all. Nothing was so exclusive as Christ and the cross, and yet what was so large? "In Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." But He was rejected. Since then Jewish forms and principles had lost all their ancient value.

In Galatians the Apostle speaks even more strongly than here. He charged those who would observe days and months and times and years with going back to heathenism. "Howbeit then when ye knew not God, yet did service to them which by nature are no gods" (that was their old Gentile condition); "but now after that ye have known God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?" They thought that it was to improve on the early simplicity of the gospel, if they borrowed from the law. How little did they expect the apostolic rebuke, that it is as bad for Christians to take up Jewish elements as to turn back to idolatry! It is in truth now shown to be the same principle; such is the light in which the cross of Christ puts these worldly elements.

Before many years are over, there may be seen a strange amalgam not merely between the churches, so-called, but between Christendom and Judaism. The loss of the temporalities of the Roman See is no unimportant step in the chain of events. In due time Rome will be left free for the beast to display his power in, Jerusalem becoming the central seat of religion to which Christendom will turn. There will not only be idolatry, but the abomination of desolation; the man of sin will be set up and worshiped in his time. All works on toward a worse evil than even popery itself.

But if such will be the end, the way now is "living in the world," which means that the heart is here, that one has settled down to the world's religion. A Christian, on the contrary, is one who belongs to heaven. The error of embracing these Jewish elements practically denied this, and especially the being dead with Christ. The only sure way to judge of anything is to bring in Christ. The question here is, How stands Christ in view of the world's religion? When He lived here below, He, undoubtedly, went to the temple, owning and practicing the law (however truly the only begotten Son of the Father), for God did; He had not yet given up Israel, man, the earth, all things here below. But where and how is Christ now? One cannot, again, have and keep truth unless it be followed out; and God does not mean that we should possess it otherwise. He gives a testimony; the light shines; but the truth only fills a soul when acted on, else the light that is within becomes darkness; and then how great is that darkness! Need one hesitate to affirm that if a man professed to understand what it is to be dead with Christ and yet went on with the world's religion, he would show himself to be a thoroughly dishonest man? It is more than a want of intelligence. What more solemn, save sacrificing Christ's Person? Those who seem to have the truth but refuse to act upon it, will ere long become enemies of the truth which they do not follow.

The religion of the world has to do with this creation; it belongs to those things of which people can say, “Touch not, taste not, handle not.” Take the principle of consecrated buildings, holy places within the holy, sacred vestments, anything of that kind which perishes with the using, all is connected with the world; and the flesh is capable of enjoying it. To say it does not matter where or how we worship God is as bad as any evil. There is nothing worse than indifference in the things of God. Those who are thus careless in what regards God, are not wanting in vigilance as to what concerns themselves. I speak, of course, of the general facts, not of individuals. If we did not know ourselves associated with Christ dead and risen, our worship ought to be a kind of accommodated Judaism, which was the religion of a people living in the world.

Now, on the contrary, all that is entirely judged in the cross to be enmity against God; and Christians are called to have nothing to do with it. There is wonderful blessedness in realizing where the death of Christ puts us. It has quite closed with whatever is alive in the world, with all that a man in the world might value. Living in the world takes two great forms, one superstitious, the other secular, self being necessarily the root of both. Being dead with Christ delivers us from both. Take the American churches as the secular form in religion; the one idea is to make themselves comfortable even in devotion. The idea of worshiping God is gone. They have no notion what it is to be dead with Christ. The greater danger, however, lies on the other or superstitious side, because that has a fine show of humility, piety, and reverence. But those who are truly, wonderfully, delivered through death and resurrection with Christ ought to avoid all reproach of lightness and negligence. Unbecoming behavior is nowhere so painful as where the Christian standing is known, and the ground of God’s Church is taken.

Then the Apostle gives us a sample of what these ordinances are. It is not the power of the Spirit of God unfolding the things of Christ, but something that relates to self, chiefly of a negative character. Such of old was the dealing of law with flesh in an evil world. Faith is now entitled to look on Christ in heaven. “Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh.” This is not God’s will, but man devising means of pleasing Him out of his own head. All this clothes itself with a great apparent lowliness, and cherishes asceticism. It is exactly what philosophy has done — denying the proper place of our bodies. How strikingly, on the contrary, does the New Testament bring out the vast importance of the body! It proclaims, for instance, that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. This is most important, and, itself the effect of redemption, is the true ground of Christian morals. “Yield up your members as instruments of righteousness to God”; “Present your bodies a living sacrifice,” and so forth.

The philosophic mind of Corinth went on the principle that it mattered not about the body, provided the spirit was all right. The Apostle insists that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). Further, there is the truth of the resurrection of the body, and not merely the immortality of the soul. The emphasis is upon the body; so that although the body is fallen under sin, the power of the Holy Spirit is there, who is said to dwell in each believer. You cannot reclaim the flesh, you cannot improve the will. The old man has to be judged, denied, treated as vile; but the body is even now made the temple of the Holy Spirit. Adam, before he fell, had body, soul, and spirit; but directly he fell, he acquired self-will — the loving to have his own way. This is a thing we should always treat as evil, and judge ourselves if in any way we allow it to act. What can give a man such power against it as Christ known thus in full delivering grace? Like the captured sword of Goliath, “of weapons there is none like that.” If I am dead and risen with Christ, where is the old man? It does not exist in the sight of God; therefore we are not to allow it in the sight of men.

The prime thought of worldly religion is correcting the flesh, and improving the world. The mind finds greater glory in itself by ascetic efforts. Neglect of the body may be at the same time a puffing up of the flesh. It was a heathenish idea, the foster child of philosophy. They willingly believed that the soul was holy if not the body, some contending that the soul came from God and the body from the devil. This was productive of frightful evil, to the destruction of all morality. Is there not an answer in Christ to all these wanderings of the human mind? Receiving the truth in Him, you get that which defeats the object of Satan; but the Holy Spirit alone, if I may so say, makes it to be truth in us. May it be received in the love of it, that thus there may be abundant fruit of righteousness by Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 3:1-11, Notes on

We have seen death with Christ and its consequences applied to the danger which menaced the Colossian saints, judging the evil into which Satan was trying to draw them back. But the effect of this death with Christ was there regarded chiefly in a negative point of view. Why were such as they subject to ordinances? They ought not to be; for in Christ they were dead from the rudiments of the world and had consequently nothing to do with ordinances. These might be all well enough for men alive in the world, but necessarily cannot apply to dead men. It was a total spiritual contradiction. Now the Christian is dead by virtue of the cross of Christ. This is all a matter of faith. Of course he is alive naturally; he is disposed also, if not occupied with Christ, his life, to have old thoughts and habits revived; &c. As a believer I ought to distrust every judgment, every feeling I have had as a natural man, remembering that the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God. But now the Christian is looked at as a dead man, aye, dead to the world doing its best, even the religions world. The best the realm of nature can pretend to is in not touching, tasting, handling. Such is its only way of getting the victory, which is really no victory at all, but merely abstinence from certain things, or a system of fleshly restrictions. That is wholly distinct from the principle of the Christian. He looks for the victory of grace. For the death of Christ has delivered him from the whole ground of nature in not touching, tasting, or handling. This was Jewish in principle, and not merely so, but it was the natural religion for man. It is only thus that men try to avoid evil in the world. Christianity does not merely avoid the evil within and around, but brings in death to it all. Christ has died to it, and the Christian should know himself dead to all that is of the world, moral or religious, as decidedly as gross, intellectual or infidel.

