

Hebrews - Commentaries by R. Beacon

Bible Treasury: Volume N7, Inspired Prayer, An (13:20-21)

There are many points of profound interest in these well-known verses. In the first place they embody a prayer, and, what is more, an inspired prayer, so that we may take up the words with the fullest confidence, knowing that we are but echoing God's gracious will concerning us. Moreover, in this prayer there are, needless to say, no superfluous words, and every word tells. Sublime and all-important doctrine is linked with gracious supplication. Such is the general scope of the passage.

The next thing to note is the character under which God is spoken of. He is called the God of peace. That is how we are directed specially to think of Him in this prayer. We have other epithets elsewhere. God is spoken of as the God of hope (Romans 15:13), the God of love and peace (2 Corinthians 13:11), the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3), the God of patience and consolation (Romans 15:5), and again the God of peace (Romans 15:33). Incidentally it may be remarked that God is never called the God of faith. Nor does it demand any special spiritual judgment to see that with no propriety could such a term be applied to the Infinite, the Almighty, the Omniscient, the Omnipresent. It is different with the other characterizations. For the God who bids us be patient exceeds in patience, the God who bids us love is Himself love, and what can compare with His peace and His joy, yea, with His hope—His gracious expectation, if we may reverently so put it? But faith—ah, that applies to the creature only, who without it cannot please his Creator. But this by the way. Here, in the verses before us, we are directed to think of "the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep"—of the peace that that gracious Shepherd made by the blood of His cross.

It is interesting to note the order of the words, and hence of the thought, in the original. "Now the God of peace, who brought again from among [the] dead the Shepherd of the ' sheep"—that is how it runs. Then the apostle says, "the great One," for there are under shepherds; and finally, after saying "in virtue of [the] blood of an everlasting covenant," he adds "[even] our Lord Jesus" (ver. 20).

Now this collocation of the words plainly shows that the Shepherd character of the blessed Lord is the most prominent thing here. The sweetness of this is too apparent to need any laboring of the point. "The good Shepherd" (for all who have any acquaintance with Greek are aware that the adjective is emphatic by a device that is one of the numerous felicities of that most admirable tongue) gave His life for the sheep; "the great Shepherd" is brought again from among the dead by the God of peace. Then the apostle tells us that the great Shepherd is, needless in one sense to say, the Lord Jesus. But His lordship is not the most salient feature of the passage. Yet this is a truth of which all genuine believers are rightly most tenacious. "Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye say well, for so I am" (John 13:13), said the Savior just before He suffered. Even so; but now one aspect of truth, now another is in strong relief in the inspired word, and that according to the manifold (πολυποίκιλος—literally, variegated) wisdom of God.

The expression "God of peace" naturally suggests the well-known passage in Philippians about the "peace of God." The former, of course, goes further, intimating that, as we have virtually said, peace is so characteristic of God that He can be called the God of peace. But the latter phrase the "peace of God"—(and how much more is it than a mere phrase, describing, as it does, a blessed reality) is strikingly beautiful. The other day I was reading an article in one of the most outstanding of weekly journals, called "Gentle Bigotries," and some verses were quoted descriptive of the gentle bigotry (or rather what would seem to a careless outsider as bigotry) of one who must have been a saint of God. It spoke of her as living in a small paradise of her own, and so safely housed that

What more admirable description could be given of a believer in Christ, having "peace with God" (Romans 5:1), letting "the peace of Christ" rule in the heart (Colossians 3:15), and "filled with all joy and peace in believing" (Romans 15:13)? And it struck one that this most desirable end must have been attained because the God of peace was working in her that which was well-pleasing in His sight.

But to proceed. We read next of the power in virtue of which our Lord was brought again from the dead. It was "by the blood of an everlasting covenant." Oh, the amazing potency of these words, of whose profound meaning we can, as it were, but touch the fringe! The readers of this magazine, less than most perhaps, need to be reminded of the abiding efficacy of that sacred, that cleansing tide, the precious blood of Christ. But none can fathom the counsels of eternity. There are, as we know, somewhat parallel passages in the New Testament, equally sublime, equally unfathomable. Elsewhere the Savior is spoken of as "raised from the dead by the glory of the Father" (Romans 6:4), even as "by the eternal Spirit he offered himself without spot to God" (Hebrews 9:14), where the power of the blood of Christ is strikingly enforced. It purges the conscience; it lays the basis of an eternal covenant of another day, into the antecedent blessings of which we meanwhile are brought who now believe. And in the power of that blood so charged with blessing for man did God raise our Lord from the dead. Undoubtedly, also, the Lord ascended by His own inherent right and power. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). And more than this. The corn of wheat might have abode alone, and never died at all. But then, where had we come in? "Without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22).

