

2 Corinthians Exposition 3 - Maclaren

2 CORINTHIANS EXPOSITION: ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., Litt.D.

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GIVING AND ASKING

‘Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God Bestowed on the churches of Macedonia... ’ — 2 Corinthians 8:1-12.

A COLLECTION from Gentile churches for their poor brethren in Jerusalem occupied much of Paul's time and efforts before his last visit to that city. Many events, which have filled the world with noise and been written at length in histories, were less significant than that first outcome of the unifying spirit of common faith. It was a making visible of the grand thought, 'Ye are all one in Christ Jesus.' Practical help, prompted by a deep-lying sense of unity which overleaped gulfs of separation in race, language, and social conditions, was a unique novelty. It was the first pulsation of that spirit of Christian liberality which has steadily grown in force and sweep ever since. Foolish people gibe at some of its manifestations.

Wiser ones regard its existence as not the least of the marks of the divine origin of Christianity.

This passage is a striking example of the inimitable delicacy of the Apostle. His words are full of what we should call tact, if it were not manifestly the spontaneous utterance of right feeling. They are a perfect model of the true

way to appeal for money, and set forth also the true spirit in which such appeals should be made.

In verses 1 to 5, Paul seeks to stimulate the liberality of the Corinthians by recounting that of the Macedonian churches. His sketch draws in outline the picture of what all Christian money-giving should be. We note first the designation of the Macedonian Christians' beneficence as 'a grace' given by God to them. It is twice called so (vers. 1, 4), and the same name is applied in regard to the Corinthians' giving (vers. 6, 7). That is the right way to look at money contributions. The opportunity to give them, and the inclination to do so, are God's gifts. How many of us think that calls for service or money are troublesome obligations, to be got out of as easily as possible! A true Christian will be thankful, as for a love token from God, for every occasion of giving to Him. It would be a sharp test for many of us to ask ourselves whether we can say, 'To me... is this grace given,' that I should part with my money for Christ's sake.

Note, further, the lovely picture of these Macedonian givers. They were plunged in sorrows and troubles, but these did not dry their fountains of sympathy. Nothing is apt to be more selfish than grief; and if we have tears to spare for others, when they are flowing bitterly for ourselves, we have graduated well in Christ's school. Paul calls the Macedonians' troubles 'proof of their affliction,' meaning that it constituted a proof of their Christian character; that is, by the manner in which it was borne; and in it they had still 'abundance of joy,' for the paradox of the Christian life is that it admits of the co-existence of grief and gladness.

Again, Christian giving gives from scanty stores. 'Deep poverty' is no excuse for not giving, and will be no hindrance to a willing heart. 'I cannot afford it' is sometimes a genuine valid reason, but oftener an insincere plea. Why are subscriptions for religious purposes the first expenditure to be reduced in bad times?

Further, Christian giving gives up to the very edge of ability, and sometimes goes beyond the limits of so-called prudence. In all regions 'power to its last particle is duty,' and unless power is strained it is not fully exercised. It is in trying to do what we cannot do that we do best what we can do. He who keeps well within the limits of his supposed ability will probably not do half as much as he could. While there is a limit behind which generosity even for Christ may become dishonesty or disregard of other equally sacred claims, there is little danger of modern

Christians transgressing that limit, and they need the stimulus to do a little more than they think they can do, rather than to listen to cold-blooded prudence.

Further, Christian giving does not wait to be asked, but takes the opportunity to give as itself 'grace,' and presses its benefactions. It is an unwonted experience for a collector of subscriptions to be besought to take them 'with much entreaty,' but it would not be so anomalous if Christian people understood their privileges.

Further, Christian giving begins with the surrender of self to Christ, from which necessarily follows the glad offering of wealth. These Macedonians did more than Paul had hoped, and the explanation of the unexpected largeness of their contributions was their yielding of themselves to Jesus. That is the deepest source of all true liberality. If a man feels that he does not own himself, much less will he feel that his goods are his own. A slave's owner possesses the slave's bit of garden ground, his hut, and its furniture. If I belong to Christ, to whom does my money belong? But the consciousness that my goods are not mine, but Christ's, is not to remain a mere sentiment. It can receive practical embodiment by my giving them to Christ's representatives. The way for the Macedonians to show that they regarded their goods as Christ's, was to give them to Paul for Christ's poor saints. Jesus has His representatives still, and it is useless for people to talk or sing about belonging to Him, unless they verify their words by deeds.

Verse 6 tells the Corinthians that the success of the collection in Macedonia had induced Paul to send Titus to Corinth to promote it there. He 'had previously visited it on the same errand (chap. 12:14), and now is coming to complete 'this grace.' The rest of the passage is Paul's appeal to the Corinthians for their help in the matter, and certainly never was such an appeal made in a more dignified, noble, and lofty tone. He has been dilating on the liberality of others, and thereby sanctioning the stimulating of Christian liberality, in the same way as other graces may legitimately be stimulated, by example. That is delicate ground to tread on, and needs caution if it is not to degenerate into an appeal to rivalry, as it too often does, but in itself is perfectly legitimate and wholesome. But, passing from that incitement, Paul rests his plea on deeper grounds.

First, Christian liberality is essential to the completeness of Christian character. Paul's praise in verse 7 is not mere flattery, nor meant to put the

Corinthians into good humour. He will have enough to say hereafter about scandals and faults, but now he gives them credit for all the good he knew to be in them. Faith comes first, as always. It is the root of every Christian excellence. Then follow two graces,

eminently characteristic of a Greek church, and apt to run to seed in it — utterance and knowledge. Then two more, both of a more emotional character, earnestness and love, especially to Paul as Christ's servant. But all these fair attributes lacked completeness without the crowning grace of liberality'. It is the crowning grace, because it is the practical manifestation of the highest excellences. It is the result of sympathy, of unselfishness, of contact with Christ, of drinking in of His spirit, Love is best. Utterance and knowledge and earnestness are poor beside it. This grace is like the diamond which clasps a necklace of jewels.

Christian giving does not need to be commanded. 'I speak not by way of commandment.' That is poor virtue which only obeys a precept. Gifts given because it is duty to give them are not really gifts, but taxes. They leave no sweet savour on the hand that bestows, and bring none to that which receives. 'I call you not servants, but friends.' The region in which Christian liberality moves is high above the realm of law and its correlative, obligation.

Further, Christian liberality springs spontaneously from conscious possession of Christ's riches. We cannot here enter on the mysteries of Christ's emptying Himself of His riches of glory. We can but touch the stupendous fact, remembering that the place whereon we stand is holy ground. Who can measure the nature and depth of that self-denuding of the glory which He had with the Father before the world was? But, thank God, we do not need to measure it, in order to feel the solemn, blessed force of the appeal which it makes to us. Adoring wonder and gratitude, unfaltering trust and absolute self-surrender to a love so self-sacrificing, must ever follow the belief of that mystery of Divine mercy, the incarnation and sacrifice of the eternal Son.

But Paul would have us remember that the same mighty act of stooping love, which is the foundation of all our hope, is to be the pattern for all our conduct. Even in His divinest and most mysterious act, Christ is our example. A dewdrop is rounded by the same laws which shape the planetary spheres or the sun himself; and Christians but half trust Christ if they do not imitate Him. What selfishness in enjoyment of our 'own things' could live in us if we duly brought ourselves under the influence of that

example? How miserably poor and vulgar the appeals by which money is sometimes drawn from grudging owners and tight-buttoned pockets, sound beside that heart-searching and heart-moving one, 'Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ!'

Further, Christian liberality will not go off in good intentions and benevolent sentiments. The Corinthians were ready with their 'willing' on Titus's previous visit. Now Paul desires them to put their good feelings into concrete shape. There is plenty of benevolence that never gets to be beneficence. The advice here has a very wide application: 'As there was the readiness to will, so there may be the completion also.' We all know where the road leads that is paved with good intentions.

Further, Christian liberality is accepted and rewarded according to willingness, if that is carried into act according to ability. While the mere wish to help is not enough, it is the vital element in the act which flows from it; and there may be more of it in the widow's mite than in the rich man's large donation — or there may be less. The conditions of acceptable offerings are twofold — first, readiness, glad willingness to give, as opposed to closed hearts or grudging bestowals; and, second, that willingness embodied in the largest gift possible. The absence of either vitiates all. The presence of both gives trifles a place in God's storehouse of precious things. A father is glad when his child brings him some utterly valueless present, not because he must, but because he loves; and many a parent has such laid away in sacred repositories. God knows how to take gifts from His children, not less well than we who are evil know how to do it.