In chapter 3 we advance a step farther. The apostle reasons from our being risen with Christ. It is not merely that we shall die and rise, but that we are dead and risen. Even many Christians who use the words constantly, do not really enter into the meaning of this language, and for the obvious and sufficient reason—they are not living in the truth of it practically: they are too habitually mixed up with the world to understand such absolute separation from it. It is not that they are dull of understanding in the things and interests of nature. But their speech and their ways bewray them, proving how far they are from intelligence of the Scripture itself. They substitute mysticism for the truth.

Before Christ came God had appointed a system of ordinances. Judaism was the world's religion in its best shape. Those who were formed in that school, till they underwent a total revolution by grace, never understood the distinctive features of Christianity. Its character was hidden from them. The Jews had no notion of the flesh being utterly ruined—no sense of sin, no understanding of the grace of God. As a nation they were put under law, under Levitical priesthood, under outward sacrifices, under carnal ordinances. All this was a part of what they had to go

through, great truths being concealed under these rudimentary pictures. Christendom has taken up the things that were right enough for a Jew, but which are now called “the elements of the world,” as in truth they are. They were not so judged when God was dealing with Israel. It was, however, what the world is capable of. Now they are treated as elements of the world; but it was not so before Christ died.

There are many, for instance, who think you cannot have fit worship for God without a sacred building and ceremonies in accordance and the more beautiful the building, and imposing the ritual, the more they count it acceptable to God. Now all this is part of the elements of the world. Again, there are those who think you cannot have the Lord's Supper without an official ordained for the purpose of administering it. There is no such custom in the Church of God. The apostle repudiates the entire system. It is an invention of the enemy. New Testament Scripture, which reveals the Church, excludes all this. Not only is it not a good thing, but all such thoughts and ways are evil now, and opposed to the cross and the heavenly glory of Christ.

Scripture remains unchangeable (whatever the changes of Christendom), and what we need is to betake ourselves to the light of Scripture. This is a simple but immense safeguard—let us go back to God's word and cleave to that alone. The devil was at this Judaizing work among the Colossians; his great aim was to lead them away to ordinances, Jewish forms which had their lawful place once, but were not in force now. Christianity treats them as of no account, and indeed so far from retaining any value they are treated as childish, and even idolatrous to the Christian. That was naturally a very serious difficulty for a Jew. All that Moses, David, Hezekiah honored as religious observances, were they asked to abandon now? Yes, but Christ had come; and were they not to “hear Him” now? Redemption, the substance of their figures, was wrought: was this to be slighted? The great error of Christendom has always been a going back to ordinances. Take the principle of a consecrated order of men; what is it but the same thing? It is true, all Christians have not the same gift or place; there are only a few gifted to help, lead on, and instruct the many. What is a difficulty to some is, that up to the cross Christ was of course bound up with the Jewish system. But this closed with His cross, resurrection, and ascension. The Christian's connection with Christ is since then founded on the cross, which rent the veil and thus dissolved the Jewish system. Therefore it is said, “Seek the things above where Christ is seated on the right hand of God.” (Ver. 1.) It is very beautiful, the allusion to Christ's place on high outside the world. It is His settled place in glory as our keynote. Not that we are here said to be seated in Him there. In Ephesians that side of the truth is pursued and enforced. But the epistle to the Colossians never carries the believer so high; it shows Christ there, but it does not, so to speak, set us there. The resurrection of Christ or rather our being risen with Him, is urged as the ground for our seeking the things above.

“Let your mind be on the things above, not on the things on the earth.” (Ver. 2.) Who can loyally have divided affections? As our Lord Himself said, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” The Lord put it as a moral impossibility. But here it is put as an exhortation founded on the immense grace that has raised us up with Christ risen. In vain do you essay to be occupied at the same time with things heavenly and earthly. Our calling is to have our mind on the things above, not merely now and again, but at all times. Supposing a person to be engaged in business: is he not to attend to it? Surely; yet not to set his mind on it, but simply to go through all as a duty to the Lord. Ought he not to do it better than another man who has not Christ? I am assured that such would be the fruit of looking to the Lord while the same single-eyedness and faith would preserve him from the snares of covetousness, as well as vain glory. The Christian thus taught and walking has an object before his soil which alone is adequate to raise a man above self and the world. Of course, if he is thus laboring day by day to the Lord, the consciousness of the grace in which he stands would deliver him from the carelessness, or self-indulgence, or speculation, which expose men to get into debt or to act in other dishonorable ways. For this is to sink beneath even decent worldliness. Yet, if a Christian does not walk with exercised conscience to the Lord, he is in danger of doing worse and going farther astray than an ordinary man. Humbling and grievous as this is, it is not surprising. The main object of Satan is put forth to dishonor Christ in those who bear His name, and the power of the Spirit is only with those whose heart is toward Christ. It is not, then, Have your mind partly on things above and partly on things on the earth; but have it not at all on the things that are on the earth. Whatever the Lord gives you to do, you can take up as service to the Lord; but even here there is need to watch narrowly and, not the least, spiritual work in the gospel or in the Church. There is no security in anything but in Him, who sits at the right hand of God. Take, for instance, research into the scriptures. One might be absorbed in the niceties of the language, the prophecies, the poetry, the history, the doctrine, &c. Any or all these might become a snare. There is no safety for us but in Christ Himself—Christ as He is above.

Moreover, there is added a remarkable statement of the reason why we should have our mind upon things above— “for ye have died.” It is not moralizing, like men, even heathen, that we have to die, but the fundamental Christian truth that we are dead. All mystics, old or new, have, as their object, to die. Hence it is a dwelling upon inward experience and human effort—the endeavor to crucify themselves: not “I am crucified with Christi nevertheless I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God.” “They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts.” What was suitable for a Jew, so far from being necessarily for a Christian, is on this side of the cross: our foundation is Christ who is dead and risen. Because a thing is in the Bible does not warrant the conclusion that it is God's will for the Christian. We must seek rightly to divide the word of truth. What was formerly right for the Jews is for us nothing but the elements of the world. These forms pointed to a reality that is now come; the body is of Christ. The blessed position of a Christian is, that he is dead even to the best things in the world, and alive to the highest things in the presence of God; for Christ is his life.