A word on the expression "make [you] perfect." There are various senses, as we know, in which perfection is spoken of in the New Testament. There is perfection of standing, which is absolute, and the same for the humblest believer as for the apostle Paul, there is the sinless perfection that cannot obtain while we are here below, and there is at least one other perfection, that of full growth, which would seem to be alluded to in the passage we are considering. But the term perfect (τέλειος) or "full-grown," is really not used in our text. "Make perfect" is here but one word, and might be rendered "adjust." For that is the literal force of the word, shading off, as here, to the idea of making, complete or perfect. The same word is found in Galatians 6:1, where it is rightly rendered "restore" (see Authorized and Revised Versions, and also J.N.D.'s). There is implied, as one has said, the supplying of whatever has been defective, the repairing of whatever has been decayed. And all this, of course, for the paramount reason that God's will must be accomplished in His children.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that the word rendered: "working" is not the same as in the familiar passage in Philippians, where we read that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). There God is said to be the One who energizes the believer, the Holy Spirit being, of course, the power. Here the word used is that which habitually means to create, and the result, rather than the process, seems to be the leading thought of the apostle. Each word is surely appropriate in its place. And it is well to note also that even here in Hebrews, where, as it appears, results are the chief point, yet the means cannot be left in the background. It is "through Jesus Christ." And so with a due ascription of praise to Him who is Lord of all ("to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen"), the beautiful prayer closes.

R. B.

Bible Treasury: Volume N6, Hebrews 1:1-4, Notes of an Address (1:1-4)

It is no doubt the calm, measured, stately, almost rhetorical, style of the Epistle to the Hebrews, that has led many to conceive that it cannot be the work of the great apostle of the Gentiles. They compare the balanced sentences of this Epistle with the rugged and impetuous language so characteristic of the Pauline writings. But even on this ground the argument is by no means convincing. For what can be more measured and stately than the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians or than the eleventh chapter of the same Epistle. The fact is that a great writer adapts his style to his subject-matter, quite apart from the question whether he is inspired or not. As one, J.N.D., has beautifully said, the same divine water, is in every vessel, be it a Paul, a Peter, or a John, but it takes the shape of the vessel through which it flows. And, we may add, the shape may vary in the same writer with the occasion. There is the tumultuous fervor of indignant upbraiding; there is the calm and ordered flow of eloquent exposition. Hence they are evidently right who judge that Paul, and no other (spite of those who ascribe it to the eloquent Apollos), is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. And this opinion is powerfully buttressed by the words of Peter in his Second Epistle (3:15, 16).

Now there is no more majestic statement even in this Epistle, or indeed in the whole of the Bible, than is contained in the wonderfully balanced sentence with which this treatise (for such it strictly is, rather than a letter) opens. For you will see that it really is one sentence only from ver. 1-4 inclusive. And the part of it most emphasized is the main part. "God hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son." Other truths, of equal, possibly of greater, moment (one most certainly is so, where the Son is spoken of as being the brightness of God's glory), are grouped around it, adding strikingly to the grandeur of the whole, but yet subservient to the point that the apostle is pressing, viz. that "God has spoken in His Son." He reminds his readers how God spake of old by the prophets (here no doubt a general term and taking in all the O. T. writers); but that now it was no longer a question of hearing prophets however venerable, lawgivers however sage and discerning, nor psalmists however tuneful. It was imperative to recognize, what was not so obvious to them as Hebrews, as it happily is to us, that the final messenger had come, and that he that is of God would hear Him (John 8:47). Each prophet had contributed his quota to the grand total, and the apostle in no way seeks to weaken the weight of their testimony. Quite the contrary. Just as the Lord Jesus, on a memorable occasion, actually placed Moses' writings as testimony above His own spoken words (John 5:47), so the writer urges that their acceptance of the sublime truths that were now being unfolded would be the proof that the Hebrews really held and understood and believed all that lawgiver and psalmist and prophet had written of old. If they believed that God had spoken in His Son, this would show that theirs was no merely national and patriotic clinging to their ancient oracles. They would own the Crucified as both Lord and Christ.