But the gracious saying of our passage has a solemn side; for if only gifts 'according as a man hath' are accepted, what becomes of the many which fall far short of our ability, and are really given, not because we have the willing mind, but because we could not get out of the unwelcome necessity to part with a miserably inadequate percentage of our possessions. Is God likely to be satisfied with the small dividends which we offer as composition for our great debt?

RICH YET POOR

'For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.' —2 Corinthians 8:9.

THE Apostle has been speaking about a matter which, to us, seems very small, but to him was very great, viz., a gathering of pecuniary help from the Gentile churches for the poor church in Jerusalem. Large issues, in his estimation, attended that exhibition of Christian unity, and, be it great or small, he applies the highest of all motives to this matter. 'For ye know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor.' The trivial things of life are to be guided and shaped by reference to the highest of all things, the example of Jesus Christ; and that in the whole depth of His humiliation, and even in regard to His cross and passion. We have here set forth, as the pattern to which the Christian life is to be conformed, the deepest conception of what our Lord's career on earth was.

The whole Christian Church is about to celebrate the nativity of our Lord at this time. This text gives us the true point of view from which to regard it. We have here the work of Christ in its deepest motive, 'The grace of our Lord Jesus.' We have it in its

transcendent self-impoverty, 'Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor.' We have it in its highest issue, 'That ye through His poverty might become rich, Let us look at those points.

I. Here we have the deepest motive which underlies the whole work of Christ, unveiled to us.

'Ye know the grace of our Lord. Jesus Christ.' Every word here is significant. It is very unusual in the New Testament to find that expression 'grace' applied to Jesus Christ. Except in the familiar benediction, I think there are only one or two instances of such a collocation of words. It is 'the grace of God' which, throughout the New Testament, is the prevailing expression. But here 'grace is attributed to Jesus'; that is to say, the love of the Divine heart is, without qualification or hesitation, ascribed to Him. And what do we mean by grace? We mean love in exercise to inferiors. It is infinite condescension in Jesus to love. His love stoops when it embraces us. Very significant, therefore, is the employment here of the solemn full

title, 'the Lord Jesus Christ,' which enhances the condescension by making prominent the height from which it bent. The 'grace' is all the more wonderful because of the majesty and sovereignty, to say the least of it, which are expressed in that title, the Lord. The highest stoops and stands upon the level of the lowest. 'Grace' is love that expresses itself to those who deserve something else. And the deepest motive, which is the very key to the whole phenomena of the life of Jesus Christ, is that it is all the exhibition, as it is the consequence, of a love that, stooping, forgives. 'Grace' is love that, stooping and forgiving, communicates its whole self to unworthy and transgressing recipients. And the key to the life of Jesus is that we have set forth in its operation a love which is not content to speak only the ordinary language of human affection, or to do its ordinary deeds, but is self-impelled to impart what transcends all other gifts of human tenderness, and to give its very self. And so a love that condescends, a love that passes by unworthiness, is turned away by no sin, is unmoved to any kind of anger, and never allows its cheek to flush. or its heart to beat faster, because of any provocation. and a love that is content with nothing short of entire surrender and self-impartation underlies all that precious life from Bethlehem to Calvary.

But there is another word in our text that may well be here taken into consideration. 'For your sakes' says the Apostle to that Corinthian church, made up of people, not one of whom had ever seen or been seen by Jesus. And yet the regard to them was part of the motive that moved the Lord to His life, and His death. That is to say, to generalise the thought, this grace, thus stooping and forgiving and self-imparting, is a love that gathers into its embrace and to its heart all mankind; and is universal because it is individualising. Just as each planet in the heavens, and each tiny plant upon the earth, are embraced by, and separately receive, the benediction of that all-encompassing arch of the heaven, so that grace enfolds all, Because it takes account of each, Whilst it is love for a sinful world, every soul of us may say: 'He loved me, and' — therefore — 'gave Himself for me.' Unless we see beneath the sweet story of the earthly life this deep-lying source of it all, we fail to understand that life itself. We may bring criticism to bear upon it; we may apprehend it in diverse affecting, elevating, educating aspects; but, oh ! brethren, we miss the blazing centre of the light, the warm heart of the fire, unless we see pulsating through all the individual facts of the life this one, all-shaping, all-vitalising motive; the grace — the stooping, the pardoning, the self-communicating, the individualising, and the universal love of Jesus Christ.

So then, we have here set before us the work of Christ in its —

II. Most mysterious and unique self-impoverty.

'He was... He became,' there is one strange contrast. 'He was rich... He became poor,' there is another. 'He was... He became.' What does that say? Well, it says that if you want to understand Bethlehem, you must go back to a time Before Bethlehem. The meaning of Christ's birth is only understood when we turn to that Evangelist who does not narrate it. For the meaning of it is here; 'the Word Became flesh, and dwelt among us.' The surface of the fact is the smallest part of the fact. They say that there is seven times as much of an iceberg under water as there is above the surface. And the deepest and most important fact about the nativity of our Lord is that it was not only the birth of an Infant, but the Incarnation of the Word. 'He was... He became.' We have to travel back and recognise that that life did not Begin in the manger. We have to travel back and recognise the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh.

And these two Words 'He was... He became,' imply another thing, and that is, that Jesus Christ who died because He chose, was not passive in His being born, But as at the end of His earthly life, so at its beginning exercised His volition, and was born because He willed, and willed because of 'the grace of our Lord Jesus.'

Now in this connection it is very remarkable, and well worth our pondering, that throughout the whole of the Gospels, when Jesus speaks of His coming into the world, He never uses the word 'born' but once, and that was before the Roman governor, who would not have understood or cared for anything further, to whom He did say, 'To this end was I born.' But even when speaking to him His consciousness that that word did not express the whole truth was so strong that He could not help adding — though He knew that the hard Roman procurator would pay no attention to the apparent tautology — the expression which more truly corresponded to the fact, 'and for this cause came I into the world.' The two phrases are not parallel! They are by no means synonymous. One expresses the outward fact; the other expresses that which underlay it. 'To this end was I born.' Yes! 'And for this cause came I.' He Himself put

it still more definitely when He said, 'I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father.' So the two extremities of

the earthly manifestation are neither of them ends; but before the one, and behind the other, there stretches an identity or oneness of Being and condition. The one as the other, the birth and the death, may be regarded as, in deepest reality, not only what He passively endured, but what He actively did. He was born, and He died, that in all points He might be 'like unto His brethren.' He 'came' into the world, and He 'went' to the Father. The end circled round to the beginning, and in both He acted because He chose, and chose because He loved.

So much, then, lies in the one of these two antitheses of my text; and the other is no less profound and significant. 'He was rich; He became poor.' In this connection 'rich' can only mean possessed of the Divine fulness and independence; and 'poor' can only mean possessed of human infirmity, dependence, and emptiness. And so to Jesus of Nazareth, to be born was impoverishment. If there is nothing more in His birth than in the birth of each of us, the words are grotesquely inappropriate to the facts of the case. For as between nothingness, which is the alternative, and the possession of conscious being, there is surely a contrast the very reverse of that expressed here. For us, to be born is to be endowed with capacities, with the wealth of intelligent, responsible, voluntary being; but to Jesus Christ, if we accept the New Testament teaching, to be born was a step, an infinite step, downwards, and He, alone of all men, might have been 'ashamed to call men brethren.' But this denudation of Himself, into the particulars of which I do not care to enter now, was the result of that stooping grace which counted it not a thing to be clutched hold of, to be equal with God; but He made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a man, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.'

And so, dear friends, we know the measure of the stooping love of Jesus only when we read the history by the light of this thought, that 'though He was rich' with all the fulness of that eternal Word which was 'in the beginning with God,' 'He Became poor,' with the poverty, the infirmity, the liability to temptation, the weakness, that attach to humanity; 'and was found in all points like unto His brethren,' that

He might be able to help and succour them all The last thing here is —

III. The work of Christ set forth in its highest issue.

'That we through His poverty might become rich. Of course, the antithetical expressions must be taken to be used in the same sense, and with the same width of application, in both of the clauses. And if so, just think reverently, wonderingly, thankfully, of the infinite vista of glorious possibility that is open to us here. Christ was rich in the possession of that Divine glory which He had with the Father before the world was. 'He became poor,' in assuming the weakness of the manhood that you and I carry, that we, in the human poverty which is like His poverty, may become rich with wealth that is like His riches, and that as He stooped to earth veiling the Divine with the human, we may rise to heaven, clothing the human with the Divine.