To have our mind therefore on the things which accord with Christ in glory is what we are called to—first of all Christ Himself, then the mighty work of Christ in redemption viewed in its heavenly effects. What objects to have before us always! The hopes too that are connected with Christ thus known, spiritual wisdom brought into exercise thereby, the affections kindled and in play; in short, all the fruits of Christ's work in relation to heaven are comprised in these things above. “For ye are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God.” (Ver. 3.) The prevalent notion with many is, that the Christian is just the better qualified to fill a place in the world, because he is a Christian. But this is in truth to deny the primary and precious truth of God, that I am dead, which my very baptism confesses. And it is remarkable that the impression of the world about any one who receives Christ is, that he is dead. They feel that he is lost to his former objects; and if he takes his place in any full measure as belonging to Christ, he does justify the instincts of men; for he ceases to act as one alive in the world. Christendom, alas! soon accustoms him to be false to Christ. But the truth is that “ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God:” As yet it is hidden: Christ has not yet caused His glory to be seen by the world. Therefore should a Christian be content to be for a little while an object of rejection and scorn. Faith and patience are thus put to the proof: God allows it to be so; and a Christian ought not to wonder at it, for Christ had just the same portion. A single eye is not deceived; selfishness is blind to God's glory. We would be true to the moral power of the cross—the night is far spent. The reason why we are despised is thus a blessed source of joy in our sorrow. Then the time is short. All will soon be changed.

There is the further truth, “when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.” (Ver. 4.) Christ is not always as now to be hidden; He is about to be manifested; and when He is, we too shall be manifested with Him in glory. God will bring us along with Him, as we learn elsewhere. We shall have been translated to Him, in order that, when He shall be seen by every eye, we may have the same portion with Him. The expression “hid with Christ in God” is a much more emphatic one than simply saying, He is absent in heaven. In John 13 it is said, “Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself and shall straightway glorify him.” It is not merely glorification in heaven, but what Christ has now in Himself. It is while He is hidden in God, as was said in verse 3, and in contrast with the display of His glory when He comes by and by, as in verse 4. The Colossians had lost sight of this truth in great measure and were in danger of getting on a track that would have deprived them of all enjoyment of peace and confidence in God. The theory was to add what they could to Christ in order to increase the saints' blessing and security, and make a present display to His glory. The apostle shows them that their life is hid with Christ in God. Consequently, though they possess the most perfect security, it is in accord with Christ's place, hidden and not displayed yet. “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon earth; fornication, uncleanness,” &c. (Ver. 5.) Because ye are dead, because ye have this new life, even Christ, and so are dead and risen with Him, mortify your members which are upon earth. What were they? Fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Such is what they, what we really are. It is a wonderfully strong and pointed way of presenting the truth. God is not mocked. Grace does not hinder His judgment either morally in His word or by and by when it shall be executed. “On account of which the wrath of God cometh on the sons of disobedience: in which things ye also once walked, when ye lived in them.” (Ver. 6, 7.)

“But now do ye also put off these all, anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, base language,” &c. It is sweet to see how the truth of being dead with Christ is brought in as deliverance from nature in all its forms, no matter whether corruption or violence. It is the judgment of the first Adam as a whole: nothing is spared. The “ye” is emphatic in verse 7. “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man, renewed unto full knowledge according to the image of him that created him.” God would have His children enjoy the fullest comfort; and indeed it is impossible for a person to be practically holy until he is happy. There may be godly desires and the Spirit be at work; but there is not power till the soul finds its peace and deliverance in another that God gives in pure grace. Then, when he is made happy through Christ and His work of redemption, he goes to God as his Father and has the Holy Ghost as power and all the other practical results which flow from that new relationship. “Where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman; but Christ is all and in all.” (Ver. 11.)

How beautifully in keeping is the Christian motive seen in this, that we should not lie, &c., not only because it dishonors God, but because we have put off the old man and have put on the new man! All appears in a strikingly characteristic light. God in His very instructions to us fails not to remind us here of our blessing. If we are therefore called to put off anger, wrath, &c., it is because we are dead. If we are told to walk no longer in uncleanness, it is on the ground that, though we once lived in it all, we are now dead to it and alive in Christ. If we are exhorted to speak the truth, it is because we have put off the old man and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him. In Him is no darkness at all. He is the true light that now shines.

It is imperative on us as Christians to value nothing but Christ. I speak simply of our place as Christians; but what does not this embrace? As Christ is all and in all, so we have to seek to act upon this always, only prizing in one another what is of Him. If I love and prize Christ, such will be my feeling toward Christians, even as I shall want myself and all Christians to feel that Christ is the only thing worth our thoughts, affections, labor, and life. There is continual danger of the Christian's sinking into thoughts of natural qualities, of those things that make men attractive, &c. The point of faith is to rise above all this. “Let your light so shine,” &c. Where Christ is not steadily adhered to as object and motive, nature will break out as bad as ever. But before God and to faith I am entitled to treat it as dead; and I owe it to Him who died for me and rose again, to act upon the great truth that God has passed sentence upon the old man. To this end I must judge myself with my eye fixed upon Christ. Otherwise there is no failure in which I may not dishonor Him. No man ever walks inconsistently while his eye is on Christ. Nor is it merely sense of his own weakness, but the consciousness that the old man is judged and gone from before God. What a blessed standing is the Christian's! The Old-Testament saints were kept from sin expecting and desiring Christ; but we look on Christ now, dead and risen with Him who has already done all for us. Is it not an incalculable progress? And there is difference quite as marked as the progress; but on this I dwell not now.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 3:2-11

(Chapter 3:2-11)

“Let your mind be on the things above, not on the things on the earth” (Col. 3:2). Who can loyally have divided affections? As our Lord Himself said, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” The Lord put it as a moral impossibility. But here it is urged as an exhortation founded on the immense grace that has raised us up with Christ risen. In vain do you essay to be occupied at the same time with things heavenly and earthly. Our calling is to have our mind on the things above, not merely now and again, but at all times. Suppose a person to be engaged in business; is he not to attend to it? Surely; yet not to set his mind on it, but simply to go through all as a duty to the Lord. Ought he not to do it better than another man who has not Christ? I am assured that such would be the fruit of looking to the Lord, while the same single-eyedness and faith would preserve him from the snares of covetousness, as well as vain glory. The Christian thus taught and walking has an object before his soul which alone is adequate to raise a man above self and the world. Of course, if he is thus laboring day by day to the Lord, the consciousness of the grace in which he stands would deliver him from the carelessness, or self-indulgence, or speculation, which expose men to get into debt or to act in other dishonorable ways. For this is to sink beneath even decent worldliness. Yet, if a Christian does not walk with exercised conscience before the Lord, he is in danger of doing worse and going farther astray than an ordinary man. Humbling and grievous as this may be, it is not surprising. The main object of Satan is put forth to dishonor Christ in those who bear His name, and the power of the Spirit is only with those whose heart is toward Christ. It is not, then, have your mind partly on things above and partly on things on the earth, but have it not at all on the things that are on the earth.

Whatever the Lord gives you to do, you can take up as service to the Lord; but even here there is need to watch narrowly and, not the least, spiritual work in the gospel or in the church. There is no security in anything but in Him who sits at the right hand of God. Take, for instance,

research into the Scriptures. One might be absorbed in the niceties of the language, the prophecies, the poetry, the history and the doctrine. Any or all these might become a snare. Where is safety for us but in Christ Himself — Christ as He is above?