God had spoken. This is the only book of Holy Scripture that commences with the sacred name, so august, so comprehensive and incomprehensible. How easy to utter it! How often it is taken in vain by profane men! How lightly even Christians may use the word! Everything is wrapped in it, so to speak. It is God, the Son, as we read in this very passage, who upholds all things by the word of His power. And by Him were all things created (Col. 1:16). The mind may proceed to lose itself forthwith in mazes of perplexity, as we contemplate the immensity of creation, and the insignificance physically of this tiny earth, which faith knows, on God's sure warrant, to have been the scene of nothing less stupendous than the Incarnation. For here "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us and," says John, "we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Here the believer rests, while he who trusts to his own keenness of perception is baffled and dismayed. But it is the fool who says in his heart, There is no God. Yet there are but few after all who do not acknowledge His eternal power and divinity (Rom. 1:20.). But how sad if we stop there or, as has been so pathetically described, be as one who could only "beat his ineffectual wings against the void;" or, as another has said, be conscious only of this, that "man is a being with just sufficient conscience to know he is vile, and just sufficient intelligence to know that he is insignificant!" Nay, believers know much more, nor do I mean to insinuate that the clever writer who so described man, meant that that was all, we can know. He was simply referring to what we know apart from revelation. We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding (1 John 5:20). We know that God has spoken unto us in His Son. There are difficulties in the Bible, things that must be left and taken on trust. Not such the knowledge of God's love in Christ, which makes known God's righteousness unto all, and upon all them that believe. This is the true God and eternal life.

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Bible Treasury: Volume N7, Hebrews 1:3 (1:3)

A word suggests itself on a portion of this striking and familiar verse, "The brightness of his glory and the express image of his person." So our Lord is described. Now in the first place it may be noted that the Revised Version rightly does not put the first "his" in italics, as does the Authorized Version, but in ordinary type, and for the very sufficient reason that though not actually in the original, it is virtually there. In this respect at any rate the Revisers' practice has been sounder than that of the most estimable men who gave us the admirable version we still use and reverently cherish. For it need not be said that what is virtually in the text should be preserved in its counterpart.

Next, we have the word rendered "brightness" in the Authorized Version, undoubtedly a just translation. Yet it falls short of the original, not only because of its extensive application to common life, but more particularly because it fails to give an important shade of meaning, a nuance may I say, that the Revised Version again, as also J.N.D., gives more adequately by the term "effulgence." It is really a "shining off from" The force is of beams of light radiating from a luminous surface. Thus the word is most picturesque, full of active energy, if I may so call it. There is probably no single English word that renders the original Greek (ἀπαύγασμα) so well as "effulgence." As one has said, it is "light from light." How admirably the doctrine here accords with the Johannine statement, "the Word was with God," may here be profitably recalled. "With God," literally, "towards God." It is like face answering to face in a perfect mirror. It is not too fanciful, I think, to speak of the original (apaugasma) as a word of delicate bloom.

But this is not all. We have the blessed Lord further declared to be "the express image of his (God's) person." Now, first of all, it is interesting to note that in the Greek there is only one word for the twofold English term "express image." And it is a most forcible one. It has been bodily transferred to English in the well-known word "character," which is pure and unaltered Greek, and means (see Liddell and Scott), strictly, an instrument for graving, and then that which is cut in or stamped. To use a homely illustration, one may perhaps think of that which has taken the form of a mold in which it has been cast in liquid shape, and then solidifying. Thus the third stage of meaning is much the same as our word "character," which is now so English, and yet, as already stated, is unchanged Greek.

The English reader, of course, would naturally suppose there were two words in the Greek as in the English, as seen both in the Authorized Version "express image," or the more precise and literal rendering ("exact impress") of the Speaker's Commentary. J.N.D.'s rendering, "exact expression," is also more to the point perhaps than the Authorized Version. Thus we see that "image" is not in the original, through giving a very fair idea of its force. It is otherwise in Colossians 1:15, where our Lord is said to be the "image of the invisible God," an all-important declaration, introduced, after the apostle's wont, apparently as if he were going off at a tangent, but really in vital connection with his previous statements. Here then, in Colossians, the word image (εἰκὼν) is emphatic, as it is not in Hebrews. For the point in the former epistle is to enforce the representative functions of the Lord Jesus. As Man He represents God on earth, and that in perfect moral beauty and holiness. "He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father," as He Himself says. We carefully note that Christ is not said to be the "likeness" of God. Things are like that are not identical. But who shall divide between the Father and the Son? Nay, the renewed mind rejoices in the sacred mystery of the Son's inscrutable person. But this by way of digression. These brief remarks are rather intended, however imperfectly, to call attention to the striking characterization of the Savior in this wonderful verse in Hebrews 1.

Lastly, we may observe, what students of J.N.D.'s version, as well as others, well know, that "substance" is a more correct rendering of the Greek ὑπόστασις than the word "person," which has such wide ramifications of meaning, though rightly enough employed in defining the truth as to the blessed Trinity. To say more would be foreign to one's purpose, and more suited to a philological treatise. Here direct spiritual profit is one's aim.

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