For surely there is nothing more plainly taught in Scripture, and I am bold to say nothing to which any deep and vital Christian experience even here gives more surely an anticipatory confirmation, than the fact that Christ became like unto us, that each of us may become like unto Him. The divine and the human natures are similar, and the fact of the Incarnation, on the one hand, and of man's glorification by possession of the divine nature on the other, equally rest upon that fundamental resemblance between the divine nature and the human nature which God has made in His own image. If that which in each of us is unlike God is cleared away, as it can be cleared away, through faith in that dear Lord, then the likeness, as a matter of course, comes into force.

The law of all elevation is that whosoever desires to lift must stoop; and the end of all stooping is to lift the lowly to the place from which the love hath bent itself. And this is at once the law for the Incarnation of the Christ, and for the elevation of the Christian. 'We shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.' And the great love, the stooping, forgiving, self-communicating love, doth not reach its ultimate issue, nor effect fully the purposes to which it ever is tending, unless and until all who have received it are 'changed from glory to glory even into the image of the Lord.' We do not understand Jesus, His cradle, or His Cross, unless on the one hand we see in them His emptying Himself that He might fill us, and, on the other hand, see, as the only result which warrants them and satisfies Him, our complete conformity to His image, and our participation in that glory which He has at the right hand of God. That is the prospect for humanity, and it is possible for each of us.

I do not dwell upon other aspects of this great self-emptying of our Lord's, such as the revelation in it to us of the very heart of God, and of the divinest thing in the divine nature, which is love, or such as the sympathy which is made possible thereby to Him, and which is not only the pity of a God, but the compassion of a Brother. Nor do I touch upon many other aspects which are full of strengthening and teaching. That grand thought that Jesus has shared our human poverty that we may share His divine riches is the very apex of the New Testament teaching, and of the Christian hope. We have within us, notwithstanding all our transgressions, what the old divines used to call a 'deiform nature,' capable of being lifted up into the participation of divinity, capable of being cleansed from all the spots and stains which make us so unlike Him in whose likeness we were made.

Brethren, let us not forget that this stooping, and pardoning, and self-imparting love, has for its main instrument to appeal to our

hearts, not the cradle hut the Cross. We are being told by many people to-day that the centre of Christianity lies in the thought of an Incarnation. Yes. But our Lord Himself has told us what that was for.

‘The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.’ It is only when we look to that Lord in His death, and see there the very lowest point to which He stooped, and the supreme manifestation of His grace, that we shall be drawn to yield our hearts and lives to Him in thankfulness, in trust, and in imitation: and shall set Him before us as the pattern for our conduct, as well as the Object of our trust.

Brethren, my text was spoken originally as presenting the motive and the example for a little piece of pecuniary liability. Do you take the cradle and the Cross as the law of your lives? For depend upon it, the same necessity which obliged Jesus to come down to our level, if He would lift us to His; to live our life and die our death, if He would make us partakers of His immortal life, and deliver us from death; makes it absolutely necessary that if we are to live for anything nobler than our own poor, transitory self-aggrandisement, we too must learn to stoop to forgive, to impart ourselves, and must die by self-surrender and sacrifice, if we are ever to communicate any life, or good of life, to others. He has loved us, and given Himself for us. He has set us therein an example which He commends to us By His own word when He tells us that ‘if a corn of wheat’ is to bring forth ‘much fruit’ it must die, else it ‘abideth alone.’ Unless we die, we

never truly live; unless we die to ourselves for others, and like Jesus, we live alone in the solitude of a self-enclosed self-regard. So living, we are dead whilst we live.

WILLING AND NOT DOING

‘Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to win so there may be a performance also.’ — 2 Corinthians 8:11.

THE Revised Version reads: ‘But now complete the doing also; that as there was the readiness to will, so there may be the completion also out of your ability.’ A collection of money for the almost pauper church at Jerusalem bulked very largely in the Apostle’s mind at the date of the writing of the two letters to the Corinthian church. We learn that that church had been the first to agree to the project, and then had very distinctly hung back from implementing its promises and fulfilling its good intentions. So the Apostle, in the chapter from which my text is taken, with wonderful delicacy, dignity, and profundity, sets forth the true principle, not only of Christian giving, but of Christian asking. The text advises that the gushing sentiments of brotherly sympathy and liberality which had inspired the Corinthians a year ago should now bear some fruit in action. So Paul is going to send Titus, his right-hand man at the time, to hurry up and finish off the collection and have done with it. The text is in effect the message which Titus was to carry; but it has a far wider application than that. It is a needful advice for us all about a great many other things: ‘As there was a readiness to will, so let there be a performance also.’

Resolutions, noble and good and Christlike, have a strange knack of cheating the people who make them. So we all need the exhortation not to be befooled by fancying that we have done, when we have only willed. Of course we shall not do unless we will. But there is a wide gap, as our experience witnesses, between the two things. We all know what place it is to which, according to the old proverb, the road is paved with good intentions; and the only way to pull up that paving is to take Paul’s advice here and always, and immediately to put into action the resolves of our hearts. Now I desire to say two or three very plain and simple things about this matter.

I. I would have you consider the necessity of this commandment.

Consider that the fault here warned against is a universal one. What different men we should be if our resolutions had fruited in conduct! In all regions of life that is true, but most emphatically is it true in regard to religion. The damning tragedy of many lives, and I dare say of those of

some of my hearers, is that men have over and over again determined that they would be Christians, and they are not Christians yet; just because they have let ‘the native hue of resolution be sicklied over’ by some paleness or other, and so have resolved and resolved and resolved till every nerve of action is rotted away, and they will die unchristian. I dare say that there are men or women listening to me now, perhaps with grey hairs upon them, who can remember times, in the springtide of their youth, when they said, ‘I will give my heart to Jesus Christ, and set my faith upon Him’; and they have not done it yet. Now, therefore, ‘as there was a readiness to will, let there be also the performance.’

But it is not only in regard to that most important of all resolves that I wish to say a word. All Christians, I am sure, know what it is, over and over again, to have had stirrings in their hearts which they have been able to consolidate into determination, but have not been able to carry into act. ‘The children have come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring them forth.’ That is true about all of us, more or less, and it is very solemnly true of a great many of us professing Christians. We have tried to cure — we have

determined that we will cure — manifest and flagrant defects or faults in our Christian life. We have resolved, and some nipping frost has come, and the blossoms have dropped on the grass before they have ever set into fruit. I know that is so about you, because I know that it is so about myself. And therefore, dear brethren, I appeal to you, and ask you whether the exhortation of my text has not a sharp point for every one of us — whether the universality of this defect does not demand that we all should gravely consider the exhortation here before us?

Then, again, let me remind you how this injunction is borne in upon us by the consideration of the strength of the opposition with which we have always to contend, in every honest attempt to bring to act Our best resolutions. Did you ever try to cure some little habit, some mere trifle, a trick of manner or twist of the finger, or some attitude or tone that might be ugly and awkward, and that people told you that it would be better to get rid of? You know how hard it is. There is always a tremendous gulf between the ideal and its realisation in life. As long as we are moving in vacuo we move without any friction or difficulty; but as soon as we come out into a world where there are an atmosphere and opposing forces, then friction comes in, and speed diminishes: and we never become what we aim to be. We begin with grand purposes, and we end with very poor results. We all start, in our early days, with the notion that our lives are going to be

radiant and beautiful, and an unlike what the limitations of power and the antagonisms that we have to meet make of them at last. The tree of our life's doings has to grow, like those contorted pines on the slopes of the Alps, in many storms, with heavy weights of snow on its branches, and beaten about by tempests from every quarter of the heavens; and so it gets gnarled and knotted and very unlike the symmetrical Beauty that we dreamed would adorn it, We begin with saying: 'Come! Let us build a tower whose top shall reach to heaven'; and we are contented at last, if we have put up some little tumble-down shed where we can get shelter for our heads from the blast.