Moreover, there is added a remarkable statement of the reason why we should have our mind upon things above — “for ye have died.” It is not moralizing, like men, even heathen, that we have to die, but the fundamental Christian truth that we are dead. All mystics, old or new, have, as their object, to die. Hence it is a dwelling upon inward experience and human effort — the endeavor to crucify themselves — not “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God.” “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts.” What was suitable for a Jew, so far from being necessarily for a Christian, is on this side of the cross; our foundation is Christ who is dead and risen. The fact that a thing is in the Bible does not warrant the conclusion that it is God’s will for the Christian. We must seek rightly to divide the Word of truth. What was formerly right for the Jews is for us nothing but the elements of the world. These forms pointed to a reality that is now come; the body is of Christ. The blessed portion of a Christian is, that he is dead even to the best things in the world, and alive to the highest things in the presence of God; for Christ is his life.

To have our mind, therefore, on the things which accord with Christ in glory is what we are called to — first of all, Christ Himself, then the mighty work of Christ in redemption viewed in its heavenly effects. What objects to have before us always! The hopes too that we are connected with Christ thus known, spiritual wisdom brought into exercise thereby, the affections kindled and in play; in short, all the fruits of Christ’s work in relation to heaven are comprised in these things above. “For ye are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

The prevalent notion with many is, that the Christian is just the better qualified to fill a place in the world, because he is a Christian. But this is in truth to deny the primary and precious truth of God, that I am dead, which my very baptism confesses. And it is remarkable that the impression of the world about anyone who receives Christ is, that he is as good as gone. They feel that he is lost to his former objects; and if he takes his place in any full measure as belonging to Christ, he does justify the instincts of men; for he ceases to act as one alive in the world. Alas! Christendom soon accustoms him to be false to Christ. But the truth is that “ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” As yet it is hidden; Christ has not yet caused His glory to be seen by the world. Therefore should a Christian be content to be for a little while an object of rejection and scorn. Faith and patience are thus put to the proof; God allows it to be so; and a Christian ought not to wonder at it, for Christ had just the same portion. A single eye is not deceived; selfishness is blind to God’s glory. We would be true to the moral power of the cross — the night is far spent. The reason why we are despised is thus a blessed source of joy in our sorrow. Then the time is short. All will soon be changed.

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The Colossians had lost sight of this truth in great measure and were in danger of getting on a track that would have deprived them of all enjoyment of peace and confidence in God. The theory was to add what they could to Christ in order to increase the saints’ blessing and security, and make a present display to His glory. The Apostle shows them that their life is hid with Christ in God. Consequently, though they possess the most perfect security, it is in accord with Christ’s place, hidden and not displayed yet. “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness” (Col. 3:5). Because ye are dead, because ye have this new life, even Christ, and so are dead and risen with Him, mortify your members which are upon the earth. What were they? Fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Such is what they — what we — really are. It is a wonderfully strong and pointed way of presenting the truth. God is not mocked. Grace does not hinder His judgment either morally in His Word or by-and-by when it shall be executed. “On account of which the wrath of God cometh on the sons of disobedience: in which things ye also once walked, when ye lived in them” (Col. 3:6-7).

“But now do ye also put off these all, anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, base language,” and so forth. It is sweet to see how the truth of being dead with Christ is brought in as deliverance from nature in all its forms, no matter whether corruption or violence. It is the judgment of the first Adam as a whole; nothing is spared. The “ye” is emphatic in verse 7. “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man, renewed unto full knowledge according to the image of Him that created him.” God would have His children enjoy the fullest comfort; and indeed it is impossible for a person to be practically holy until he is happy. There may be godly desires and the Spirit be at work, but there is not power till the soul finds its peace and deliverance in another that God gives in pure grace. Then, when he is made happy through Christ and His work of redemption, he goes to God as his Father and has the Holy Spirit as power, and all the other practical results which flow from that new relationship. “Where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman; but Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11).

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again to act upon the great truth that God has passed sentence upon the old man. To this end I must judge myself with my eye fixed upon Christ. Otherwise there is no failure in which I may not dishonor Him. No man ever walks inconsistently while his eye is on Christ. Nor is it merely sense of his own weakness, but the consciousness that the old man is judged and gone from before God. What a blessed standing is the Christian's! The Old Testament saints were kept from sin by expecting and desiring Christ; but we look on Christ now, being dead and risen with Him who has already done all for us. Is it not an incalculable progress? And there is difference quite as marked as the progress, but on this I dwell not now.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 3:12-17

(Chapter 3:12-17)

In Ephesians the ground for not lying is because we are members one of another. Here it is treated as inconsistent with our having put off the old man and put on the new man. Thus it is an evident contradiction of the new nature, as well as of the judgment and setting aside of the old one. The judgment doubtless took effect upon Christ; but then faith in Him supposes it has been applied to us, and that we have, through Him, renounced self, yea, put off the old man with his deeds, and put on the new. The old man is supposed to account for lying; the old man is false, full of deceit. There is not, there cannot be, thorough truthfulness in nature as it is now. We see this from the first; Adam was false directly he sinned.

Cain was false also. There may be other evils, such as violence, shown betimes in some and not in others; but all are false — lying one does see in all. The ordinary forms of social intercourse are founded more or less upon deceit in the present state of the world. Men say what is agreeable to others without thought. Men subscribe forms, especially in religion, which they are not expected to believe, and, sad to say, the best men least of all. This all shows how universally falsehood follows the old man — here it is a question of Christians, and therefore we have the new man.

In Ephesians we hear of the members of the body; here it is the nature. In Ephesians also they are to put off the old man and put on the new; but here it is said, "which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him." In Ephesians it is as a fresh thing that they had not before, without any reference to being renewed; it is absolutely new — created; whereas here they have received the fresh blessing, but at the same time there is renewing. Both ideas are in the two epistles, but put so as to prove the complement of each other. In Ephesians it is said that the new man is after God created in righteousness and true holiness. What is the difference between the two? Righteousness brings in the idea of authority; it supposes an answer to a just claim; let it be man that meets it, or God, a right to demand underlies it. Holiness is His nature alone and intolerant of evil; it has in itself nothing to do with the claim of justice. To the believer Christ is made righteousness, which is grounded on God's judgment, though it may be entirely settled in our favor; whereas holiness would have been true apart from the question of His authority; it is the essential nature and character.

The angels are said to be holy, but are never said to be righteous or just. The new man rejoices in both. There is entire acquiescence in the authority of God, and delight that the judgment of God has been so met in Christ that He is glorified more than ever. Besides that, there is the moral nature that feels with God. Righteousness is more a bowing to God, holiness is the participation of His own feelings about good and evil. In us the two feelings often mingle. Righteousness is a true balance, the maintenance of what is just in relationships of all kinds. For instance, it is right for a child to obey its parents; it is not merely holy but "right" to do so. The one belongs to the nature quite apart from relationship, or anything of duty, apart from anything that is a sort of obligation which brings in the idea of righteousness.