And the difficulty in bringing into action our best selves besets us in the matter of translating our resolutions into practice. What are arrayed against it? A feeble will, enslaved too often by passions and flesh and habits, and all about us lie obstacles to our carrying into action our conscientious convictions, our deepest resolutions; obstacles to our being true to our true selves; to which obstacles, alas, far too many of us habitually, and all of us occasionally, succumb. That being the case, do not we all need to ponder in our deepest hearts, and to pray for grace to make the motto of our lives, 'As there was a readiness to will, let there be a performance'?

II. Consider the importance of this counsel

That is borne in upon mind and conscience by looking at the disastrous effects of letting resolutions remain sterile. Consider how apt we are to deceive ourselves with unfulfilled purposes. The quick response which an easily-moved nature may make to some appeal of noble thought or lofty principle is mistaken for action, and we are tempted to think that willing is almost as good as if we had done what we half resolved on. And there is a kind of glow of satisfaction that comes when such a man thinks, 'I have done well in that I have determined.' The Devil will let you resolve as much as you like-the more the better; only the more easily you resolve, the more certainly he will block the realisation. Let us take care of that seducing temptation which is apt to lead us all to plume ourselves on good resolutions, and to fancy that they are almost equivalent to their own fulfilment. Cheques are all very well if there be bullion in the bank cellars to pay them with when they fall due, but if that be not so, then the issuing of them is crime and fraud. Our resolutions, made and forgotten as so many of our good resolutions are, are very little better.

Note, too, how rapidly the habit of substituting lightly-made resolutions for seriously-endeavoured acts grows.

And mark, further, how miserable and debilitating it is to carry the dead weight of such unaccomplished intentions.

Nothing so certainly weakens a man as a multitude of resolves that he knows he has never fulfilled. They weaken his will, burden his conscience, stand in the way of his hopes, make him feel as if the entail of evil was too firm and strong to be ever broken. 'O wretched man that I am!' said one who had made experience of what it was to will what was good, and not to find how to perform, 'who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' It is an awful thing to have to carry a corpse about on your back. And that was what Paul thought the man did who loaded his own shoulders with abortive resolutions, that perished in the birth, and never grew up to maturity. Weak and miserable is always the man who is swift to resolve and slow to carry out his resolutions.

III. And now let me say a word before I close about how this universal and grave disease is to be coped with.

Well, I should say to begin with, let us take very soberly and continually into our consciousness the recognition of the fact that the disease is there. And then may I say, let us be rather slower to resolve than we often are. 'Better is it that thou shouldest not vow than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.' The man who has never had the determination to give up some criminal indulgence-say, drink — is possibly less criminal, and certainly less weak, than the man who, when his head aches, and the consequences of his self-indulgence are vividly realised by him, makes up his mind to be a teetotaller, and soon stumbles into the first dram-shop that is open, and then reels out a drunkard. Do not vow until you have made up your minds to pay. Remember that it is a solemn act to determine anything, especially anything bearing on moral and religious life; and that you had far better keep your will in suspense than spring to the resolution with thoughtless levity and leave it with the same.

Further, the habit of promptly carrying out our resolves is one that, like all other habits, can be cultivated. And we can cultivate it in little things, in the smallest trifles of daily life, which by their myriads make up life itself, in order that it may be a fixed custom of our minds when great resolves have to be made. The man who has trained himself day in and day out, in regard

to the insignificances of daily life, to let act follow resolve as the thunder peal succeeds the lightning flash, is the man who, if he is moved to make a great resolve about his religion, or about his conduct, will be most likely to carry it out, Get the magical influence of habit on your side, and you will have done much to conquer the evil of abortive resolutions.

But then there is something a great deal more than that to be said. The Apostle did not content himself, in the passage already referred to, with bewailing the wretchedness of the condition in which to will was present, but how to perform he found not. He asked, and he triumphantly answered, the question, 'Who shall deliver me?' with the great words, 'I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.' There is the secret; keep near Him, trust Him, open your hearts to the influences of that Divine Spirit who makes us free from the law of sin and death. And if thus, knowing our weakness, recognising our danger, humbly trying to cultivate the habit of prompt discharge of all discerned duty, we leave ourselves in Jesus Christ's hands, and wait, and ask, and believe that we possess, His cleansing Spirit, then we shall not ask and wait in vain. 'Work out your own salvation,... for it is God that worketh in you, both the willing and the doing.'

ALL GRACE ABOUNDING

'God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all. sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.' — 2 Corinthians 9:8.

IN addition to all his other qualities the Apostle was an extremely good man of business; and he had a field for the exercise of that quality in the collection for the poor saints of Judea, which takes up so much of this letter, and occupied for so long a period so much of his thoughts and efforts. It was for the sake of showing by actual demonstration that would 'touch the hearts' of the Jewish brethren, the absolute unity of the two halves of the Church, the Gentile and the Jewish, that the Apostle took so much trouble in this matter. The words which I have read for my text come in the midst of a very earnest appeal to the Corinthian Christians for their pecuniary help. He is dwelling upon the same thought which is expressed in the well-known words: 'What I gave I kept; what I kept I lost.'

But whilst the words of my text primarily applied to money matters, you see that they are studiously general, universal. The Apostle, after his fashion, is lifting up a little 'secular' affair into a high spiritual region; and he lays down in my text a broad general law, which goes to the very depths of the Christian life.

Now, notice, we have here in three clauses three stages which we may venture to distinguish as the fountain, the basin, the stream. 'God is able to make all grace abound toward you'; — there is the fountain. 'That ye always, having all-sufficiency in all things'; — there is the basin that receives the gush from the fountain. 'May abound in every good work'; — there is the stream that comes from the basin. The fountain pours into the basin, that the flow from the basin may feed the stream.

Now this thought of Paul's goes to the heart of things. So let us look at it. I. The Fountain.

The Christian life in all its aspects and experiences is an outflow from 'the Fountain of Life,' the giving God. Observe how emphatically the Apostle, in the context, accumulates words that express universality: 'all grace..., all-sufficiency for all things... every good work.' But even these expressions do not satisfy Paul, and he has to repeat the word 'abound,' in order to give some faint idea of his conception of the full tide which gushes from the fountain. It is 'all grace,' and it is abounding grace.

Now what does he mean by 'grace'? That word is a kind of shorthand for the whole sum of the unmerited blessings which come to men through Jesus Christ. Primarily, it describes what we, for want of a better expression, have to call a 'disposition' in the divine nature; and it means, then, if so looked at, the unconditioned, undeserved, spontaneous, eternal, stooping, pardoning love of God. That is grace, in the primary New Testament use of the phrase.

But there are no idle 'dispositions' in God. They are always energising, and so the word glides from meaning the disposition, to meaning the manifestation and activities of it, and the 'grace' of our Lord is that love in exercise. And then, since the divine energies are never fruitless, the word passes over, further, to mean all the blessed and beautiful things in a soul which are the consequences of the Promethean truth of God's loving hand, the outcome in life of the inward bestowment which has its cause, its sole cause, in God's ceaseless, unexhausted love, unmerited and free.

That, very superficially and inadequately set forth, is at least a glimpse into the fulness and greatness of meaning that lies in that profound New Testament word, 'grace.' But the Apostle here puts emphasis on the variety of forms which the one divine gift assumes. It is 'all grace' which God is able to make abound toward you. So then, you see this one transcendent gift from the divine

heart, when it comes into our human experience, is like a meteor when it passes into the atmosphere of earth, and catches fire and blazes, showering out a multitude of radiant points of light. The grace is many-sided — many-sided to us, but one in its source and in its character. For at bottom, that which God in His grace gives to us as His grace is what? Himself; or if you like to put it in another form, which comes to the same thing — new life through Jesus Christ. That is the encyclopaedical gift, which contains within itself all grace. And just as the physical life in each of us, one in all its manifestations, produces many results, and shines in the eye, and blushes in the cheek, and gives strength to the arm, and flexibility and deftness to the fingers and swiftness to the foot: so also is that one grace which, being manifold in its manifestations, is one in its essence. There are many graces, there is one Grace.

But this grace is not only many-sided, but abounding. It is not congruous with God's wealth, nor with His love, that He should give scantily, or, as it

were, should open but a finger of the hand that is full of His gifts, and let out a little at a time. There are no sluices on that great stream so as to regulate its flow, and to give sometimes a painful trickle and sometimes a full gush, but this fountain is always pouring itself out, and it 'abounds!'

But then we are pulled up short by another word in this first clause: 'God is able to make.' Paul does not say, 'God will make.' He puts the whole weight of responsibility for that ability becoming operative upon us. There are conditions; and although we may have access to that full fountain, it will not pour on us 'all grace' and 'abundant grace,' unless we observe these, and so turn God's ability to give into actual giving.

And how do we do that? By desire, by expectance, by petition, by faithful stewardship. If we have these things, if we have tutored ourselves, and experience has helped in the tuition, to make large our expectancy, God will smile down upon us and 'do exceeding abundantly above all 'that we 'think' as well as above all that we 'ask.' Brethren, if our supplies are scant, when the full fountain is gushing at our sides, we are 'not straitened in God, we are straitened in ourselves.' Christian possibilities are Christian obligations, and what we might have and do not have, is our condemnation.

I turn, in the next place, to what I have, perhaps too fancifully, called II. The Basin.

'God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that ye, having always all-sufficiency in all things, may,'... etc.

The result of all this many-sided and exuberant outpouring of grace from the fountain is that the basin may be full. Considering the infinite source and the small receptacle, we might have expected something more than 'sufficiency' to have resulted.

Divine grace is sufficient. Is it not more than sufficient? Yes, no doubt. But what Paul wishes us to feel is this — to put it into very plain English — that the good gifts of the divine grace will always be proportioned to our work, and to our sufferings too. We shall feel that we have enough, if we are as we ought to be. Sufficiency is more than a man gets anywhere else. 'Enough is as good as a feast.' And if we have strength, which we may have, to do the day's tasks, and strength to carry the day's crosses, and strength to accept the day's sorrows, and strength to master the day's

temptations, that is as much as we need wish to have, even out of the fulness of God. And we shall get it, dear brethren, if we will only fulfil the conditions. If we exercise expectance, and desire and petition and faithful stewardship, we shall get what we need. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,' if the road is a steep, and rocky one that would wear out leather. 'As thy days so shall thy strength be.' God does not hurl His soldiers in a blundering attack on some impregnable mountain, where they are slain in heaps at the base; but when He lays a commandment on my shoulders, He infuses strength into me, and according to the good homely old saying that has brought comfort to many a sad and weighted heart, makes the back to bear the burden. The heavy task or the crushing sorrow is often the key that opens the door of God's treasure-house. You have had very little experience either of life or of Christian life, if you have not learnt by this time that the harder your work, and the darker your sorrows, the mightier have been God's supports, and the more starry the lights that have shone upon your path. 'That ye, always having all-sufficiency in all things,'

One more word: this sufficiency should be more uniform, is uniform in the divine intention, and in so far as the flow of the fountain is concerned. Always having had I may be sure that I always shall have. Of course I know that, in so far as our physical nature conditions our spiritual experience, there will be ups and downs, moments of emancipation and moments of slavery. There will be times when the flower opens, and times when it shuts itself up. But I am sure that the great mass of Christian people might have a far more level temperature in their Christian experience than they have; that we could, if we would, have far more experimental knowledge of this 'always' of my text. God means that the basin should be always full right up to the top of the marble edge, and that the more is drawn off from it, the more should flow into it. But it is very often like the reservoirs in the hills for some great city in a drought, where great stretches of the bottom are exposed, and again, when the drought breaks, are full to the top of the retaining wall. That should not be. Our Christian life should run on the high levels. Why does it not? Possibilities are duties.

And now, lastly, we have here what, adhering to my metaphor, I call III. The stream.

'That ye, always having all-sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.'

That is what God gives us His grace for; and that is a very important consideration. The end of God's dealings with us, poor, weak, sinful creatures, is character and conduct. Of course you can state the end in a great many other ways; but there have been terrible evils arising from the way in which Evangelical preachers have too often talked, as if the end of God's dealings with us was the vague thing which they call 'salvation,' and by which many of their hearers take them to mean neither more nor less than dodging Hell. But the New Testament, with all its mysticism, even when it soars highest, and speaks most about the perfection of humanity, and the end of God's dealings being that we may be 'filled with the fulness of God,' never loses its wholesome, sane hold of the common moralities of daily life, and proclaims that we receive all, in order that we may be able to 'maintain good works for necessary uses.' And if we lay that to heart, and remember that a correct creed, and a living faith, and precious, select, inward emotions and experiences are all intended to evolve into lives, filled and radiant with common moralities and 'good works' — not meaning thereby the things which go by that name in popular phraseology, but 'whatsoever things are lovely ... and of good report' — then we shall understand a little better what we are here for and what Jesus Christ died for, and what His Spirit is given and lives in us for. So 'good works' is the end, in one very important aspect, of all that avalanche of grace which has been from eternity rushing down upon us from the heights of God.

There is one more thing to note, and that is that, in our character and conduct, we should copy the 'giving grace.' Look how eloquently and significantly, in the first and last clauses of my text, the same words recur. 'God is able to make all grace abound, that ye may abound in all good work.' Copy God in the many-sidedness and in the copiousness of the good that flows out from your life and conduct, Because of your possession of that divine grace. And remember, 'to him that hath shall be given.' We pray for more grace; we need to pray for that, no doubt. Do we use the grace that God has given us? If we do not, the remainder of that great word which I have just quoted will be fulfilled in you. God forbid that any of us should receive the grace of God in vain, and therefore come under the stern and inevitable sentence, 'From him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath!'

GOD'S UNSPEAKABLE GIFT

'Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift. — 2 Corinthians 9:15.

IT seems strange that there should ever have been any doubt as to what gift it is which evokes this burst of thanksgiving. There is but one of God's many mercies which is worthy of being thus singled out. There is one blazing central sun which shines out amidst all the galaxy of lights which fill the heavens. There is one gift of God which, beyond all others, merits the designation of 'unspeakable.' The gift of Christ draws all other divine gifts after it. 'How should He not with Him also freely give us all things.'

The connection in which this abrupt jet of praise stands is very remarkable. The Apostle has been dwelling on the Christian obligation of giving bountifully and cheerfully, and on the great law that a glad giver is 'enriched' and not impoverished thereby, whilst the recipients, for their part, are blessed by having thankfulness evoked towards the givers. And that contemplation of the happy interchange of benefit and thanks between men leads the fervid Apostle to the thoughts which were always ready to spring to his lips — of God as the great pattern of giving and of the gratitude to Him which should fill all our souls. The expression here 'unspeakable' is what I wish chiefly to fix upon now. It means literally that which cannot be fully declared. Language fails because thought fails.

I. The gift comes from unspeakable love.

God so loved the world that He gave His only gotten Son. The love is the cause of the gift: the gift is the expression of the love. John's Gospel says that the Son which is in the bosom of the Father has declared Him. Paul here uses a related word for unspeakable which might be rendered 'that which cannot be fully declared.' The declaration of the Father partly consists in this, that He is declared to be undecidable, the proclamation of His name consists partly in this that it is proclaimed to be a name that cannot be proclaimed. Language fails when it is applied to the expression of human emotion; no tongue can ever fully serve the heart. Whether there be any thoughts too great for words or no, there are emotions too great. Language is ever 'weaker than our grief' and not seldom weaker than our love. It is but the surface water that can be run off through the narrow channel of speech: the central deep remains. If it be so with human affection, how much more must it be so with God's love? With lowly

condescension He uses all sweet images drawn from earthly relationships, to help us in understanding His. Every dear name is pressed into the service — father, mother, husband, wife, brother, friend, and after all are exhausted, the love which clothed itself in them all in turn, and used them all to give some faint hint of its own perfection, remains unspoken. We know human love, its limitations, its changes, its extravagances, its shortcomings, and cannot but feel how unworthy it is to mirror for us that perfection in God which we venture to name by a name so soiled. The analogies between what we call love in man and love in God must be supplemented by the differences between them, if we are ever to approach a worthy conception of the unspeakable love that underlies the unspeakable gift.