Hence, we see, Rationalists admit the value of holiness, but they seldom talk of righteousness; for righteousness supposes judgment. Righteousness is a terrible word for a man until he has got hold of Christ. Righteousness, I repeat, proclaims the authority of God. God was holy before sin came into the world; but who could speak of His righteousness before there was the judgment of evil, spite of conscience, and against His express authority? Under the law, therefore, which was the formal assertion of that authority in dealing with men in the flesh, Jehovah, as a righteous God, is continually set forth. "The righteous Lord loveth righteousness" and so forth. There was neither righteousness nor holiness in Adam before he fell. We have both and become both in Christ. Adam was made upright, but that is not the same thing as being righteous or holy; it was the absence of evil; he was innocent, unfallen.

Righteous and holy is the description that God gives of the Christian. Adam knew nothing of evil as yet, neither was there any question of God's righteous claim upon him, save so far as the forbidden fruit tested his obedience; yet there was no limit of doing this and living, but rather of not doing lest he die. Adam was in a place of privilege, and the point was simply to enjoy it in obedience to God, on penalty of death if he disobeyed. We are in a wholly different position, being in the midst of evil, and acted on by a good outside and above us. Hence we are said to be called by glory and virtue; "by glory" as the object, the condition in which Christ is, and "by virtue" as a restraint upon us and practical conformity to Christ (2 Pet. 1).

It has been well remarked that in Ephesians Christ is never spoken of as the image of God; He is so, very expressly, in Colossians. If we may discriminate, what we have in Ephesians is more Christ showing me what God is — not His image, but His moral likeness reflected in Christ. Hence it is said, "Be ye imitators of God, as dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us." It is more the notion of resemblance than representation. Still, although you can say of Christ, He is the image of God, He is never said to be in the likeness of God, just because He is God. In Colossians we hear repeatedly of the image of God. Here, for instance, the new man is said to be "after the image of him that created him"; as in the first chapter Christ is said to be the image of the invisible God. The two ideas of likeness and image may often be confounded in our minds, but not so in Scripture, where likeness simply means that one person resembles another; image means that a person is represented, whether it be like him or not — both of course may be together.

"Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering" (Col. 3:12). These are the positive, moral qualities of Christ — the tone, spirit, and inward feelings of our Lord. It is not exactly as children, but "as the elect of God, holy and beloved," that we are called on to manifest the same. We are to feel and walk as the Lord walked here.

There is this character about Scripture, that, being divine, it never can be mastered by intellect alone, but always appeals to the affections and conscience as well as mind. It needs the power of the Holy Spirit to connect it with Christ in order even then to feel, judge, and act aright. “Forbearing one another and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any; even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col. 3:13). Christ is looked at as Head of everything in this epistle. He is viewed as the ideal of all that is good and lovely which God looks either for or from us. “And above all these things, love, which is the bond of perfectness” (Col. 3:14). There is more in love than simple kindness and forgiveness; it goes beyond these. Love always brings in God, being the activity of His nature. His nature morally is light, but the energy of it is love that goes out in goodness to others.

Thus, love tends to bind together, whereas self or flesh is the very opposite, the one as decidedly removing difficulties, as the other brings them in. Love not only bears and forbears, but overcomes evil with good. “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” The peace of God is that perfect calm in which He rests as to all circumstances in this world and into which He brings the believer who looks up to Him, committing all circumstances into His hands without allowance of will or anxiety. Instead of our way of escape, which is what man’s mind loves to take, because he has always a notion of governing for himself, faith enables a man to look up to God, and brings in the Word of God to bear upon what passes around us. But our epistle speaks of a peace more intimate. It is the peace that Christ has now, the peace He ever had when here below. Thus Christ Himself met all difficulties, as He saw all perfectly, resting in perfect peace about all; and so should we. No sense of evil without, no sense of weakness among His own, disturbs His perfect peace about everything.

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body, and be ye thankful” (Col. 3:15). Thus it is peace, but not an isolated spirit, not as having done with one another, but, on the contrary, cleaving to all, spite of all. Supposing, for instance, something painful troubled me about one in communion, am I to be troubled by this so as to be hindered from going to the Lord’s table? That would be adding wrong to wrong; for if it were right for me to stay away, it would be equally incumbent on others also. I am never warranted to yield to trouble about such matters, but entitled to have the peace of Christ ruling in my heart. There is always a way of Christ in everything, and this is very important for our souls to remember. “And be ye thankful”; not anxious nor fretful, but thankful. Everything that is wrong may be matter for judgment; but the best preliminary for judging soundly is to do what is according to God — perhaps to judge ourselves. It is our privilege to think of Christ in all that we enter on.

“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). This is a remarkable contrast of the gospel with the law. The law decided this and that; and not this only, but the obedience of the law is definite; it does not leave room for a growing measure of spirituality. Now, in Christianity, there is an elasticity which leaves room for differences in spirituality. This does not suit the thoughts of human nature; it is too vague for it; but it is perfection in the mind and ways of God, who thus forms the affections and judgments. It is precisely what leaves room for the word of Christ. Here there is growth in every kind of wisdom, and also room left for the exercise of spiritual judgment. In the first chapter there is a similar principle, only there it is “being filled with the knowledge of his will, that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing.” Here it is “That the word of Christ may dwell in you richly in all wisdom”; it is not a question of walk, but of enjoyment and worship. Hence, immediately after we have “teaching and admonishing one another,” and so forth. By speaking of enjoyment and worship, its public exercise is not meant, but the spirit of it in intercourse with one another.

As to the difference between psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, I suppose a psalm was a more stately composition than a spiritual song, which admits more of Christian experience and expression of our feelings. This may be very good in its way and season, but it is not the best or highest thing. A psalm, then, is more solemn; a hymn is a direct address to God and consists of praise. By psalms, of course, I do not refer to the Psalms of David, but to Christian compositions.

The exhortation, again, to sing with grace in their hearts was because the Colossian saints were far from the excellent state in which we may gather the Ephesians, for instance, were. “And whatever ye do in word or deed, do everything in [the] name of [the] Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Col. 3:17). This exactly meets what has been already remarked about bringing in everything as a matter for blessing the Lord, instead of finding only sorrow. Doing all things in the name of the Lord Jesus includes not the mere thought of belonging to Him, but of perfect grace. Still it is the Lord Jesus, not Christ simply, but the “Lord Jesus,” which involves our relation to His authority. Whatever grace may be shown us, the authority is not weakened, and the effect is that we give thanks to God and the Father by Him. A Christian man, woman, or child dishonors the Lord by yielding to the thankless spirit of the world. “Whatever ye do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Thus our tone and speech, as well as ways, should testify our subjection to Him before whom all heaven bows.

Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 3:18-25

(Colossians 3:18-25)

Hitherto, the exhortations have been entirely general. Now the Apostle enters upon special relationships. The Spirit begins, as a rule, in these exhortations with the subordinate ones, with those under authority, rather than with those who are called to exercise it. The wisdom of this is manifest. If the one who should be subject behaves with humility, there is nothing more conciliating to such as are in authority. First of all, then, we begin with the most important of earthly relationships, that of wives and husbands. The wife, in accordance with that just principle, is exhorted before the husband. The emphatic word for the wife is to submit herself. “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in [the] Lord” (Col. 3:18). Where she is not submissive, it is unseemly even in nature, but more especially in the Lord. The wife’s subjection is fitting in the Lord, though no doubt “in the Lord” acts so far as a preservative, that if a husband required anything wrong, submission could not be right. The point here, however, I think, is rather the suitability of it as a Christian principle without entering into the question of how and when it should be made.

Some have inferred that as we are all one in Christ Jesus, there is now no submission due from the wife; that it was part of the curse and woman’s special lot in and by the fall; but that now, when she becomes a Christian, the inferiority vanishes, and the woman stands absolutely equal with her husband. Now it is true that Scripture shows us a place and relationship in which the question of man and woman disappears. Thus, “if ye then be risen with Christ” applies in a manner quite independent of age or sex; Christian man and woman and child are equally

risen in Christ. But the moment you come down to special relationship, there are distinctions. If a person indulge in wrong thoughts about this, he is in danger of destroying weighty principles. The husband would abandon his right seat of authority; the wife as a matter of course would lose her only happy place of subjection; and where would the Christian child be if the scheme were followed out? As children of God, no doubt all stand on a level; father, mother, child, if believing, enjoy like spiritual privileges. The differences as to flesh and the world entirely disappear in Christ; but the moment you think of earthly relationships (and this is what we have here), there are differences, neither few nor unimportant, in what pertains to our present life and the shape of our walk as Christians. The difference between man, woman, and child, was not destroyed, and still less was it originated, by the fall; it existed before there was sin; the fall did not touch it in any respect. So far is Christianity from taking these differences away, that it strengthens them immensely.

When the Apostle forbids a woman to teach, and so forth, he does so on the ground that a woman is more likely to be deceived than a man. Adam was not deceived; he was no better for this, for though not deceived, he sinned boldly with his eyes open, while the woman was led away weakly. What the Apostle infers thence is that the woman should not teach nor rule, being stronger in her affections than in her judgment. A man may be worse, but is less likely to be deceived. The woman is governed by her affections instead of judgment guiding her. A woman is not so apt to fail on that side. A wise woman would show her wisdom in not putting herself in the place of, still less above, her husband. If she compared herself with him, she might be easily misled; but if she thinks of the Lord, she would rather put her husband forward. The principle of submission to the husband is here without any guard. “As it is fit in the Lord” does not mean so much acting as a measure, but that it is a seemly thing in the Lord for wives to submit themselves.

Next comes the word to the husbands. “Husbands, love your wives and be not bitter against them” (Col. 3:19). The wife needs not to be exhorted to love her husband; it is assumed that therein her affections are all right. But it is very possible the husband might allow anxiety and outward pressure of life so to occupy him that he might not take sufficient care of his wife or interest in her anxieties; accordingly, this is the exhortation for him. The wife is necessarily thrown upon her husband; she leaves father, mother, and all, and is cast peculiarly upon her husband; and if he be not watchful, he may fail in thoughtful love, in the attention of every day, not sufficiently guarding his temper, which seems to be what is meant by being “bitter.” There should be this affection for the wife, this vigilance against the influence of circumstances; the outward world might often occasion irritation, and then the husband is liable to vent his spleen at home, especially on his wife. This is human nature and what we know too often happens; but it is not Christ; and here it is guarded against. “Husbands, love your wives and be not bitter against them.” Let none presume to think it needless.

In the same order parents and children appear, the fathers, however, more particularly. “Children, obey your parents in all things; for this is well pleasing in [the] Lord.” Here this also is put quite absolutely. We know elsewhere there are landmarks to guard us. It is evident neither a father nor a husband has any title to insist on what is contrary to the Lord; but accordance is assumed here. What the Apostle urges is that the children should in all things obey their parents. And how good is obedience! Scripture elsewhere brings in a limit, but not here. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord” furnishes a very important restriction; at any rate it defines the sphere of obedience; it determines how and how far one ought to go. As a rule, even a bad father would like to have a good child. Many who drink or swear would be very sorry for their sons to do the same. “Children, obey your parents in all things; for this is well pleasing to or in the Lord.” This directs us simply to the Lord as the One to whom this obedience is acceptable, but well pleasing in the Lord goes a great deal farther. It is not the bare fact of regarding the Lord as the ultimate judge, who then will be pleased; but the Christian has the consciousness of the Lord’s love now and of His interest in all his ways and trials day by day. No doubt He will manifest His judgment of all that was done in the body by-and-by; but this should only strengthen the Christian now to do that which is well pleasing in the Lord. The best authorities are unanimous that it should be here “in the Lord” rather than “to the Lord.” It is well pleasing that children should obey their parents, not naturally only, but (for the Christian, let it be) in the Lord. “Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged” (Col. 3:21). The mother is not thus exhorted, for as a rule her general fault is to spoil them. There is nothing that more discourages a child than a parent’s continual needless fault-finding. Again, where a child is punished without deserving it, what can be more apt to create distrust, and so weaken the springs of love and respect?

We now come to the lowlier members of the household. “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God” (Col. 3:22). It is absolute in every one of these cases in Colossians; not so in Ephesians, where there is more of a guard brought in. I should think this attributable to the happier and better tone of the Ephesians. They required rather the limits than the pressure of the duty. The Colossians, on the contrary, stood in need of exhortations to obey. Thus, for instance, if a man had to do with a well-ordered family, he would not have to urge obedience in the same manner as if they were disorderly. Strange to say, you will always find self-will the companion of a legal spirit. There is never true obedience without the power of grace. Who were the most stiff-necked people in all the world? The Jews, the same who boasted of the law. You will find, since the law has been taken as a rule of life for Christians, they too are less obedient and think nothing of going against the Scriptures. This was one danger for the Colossians — a spirit of ordinance and legality.

No person becomes obedient by good rules. What is it then that produces it? The heart must be filled with right motives; and what brings this about? Love for a person gives a sense of duty to him, and acts upon the heart. This makes obedience easy. Rules are never the power but only the tests of obedience in certain cases. This is even true of Christ’s commandments. He keeps them who loves Him, and he only. This induces obedience, and then what Christ says lies upon our hearts and minds and memories — not only His commandments but His Word — whereas if we love not, how readily all is forgotten! This is an important difference in John 14. First the Lord speaks of His commandments, then of His word. The truth is, where there is a loving heart, any expression of will, even without a positive command, governs the affections.

“Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh.” This is very important. Feelings and habits no doubt, have been brought in by Christianity — difficulties also (not that these ought to have been, but by reason of a fleshly mind) — all these arose. A bondman found himself suddenly a brother to his master; if he did not watch, he would soon begin to judge his master, whether he ought to say this or do that. If his master blamed him for anything, he might consider his master to have acted in a hard, fleshly way. How easy it is to slip into a wrong spirit, especially for a servant in presence of his master’s infirmities daily before him, and in danger of judging his master according to the evil thoughts of his own heart! But surely a man ought to do all better after, than before, he knew Christ. The notion that, because they have to do with Christians, the latter ought to put up with ill-done duties is all selfishness. The fact that servants are not bondmen now in no way alters the matter. In those days they had often to serve heathen masters. In any case the great thing is to remember the Lord Jesus and His will in every place. We belong absolutely to Him to do His bidding in all things. In order to walk well with God, let me take care that I am in a position according to His will where I have no qualms of conscience. A scrupulous conscience however is dangerous, though far preferable to

a burdened or bad conscience; but it is dangerous, for the strain tends to break and to end in a bad conscience. There is no place in this world where one may not glorify God, sin of course excepted.