II. The gift involves unspeakable sacrifice.

Human love desires to give its most precious treasures to its object and is then most blessed: divine love cannot come short of human in this most characteristic of its manifestations. Surely the copy is not to surpass the original, nor the mirror to flash more brightly than the sun which, at the brightest, it but reflects. In such a matter we can but stammer when we try to find words. As our text warns us, we are trying to utter the unutterable when we seek to speak of God's giving up for us; but however such a thought may seem to be forbidden by other aspects of the divine nature, it seems to be involved in the great truth that 'God is love.' Since He is, His blessedness too, must be in imparting, and in parting with what He gives. A humble worshipper in Jewish times loved enough to say that he would not offer unto God an offering that cost him nothing, and that loving height of self-surrender was at the highest, but a lowly imitation of the love to which it looked up. When Paul in the Epistle to the Romans says, 'He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all,' he is obviously alluding to, and all but quoting, the divine words to Abraham, 'Seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me,' and the allusion permits us to parallel what God did when He sent His Son with what Abraham did when, with wrung heart, but with submission, he bound and laid Isaac on the altar and stretched forth his hand with the knife in it to slay him. Such a representation contradicts the vulgar conceptions of a passionless, self-sufficing, icy deity, but reflection on the facts of our own experience and on the blessed secrets of our own love, leads us to believe that some shadow of loss passed across the infinite and eternal completeness of the divine nature when 'God sent forth His Son made of a woman.'

And may we not go further and say that when Jesus on the Cross cried from out of the darkness of eclipse, 'My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?' there was something in the heavens corresponding to the darkness that covered the earth and something in the Father's heart that answered the Son's. But our text warns us that such matters are not for our handling in speech, and are Best dealt with, not as matters of possibly erring speculation, But as materials for lowly thanks unto God for His unspeakable gift.

But whatever may be true about the love of the Father who sent, there can be no doubt about the love of the Son who came. No man helps his fellows in suffering But at the cost of his own suffering. Sympathy means fellow-feeling, and the one indispensable condition of all rescue work of any sort is that the rescuer must bear on his own shoulders the sins or sorrows that he is able to bear away. Heartless help is no help. It does not matter whether he who 'stands and says, "Be ye clothed and fed,"' gives or does not give 'the things necessary,' he will be but a 'miserable comforter' if he has not in heart and feeling entered into the sorrows and pains which he seeks to alleviate. We need not dwell on the familiar truths concerning Him who was a 'man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.' All through His life He was in contact with evil, and for Him the contact was like that of a naked hand pressed upon hot iron. The sins and woes of the world made His path through it like that of bare feet on sharp flints. If He had never died it would still have been true that 'He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.' On the Cross He completed the libation which had continued throughout His life and 'poured out His soul unto death' as He had been pouring it out all through His life. We have no measure by which we can estimate the inevitable sufferings in such a world as ours of such a spirit as Christ's. We may know something of the solitude of uncongenial society; of the pain of seeing miseries that we cannot comfort, of the horrors of dwelling amidst impurities that we cannot cleanse, and of longings to escape from them all to some nest in the wilderness, but all these are but the feeblest shadows of the incarnate sorrows whose name among men was Jesus. Nothing is more pathetic than the way in which our Lord kept all these sorrows close locked within His Own heart, so that scarcely ever did they come to light. Once He did permit a glimpse into that hidden chamber when He said, 'O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you, how long shall I suffer you?' But for the most part His sorrow was unspoken because it was 'unspeakable.'

Once beneath the quivering olives in the moonlight of Gethsemane, He made a pitiful appeal for the little help which three drowsy men could give Him, when He cried, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. Tarry ye here and watch with Me,' but for the most part the silence at which His judges 'marvelled greatly,' and raged as much as they marvelled, was unbroken, and as 'a sheep before her shearers is dumb,' so 'He opened not His mouth.' The sacrifice of His death was, for the most part, silent like the sacrifice of His life. Should it not call forth from us floods of praise and thanks to God for His unspeakable gift?

III. The gift brings with it unspeakable results.

In Christ are hid 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' When God gave us Him, He gave us a storehouse in which are contained treasures of truth which can never be fully comprehended, and which, even if comprehended, can never be exhausted. The mystery of the Divine Name revealed in Jesus, the mystery of His person, are themes on which the Christian world has been nourished ever since, and which are as full of food, not for the understanding only, but far more for the heart and the will, to-day as ever they were. The world may think that it has left the teaching of Jesus behind, but in reality the teaching is far ahead, and the world's practise is but slowly creeping towards its imperfect attainment. The Gospel is the guide of the race, and each generation gathers something more from it, and progresses in the measure in which it follows Christ; and as for the race, so for the individual. Each of Christ's scholars finds his own gift, and in the measure of his faithfulness to what he has found makes ever new discoveries in the unsearchable riches of Christ. After all have fed full there still remain abundant baskets full to be taken up.

He who has sounded the depths of Jesus most completely is ever the first to acknowledge that he has been but as a child 'gathering

pebbles on the beach while the great ocean lies unsounded before him.' No single soul, and no multitude of souls, can exhaust Jesus; neither our individual experiences, nor the experiences of a believing world can fully realise the endless wealth laid up in Him. He is the Alpha and the Omega of all our speech, the first letter and the last of our alphabet, between which lie all the rest.

The gift is completed in consequences yet unspeakable. Even the first blessings which the humblest faith receives from the pierced hands have more in them than words can tell. Who has ever spoken adequately and in full correspondence with reality what it is to have God's pardoning love flowing in upon the soul? Many singers have sung sweet psalms and hymns and spiritual songs on which generations of devout souls have fed, but none of them has spoken the deepest blessedness of a Christian life, or the calm raptures of communion with God. It is easy to utter the words 'forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, fellowship, eternal life'; the syllables can be spoken, but who knows or can utter the depths of the meanings? After all human words the half has not been told us, and as

every soul carries within itself unrevealable emotions, and is a mystery after all revelation, so the things which God's gift brings to a soul are after all speech unspeakable, and the words 'cannot be uttered' which they who are caught up into the third heavens hear.

Then we may extend our thoughts to the future form of Christian experience. 'It doth not yet appear what we should be.' All our conceptions of a future existence must necessarily be inadequate. Nothing but experience can reveal them to us, and our experience there will be capable of indefinite expansion, and through eternity there will be endless growth in the appropriation of the unspeakable gift.

For us the only recompense that we can make for the unspeakable gift is to receive it with 'thanks unto God' and the yielding up of our hearts to Him. God pours this love upon us freely, without stint. It is unspeakable in the depths of its source, in the manner of its manifestation, in the glory of its issues. It is like some great stream, rising in the trackless mountains, broad and deep, and leading on to a sunlit ocean. We stand on the bank; let us trust ourselves to its broad bosom. It will bear us safe. And let us take heed that we receive not the gift of God in vain.

A MILITANT MESSAGE

'Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ; and being in readiness to avenge all disobedience, when your obedience shall be fulfilled.' — 2 Corinthians 10:5-6

NONE of Paul's letters are so full of personal feeling as this one is. It is written, for the most part, at a white heat; he had heard from his trusted Titus tidings which on one hand filled him with a thankfulness of which the first half of the letter is the expression; but there had also been tidings of a very different kind, and from this point onwards the letter is seething with the feelings which these had produced. There was in the Corinthian Church a party, probably Judaisers, which denied his authority and said bitter things about his character. They apparently had contrasted the force of his letters and the feebleness of his 'bodily presence' and speech. They insinuated that his 'bark was worse than his bite.' Their language put into plain English would be something like this, 'Ah! He is very bold at a distance, let him come and face us and we shall see a difference. Vapouring in his letters, he will be meek enough when he is here.'

These slanderers seem to have thought of Paul as if he 'warred according to flesh,' and it is this charge, that he was actuated in his opposition to the evils in Corinth by selfish considerations and worldly interests, which seems to have set the Apostle on fire. In answer he pours out quick, indignant questionings, sharp irony, vehement self-vindication, passionate remonstrances, flashes of wrath, sudden jets of tenderness. What a position for him to have to say, 'I am not a low schemer; I am not working for myself.' Yet it is the common lot of all such men to be misread by little, crawling creatures who cannot believe in heroic self-forgetfulness. He answers the taunt that he 'walked according to the flesh' in the context by saying, 'Yes, I live in the flesh, my outward life is like that of other men, but I do not go a-soldiering according to the flesh. It is not for my own sinful self that I get the rules of my life's battle, neither do I get my weapons from the flesh. They could not do what they do if that were their origin: they are of God and therefore mighty.' Then the metaphor as it were catches fire, and in our text he expands the figure of a warfare and sets before us the destruction of fortresses, the capture of their garrisons, and the leading of them away into another land, the stern punishment of the

rebels who still hold out, and the merciful delay in administering it. It has been suggested that there is an allusion in our text to the extermination of the pirates in Paul's native Cilicia which happened some fifty or sixty years before his birth and ended in destroying their robber-holds and taking some thousands of prisoners. Whether that be so or no, the Apostle's kindled imagination sets forth here great truths as to the effects which his message is meant to produce and, thank God, has produced.

I. The opposing fortresses.

The Apostle conceives of himself and of his brother preachers of Christ as going forth on a merciful warfare. He thinks of strong rock

fortresses, with lofty walls set on high, and frowning down on any assailants. No doubt he is thinking first of the opposition which he had to front in Corinth from the Judaisers to whom we have referred, but the application of the metaphor goes far beyond the petty strife in Corinth and carries for us the wholesome lesson that one main cause which keeps men back from Christ is a too high estimate of themselves. Some of us are enclosed in the fortress of self-sufficiency: we will not humbly acknowledge our dependence on God, and have turned self-reliance into the law of our lives. There are many voices, some of them sweet and powerful, which to-day are preaching that gospel. It finds eager response in many hearts, and there is something in us all to which it appeals. We are often tempted to say defiantly, 'Who is Lord over us?' And the teaching that bids us rely on ourselves is so wholly in accord with the highest wisdom and the noblest life that what is good and what is evil in each of us contribute to reinforce it. Self-dependence is a great virtue, and the mother of much energy and nobleness, but it is also a great error and a great sin. To be so self-sufficing as not to need externals is good; to be so self-sufficing as not to need or to see God is ruin and death. The title which, as one of our great thinkers tells us, a humourist put on the back of a volume of heterodox tracts, 'Every man his own redeemer,' makes a claim for self-sufficiency which more or less unconsciously shuts out many men from the salvation of Christ.

There is the fortress of culture and the pride of it in which many of us are to-day entrenched against the Gospel. The attitude of mind into which persons of culture tend to fall is distinctly adverse to their reception of the Gospel, and that is not because the Gospel is adverse to culture, but because cultured people do not care to be put on the same level with publicans and harlots. They would be less disinclined to go into the feast if

there were in it reserved seats for superior people and a private entrance to them. If the wise and prudent were more of both, they would be liker the Babes to whom these things are revealed, and they would be revealed to them too. Not knowledge but the superciliousness which is the result of the conceit of knowledge hinders from God, and is one of the strongest fortresses against which the weapons of our warfare have to be employed.

There is the fortress of ignorance. Most men who are kept from Christ are so because they know neither themselves nor God. The most widely prevailing characteristic of the superficial life of most men is their absolute unconsciousness of the fact of sin; they neither know it as universal nor as personal. They have never gone deeply enough down into the depths of their own hearts to have come up scared at the ugly things that lie sleeping there, nor have they ever reflected on their own conduct with sufficient gravity to discern its aberrations from the law of right, hence the average man is quite unconscious of sin, and is a complete stranger to himself. The cup has been drunk by and intoxicated the world, and the masses of men are quite unaware that it has intoxicated them.

They are ignorant of God as they are of themselves, and if at any time, by some flash of light, they see themselves as they are, they think of God as if He were altogether such an one as themselves, and fall back on a vague trust in the vaguer mercy of their half-believed-in God as their hope for a vague salvation. Men who thus walk in a vain show will never feel their need of Jesus, and the lazy ignorance of themselves and the as lazy trust in what they call their God, are a fortress against which it will task the power of God to make any weapons of warfare mighty to its pulling down.

II. The casting down of fortresses.

The first effect of any real contact with Christ and His Gospel is to reveal a man to himself, to shatter his delusive estimates of what he is, and to pull down about his ears the lofty fortress in which he has ensconced himself. It seems strange work for what calls itself a Gospel to begin by forcing a man to cry out with sobs and tears, Oh, wretched man that I am! But no man will ever reach the heights to which Christ can lift him, who does not begin his upward course by descending to the depths into which Christ's Gospel begins its work by plunging him. Unconsciousness of sin is sure to lead to indifference to a 'Saviour, and unless we know ourselves to be miserable and poor and blind and naked, the offer of gold refined by fire and white garments that we may clothe ourselves will make no appeal to us. The fact of sin makes the need for a Saviour; our individual sense of sin makes us sensible of our need of a Saviour.

Paul believed that the weapons of his warfare were mighty enough to cast down the strongest of all strongholds in which men shut themselves up against the humbling Gospel of salvation by the mercy of God. The weapons to which he thus trusted were the same to which Jesus pointed His disciples when, about to leave them, He said, 'When the Comforter is come He will convict the world of sin because they Believe not in Me.' Jesus brought to the world the perfect revelation of the holiness of God, and set Before us all a divine pattern of manhood to rebuke and condemn our stained and rebellious lives, and He turned us away from the superficial estimate of actions to the careful scrutiny of motives. By all these and many other ways He presented Himself to the world a perfect man, the incarnation of a holy God and the revelation and condemnation of sinful humanity. Yet, all that miracle of loveliness, gentleness, and dignity is beheld by men without a thrill, and they see in Him no 'beauty that they should desire Him,' and no healing to which they will trust. Paul's way of kindling penitence in impenitent spirits was not to brandish over them the whips of law or to seek to shake souls with terror of any hell, still less was it to discourse with philosophic calm on the obligations of duty and the wisdom of virtuous living; his appeal to conscience was primarily the pressing on the heart of the love of God in Christ Jesus our

Lord. When the heart is melted, the conscience will not long continue indurated. We cannot look lovingly and believingly at Jesus and then turn to look complacently on ourselves. Not to believe on Him is the sin of sins, and to be taught that it is so is the first step in the work of Him who never merits the name of the Comforter more truly than when He convicts the world of sin.

For a Christianity that does not begin with the deep consciousness of sin has neither depth nor warmth and has scarcely vitality. The Gospel is no Gospel, and we had almost said, 'The Christ is no Christ' to one who does not feel himself, if parted from Christ, 'dead in trespasses and sins.' Our religion depends for all its force, our gratitude and love for all their devotion, upon our sense that 'the chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him, and that by His stripes we are healed.' Since He gave Himself for us, it is meet that we give ourselves to Him, but there will be little fervour of devotion or self-surrender, unless there has been first the consciousness of the death of sin and then the joyous consciousness of newness of life in Christ Jesus.

III. The captives led away to another land.

The Apostle carries on his metaphor one step further when he goes on to describe what followed the casting down of the fortresses. The enemy, driven from their strongholds, have nothing for it but to surrender and are led away in captivity to another land. The long strings of prisoners on Assyrian and Egyptian monuments show how familiar an experience this was. It may be noted that perhaps our text regards the obedience of Christ as being the far country into which 'every thought was to be brought.' At all events Paul's idea here is that the end of the whole struggle between 'the flesh' and the weapons of God is to make men willing captives of Jesus Christ. We are Christians in the measure in which we surrender our wills to Christ. That surrender rests upon, and is our only adequate answer to, His surrender for us. The 'obedience of Christ' is perfect freedom; His captives wear no chains and know nothing of forced service; His yoke is easy, not because it does not press hard upon the neck but because it is lined with love, and 'His burden is light' not because of its own weight but because it is laid on us by love and is carried by kindred love. He only commands himself who gladly lets Christ command him. Many a hard task becomes easy; crooked things are straightened out and rough places often made surprisingly plain for the captives of Christ, whom He leads into the liberty of obedience to Him.

IV. Fate of the disobedient.

Paul thinks that in Corinth there will be found some stiff-necked opponents of whom he cannot hope that their 'obedience shall be fulfilled,' and he sees in the double issue of the small struggle that was being waged in Corinth a parable of the wider results of the warfare in the world. 'Some believed and some believed not'; that has been the brief summary of the experience of all God's messengers everywhere, and it is their experience to-day. No doubt when Paul speaks of 'being in readiness to avenge all disobedience,' he is alluding to the exercise of his apostolic authority against the obdurate antagonists whom he contemplates as still remaining obdurate, and it is beautiful to note the long-suffering patience with which he will hold his hand until all that can be won has been won. But we must not forget that Paul's demeanour is but a faint shadow of his Lord's, and

that the weapons which were ready to avenge all disobedience were the weapons of God. If a man steels himself against the efforts of divine love, builds up round himself a fortress of self-righteousness and locks its gates against the merciful entrance of convictions of sin and the knowledge of a Saviour, and if he therefore lives, year in, year out, in disobedience, the weapons which he thinks himself to have resisted will one day make him feel their edge. We cannot set ourselves against the salvation of Jesus without bringing upon ourselves consequences which are wholly evil and harmful. Torpid consciences, hungry hearts, stormy wills, tyrannous desires, vain hopes and not vain fears come to be, by slow degrees, the tortures of the man who drops the portcullis and lifts the bridge against the entrance of Jesus. There are hells enough on earth if men's hearts were displayed.