“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance; for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24). But not so occupied with the fact that you are serving an earthly master; remember, “ye serve the Lord Christ.” Thus will you be the more subject to your earthly master, doing heartily whatsoever ye do, not as being right only but with heart. The Apostle adds a remarkable word here, “he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done, and there is no respect of persons” (Col. 3:25). This takes in both the present and the future, as I suppose, being a general principle.

The condition of the Ephesians was such that the love of Christ to the Church could be developed and urged on them. The Colossians, not being in so healthful a state, are exhorted on a lower ground. Conscience needed to be exercised.

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 3:18-25, 4:1, Notes on

Hitherto the exhortations have been entirely general. Now the apostle enters upon special relationships. The Spirit begins, as a rule, in these exhortations with the subordinate ones, with those under authority, rather than with those who are called to exercise it. The wisdom of this is manifest. If the one that should be subject behaves with humility, there is nothing more conciliating to such as are in authority. First of all, then, we begin with the most important of earthly relationships, that of wives and husbands. The wife, in accordance with that just principle, is exhorted before the husband. The emphatic word for the wife is to submit herself. “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.” Where she is not submissive, it is unseemly even in nature, but more especially in the Lord. The wife's subjection is fitting in the Lord, though no doubt “in the Lord” acts so far as a preservative, that if a husband required anything wrong, submission could not be right. The point here, however, I think, is rather the suitability of it as a Christian principle without entering into the question of how and when it should be made. Some have inferred that as we are all one in Christ Jesus, there is now no submission due from the wife; that it was part of the curse and woman's special lot in and by the fall; but that now, when she becomes a Christian, the inferiority vanishes, and the woman stands absolutely equal with her husband. Now it is true that Scripture skews us a place and relationship in which the question of man and woman disappears. Thus, “if ye then be risen with Christ” applies in a manner quite independent of age or sex; man, and woman, and child are equally risen in Christ. But the moment you come down to special relationship, there are distinctions. If a person indulge in wrong thoughts about this, he is in danger of destroying weighty principles. The husband would abandon his right seat of authority: the wife as a matter of course would lose her only happy place of subjection, and where would the Christian child be if the scheme were followed out? As children of God, no doubt all stand on a level; father, mother, child, if believing, enjoy like spiritual privileges. The differences as to flesh and the world entirely disappear in Christ; but the moment you think of earthly relationships (and this is what we have here), there are differences, neither few nor unimportant, in what pertains to our present life and the shape of our walk as Christians. The difference between man, woman, and child, was not destroyed, and still less was it originated, by the fall; it existed before there was sin: the fall did not touch it in any respect. So far is Christianity from taking these differences away, that it strengthens them immensely. When the apostle forbids a woman to teach, &c., he does so on the ground that a woman is more likely to be deceived than a man. Adam was not deceived; he was no better for this, for though not deceived, he sinned boldly with his eyes open, while the woman was led away weakly: what the apostle infers thence is that the woman should not teach nor rule, being stronger in her affections than in her judgment. A man may be worse, but is less likely to be deceived. The woman is governed by her affections instead of judgment guiding her. A woman is not so apt to fail on that side. A wise woman would show her wisdom, in not putting herself in the place of, or still less above, her husband. If she compared herself with him, she might be easily misled; but if she thinks of the Lord, she would rather put her husband forward. The principle of submission to the husband is here without any guard. “As it is fit in the Lord” does not mean so much acting as a measure, but that it is a seemly thing in the Lord for wives to submit themselves.

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Chapter 4:1. It is evident that the first verse of the new chapter belongs to the special exhortations which occupy the close of chapter 3 Consequently, chapter 4 ought, if the division were accurate according to subjects, to begin at the second verse.

The exhortations to wives and husbands are correlative, so to children and fathers, and to servants and masters, making three pairs of such appeals. There is the difference to be noted that husbands and wives existed from the very first; not so the relation of master and servant. It is clear also, that though children were contemplated from the beginning, in point of fact they did not exist in Paradise. God took care there should be no race, no parent and child, before the fall.

It was when Christ had glorified God perfectly, that Christ became the head of a family. The contrast in this respect is very interesting and beautiful. What confusion, if some had been born in a state of innocence, and others in sin! God ordered things that there should be no family, till man was fallen. To increase and multiply, however, was the intention and word of God even then. The relation of masters and slaves (as they are here supposed to be), was solely a result of the entrance of sin into the world. We do not hear of bondmen before the flood, though Noah predicts it of Canaan soon after. I presume that the mighty hunter, Nimrod, was the first that essayed his craft or violence in this direction.

If this be so, there is a remarkable gradation in these relationships. Husbands and wives in Paradise, children born after the fall but before the flood, servants not heard of till after that. I do not mean at all that Scripture does not recognize this latter relationship—far from it: only it is well to see that it was one which followed not only the fall, but even the great judgment of God executed on the earth. Thus it is a condition of things very far from according to God, that men should have their fellows as their property or slaves. And yet even so, “masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal.” In our countries it is a relationship voluntarily entered into on both sides, and there are corresponding privileges and duties; but here, though it was a case of slaves, the call to masters is to be impartial in their ways with them. And this refers not only to equity as a matter between the master and a slave, but between the slaves generally. There might be much confusion and injury in a household by disturbing the equilibrium between the slaves. The wisdom of God thus provides for everything, even for what respects the despised bondmen. It is here said “just,” &c.—not grace. You never can demand grace. In writing the epistle to Philemon, the apostle brings motives of grace to bear upon the case: he does not dictate what Philemon was to do, but reminds him of his heavenly relationship, and leaves it to Philemon's grace. Though the runaway slave was justly liable to be put to death, Roman and indeed any other masters having the right to punish them thus, yet would he have Philemon now receive him again no more as a slave but as a brother. Here however it is a question of what was “just and equal.” For the expression, “just,” shows a sense of right, grace in this case would not have been suited, as it would have left the door open more or less. Justice maintains obligations. In Ephesians it is said “forbearing threatening.” It was wrong even to threaten a slave with violent measures. The Colossians, being in a lower condition, are plainly dealt with, and told to be just and equal; it is the recognition of certain responsibilities in which the masters stood to their slaves. Do not you masters imagine all duty is on one side; you have yours toward your slaves. This, often forgotten, seems implied in the word “just,” and “equal,” forbids the indulgence of favoritism.

The rationalistic philosophy is mainly founded on the endeavor to blot out the word “duty.” I have known persons even in the Church disposed to deny anything in this shape as obligatory on the Christian. But it is a fatal error. Grace no doubt alone gives the power, but moral obligations ever remain binding.

The broad-church class talk of holiness, they do not like righteousness. That bias of mind ever tended to explain it away from Scripture. So Grotius used to say that the righteousness of God means His mercy: an idea as dreadful in its way, as the common error that the righteousness of God means the law fulfilled. Such entirely deny the standing of the believer, for the law was not made for the righteous, but for the ungodly. Thus theologians are infected by a double error, either that of confounding the righteousness of God with the righteousness of the law, and making this to be both the standing and the rule of the Christian, or that of denying all righteousness in any shape by making it to be merely divine mercy. Both are quite wrong, and one error leads on to another: as truth hangs together, so does error. “Grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.” “This is the true grace of God wherein ye stand.”

Lectures on the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, Colossians 4:2-18, Notes on

“Persevere in prayer, watching in it with thanksgiving.” (Ver. 2.) The habit, the persevering habit of prayer, is of immense moment. And as Luke 18, so this chapter presses it strongly, though the apostle does not look for such far extending and thorough spirit of supplication as in Eph. 6. Their state did not admit either of like depths of desire or of such large affections for all saints in the bowels of Christ. Legalism, ordinance, philosophy savor of the creature, not of God rightly known: they are not Christ and are far short of comprehending all that are His. Nevertheless, he does count here as there on a mind on the alert to turn occasions of difficulty or blessing, joy or sorrow, anything, everything, into matter for spreading before God; and this in a spirit not of murmuring anxiety, but of grateful acknowledgment of His goodness and confidence in Him. How blessed that even the groaning of the Spirit in the believer supposes deliverance, and not mere selfish sense of evil! Not of course that the deliverance is complete and evil yet put down by power from on high and actually cleared out of the scene. But we know the victory won in Christ's death and resurrection, and having the earnest of the Spirit, feel the contrariety of present things to that glory of which He gives us the sense in Christ now exalted, the hope for all saints at His coming. The consciousness of the favor already shown and secured to us in Christ makes us thankful while we ask of God all good things suitable to it now, worthy of it in result by and by when evil disappears by His power. Yet it is remarkable to see how the apostle values and asks for the prayers of saints— “praying at the same time also for us that God may open to us a door of the word to speak the mystery of Christ on account of which also I am bound.” (Ver. 3.) The value of united prayer is great; but God makes much of individual waiting on Him, and very especially as in the interests of His Church and the Gospel—of Christ in short—here below. How little the apostle was discouraged even at this late day! He writes to the Colossians, from his bondage because of his testimony to that very mystery of Christ which he still desired to be the object of their supplication on his behalf with God, “that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak.” (Ver. 4.)

Next, he reverts to their own need of walking wisely, considering those outside, and seizing the fit opportunity, though I doubt not the service of prayer, such as we have seen would have issued in their own blessing as truly as in good to others. “Walk in wisdom with those without, buying up the time. Let your speech be always in grace, seasoned with salt, to know how ye ought to answer each one.” (Ver. 5, 6.) Grace gives us the rich glow of divine favor to the undeserving, the display of what God is in Christ to those who belong to this guilty, ruined world; salt presents the guard of holiness, the preservative energy of God's rights in the midst of corruption. It is not said “always with salt,” seasoned with grace but “always in grace, seasoned with salt.” Grace should ever be the groundwork and the spring of all we say. No matter how much we may differ, righteousness must be maintained inviolate.

It is this combination of divine love in the midst of an evil world, with uncompromising maintenance of what is due to God's holy and righteous will, that teaches the Christian not merely what but how to answer each one as he ought.

Next come personal messages. (Ver. 7-18.) Observe the remarkable care of the apostle to sustain and commend true-hearted laborers, knowing well the tone of detraction natural to men who can see the failings of those whose service left themselves far behind. “Tychicus, my beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow-bondman in the Lord, all my affairs shall make known to you, whom I have sent to you for this very purpose, that he may know your matters and may comfort your hearts; with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is [one] of you: they shall make known to you all things here.” (Ver. 7-9.) This exuberance of affectionate commendation is greatly to be weighed. The lack of it tends to loosen and dislocate the bonds of charity among the saints. Remark further, that love counts on the interest of others in our affairs quite as much as it feels a real concern in hearing of theirs. Among men such a feeling is either unknown, or where it exists is but vanity; but then love, divine love, is not there. And love must exist and be known in order to understand its workings and effects. Truly is it called in this epistle the bond of perfectness.

“Aristarchus, my fellow-captive, saluteth you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received orders (if he come to you, receive him), and Jesus that is called Justus, who are of the circumcision: these [are the] only fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God which have been a comfort to me.”

(Ver. 10, 11.) There is a singular change in comparing the notices here with those in Philemon. Aristarchus is here a sharer of the apostle's captivity, as there Epaphras is; while there Aristarchus is a fellow-laborer of the apostle with others, as Epaphras is here spoken of—at least as a bondman of Christ. They may have shared the apostle's imprisonment successively, as some one has suggested. It is certain that Aristarchus was his companion not only in Asia, but during his voyage to Italy. This would tend to show, I think, that this Epistle to the Colossians was written at least a little before that to Philemon, though both may be supposed to have been written at the same general date and to have been forwarded by the same hands from the apostle, a prisoner at Rome.

How beautiful too is the grace which enjoined distinctly the reception of Mark! Remembrance of the past would else have forbidden a cordial welcome to himself, and so must have hindered his ministry among the saints. Thus, if here we learn the secret of Barnabas's leaning (for he was his kinsman), when the breach occurred with the apostle in earlier days, we learn that real love is as generous as faithful, acts at all cost for the Lord, and where requisite, spite of paining nature, but rejoices to praise aloud and heartily where the grace of God has intervened to the removal of the impediment. Of Jesus called Justus we know no more than that, like Mark, he was of the circumcision; and like him too, consoled the apostle as a fellow-servant—rare thing among those who had been used to the law and its prejudices. The Justus of Acts 18:7

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“Luke, the beloved physician, saluteth you, and Demas.” (Ver. 14) The occupation of Luke was not blotted out because he was a saint and a servant of Christ, and even an inspired writer. Demas, I should gather, was even now distrusted by the apostle, who mentions his name with an ominous silence and without an endearing word—a thing unusual with the apostle. Even to Philemon, about the same time, he is “my fellow-laborer.” In 2 Timothy he had forsaken the apostle, having loved the present age. The steps of declension were rapid; no testimony tells of his recovery. But a more extensive falling off was at hand (2 Tim. 1:15), for, the ice once broken, many were ready to slip through. As for the apostle, he had fought the fight, he had finished his course, he had kept the faith. The men who were little known for building up, were active for leading astray: as one of this world's sages has said, the hand that could not build a hut can destroy a palace. Nevertheless God's firm foundation stands.

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“And say to Archippus, See to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it.” (Ver. 17.) The brethren cannot forego their responsibility and exercise of godly discipline; but ministry is received from and in the Lord. The assembly never appoints to service in the word, but Christ, the Head, though apostles or their delegates (never the church) acted for Him when it was a question of local charge.

Finally comes “the token in every epistle” —at least in his regular province as apostle of the uncircumcision: “The salutation by the hand of me, Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you.”

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Lectures on Colossians, Colossians, Lectures on: Colossians 4:7-18

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