But the love which is obliged to smite gives warning that it is ready to avenge, long before it lets the blow fall, and does so in order that it may never need to fail. As long as it is possible that the disobedient shall become obedient to Christ, He holds back the vengeance that is ready to fall and will one day fall 'on all disobedience.' Not till all other means have been patiently tried will He let that terrible ending crash down. It hangs over the heads of many of us who are all unaware that we walk beneath the shadow of a rock that at any moment may be set in motion and bury us beneath its weight. It is 'in readiness,' but it is still at rest. Let us be wise in time and yield to the merciful weapons with which Jesus would make His way into our hearts. Or if the metaphor of our text presents Him in too warlike a guise, let us listen to His own gentle pleading, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him.'

SIMPLICITY TOWARDS CHRIST

'But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, as your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. — 2 Corinthians 11:2

THE Revised Version, amongst other alterations, reads, 'the simplicity that is towards Christ.'

The inaccurate rendering of the Authorised Version is responsible for a mistake in the meaning of these words, which has done

much harm. They have been supposed to describe a quality or characteristic belonging to Christ or the Gospel; and, so construed, they have sometimes been made the watchword of narrowness and of intellectual indolence. 'Give us the simple Gospel' has been the cry of people who have thought themselves to be evangelical when they were only lazy, and the consequence has been that preachers have been expected to reiterate commonplaces, which have made both them and their hearers listless, and to sink the educational for the evangelistic aspect of the Christian teacher's function.

It is quite true that the Gospel is simple, but it is also true that it is deep, and they will best appreciate its simplicity who have most honestly endeavoured to fathom its depth. When we let our little sounding lines out, and find that they do not reach the bottom, we begin to wonder even more at the transparency of the clear abyss. It is not simplicity in Christ, but towards Christ of which the Apostle is speaking; not a quality in Him, but a quality in us towards Him. I wish, then, to turn to the two thoughts that these words suggest. First and chiefly, the attitude towards Christ which befits our relation to Him; and, secondly and briefly, the solicitude for its maintenance.

I. First, then, look at the attitude towards Christ which befits the Christian relation to Him.

The word 'simplicity' has had a touch of contempt associated with it. It is a somewhat doubtful compliment to say of a man that he is 'simple-minded.' All noble words which describe great qualities get oxidised by exposure to the atmosphere, and rust comes over them, as indeed all good things tend to become deteriorated in time and by use. But the notion of the word is really a very noble and lofty one. To be 'without a fold,' which is the

meaning of the Greek word and of its equivalent 'simplicity,' is, in one aspect, to be transparently honest and true, and in another to be out and out of a piece. There is no underside of the cloth, doubled up beneath the upper which shows, and running in the opposite direction; but all tends in one way. A man with no under-currents, no by-ends, who is down to the very roots what he looks, and all whose being is knit together and hurled in one direction. without reservation or back-drawing, that is the 'simple' man whom the Apostle means. Such simplicity is the truest wisdom; such simplicity of devotion to Jesus Christ is the only attitude of heart and mind which corresponds to the facts of our relation to Him. That relation is set forth in the context by a very sweet and tender image, in the true line of scriptural teaching, which in many a place speaks of the Bride and Bridegroom, and which on its last page shows us the Lamb's wife descending from Heaven to meet her husband. The state of devout souls and of the community of such here on earth is that of betrothal. Their state in heaven is that of marriage. Very beautiful it is to see how this fiery Paul, like the ascetic John, who never knew the sacred joys of that state, lays hold of the thought of the Bridegroom and the Bride, and of his individual relation to both as indicating the duties of the Church and the solicitude of the Apostle. He says that he has been the intermediary who, according to Oriental custom, arranged the preliminaries of the marriage, and brought the bride to the bridegroom, and, as the friend of the latter, standing by rejoices greatly to hear the bridegroom's voice, and is solicitous mainly that in the tremulous heart of the betrothed there should be no admixture of other loves, but a whole-hearted devotion, an exclusive affection, and an absolute obedience. 'I have espoused you,' says he, 'to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear lest... your mind should be corrupted from the simplicity that is towards Him.'

Now that metaphor carries in its implication all that anybody can say about the exclusiveness, the depth, the purity, the all-pervasiveness of the dependent love which should knit us to Jesus Christ. The same thought of whole-hearted, single, absolute devotion is conveyed by other Scripture metaphors, the slave and the soldier of Christ. But all that is repellent or harsh in these is softened and glorified when we contemplate it in the light of the metaphor of my text.

So I might leave it to do its own work, but I may perhaps be allowed to follow out the thought in one or two directions.

The attitude, then, which corresponds to our relation to Jesus Christ is that, first, of a faith which looks to Him exclusively as the source of salvation and of light. The specific danger which was alarming Paul, in reference to that little community of Christians in Corinth, was one which, in its particular form, is long since dead and buried. But the principles which underlay it, the tendencies to which it appealed, and the perils which alarmed Paul for the Corinthian Church, are perennial. He feared that these Judaising teachers, who dogged his heels all his life long, and whose one aim seemed to be to build upon his foundation and to overthrow his building, should find their way into this church and wreck it. The keenness of the polemic, in this and in the contextual chapters, shows how real and imminent the danger was. Now what they did was to tell people that Jesus Christ had a partner in His saving work. They said that obedience to the Jewish law, ceremonial and other, was a condition of salvation, along with trust in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. And because they thus shared out the work of salvation between Jesus Christ and something else, Paul thundered and lightened at them all his life, and, as he tells us in this context, regarded them as preaching another Jesus, another spirit, and another gospel. That particular error is long dead and buried.

But is there nothing else that has come into its place?

Has this old foe not got a new face, and does not it live amongst us as really as it lived then? I think it does; whether in the form of the grosser kind of sacrament-arianism and ecclesiasticism which sticks sacraments and a church in front of the Cross, or in the

form of the definite denial that Jesus Christ's death on the Cross is the one means of salvation, or simply in the form of the coarse, common wish to have a finger in the pie and a share in the work of saving oneself, as a drowning man will sometimes half drown his rescuer by trying to use his own limbs. These tendencies that Paul fought, and which he feared would corrupt the Corinthians from their simple and exclusive reliance on Christ, and Christ alone, as the ground and author of their salvation, are perennial in human nature, and we have to be on our guard for ever and for ever against them. Whether they come in organised, systematic, doctrinal form, or whether they are simply the rising in our own hearts of the old Adam of pride and self-trust, they equally destroy the whole work of Christ, because they infringe upon its solitariness and uniqueness. It is not Christ and anything else. Men are not saved by a syndicate. It is Jesus Christ alone, and 'beside Him there is no Saviour.' You go into a Turkish mosque and see the roof held up by a

forest of slim pillars. You go into a cathedral chapter-house and see one strong support in the centre that bears the whole roof. The one is an emblem of the Christless multiplicity of vain supports, the other of the solitary strength and eternal sufficiency of the one Pillar on which the whole weight of a world's salvation rests, and which lightly bears it triumphantly aloft. 'I fear lest your minds be corrupted from the simplicity' of a reasonable faith directed towards Christ.

And in like manner He is the sole light and teacher of men as to God, themselves, their duty, their destinies and prospects. He, and He alone, brings these things to light. His word, whether it comes from His lips or from the deeds which are part of His revelation, or from the voice of the Spirit which takes of His and speaks to the ages through His apostles, should be 'the end of all strife.' What He says, and all that He says, and nothing else than what He says, is the creed of the Christian. He, and He only, is 'the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' In this day of babblements and confusions, let us listen for the voice of Christ and accept all which comes from Him, and let the language of our deepest hearts be, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou only hast the words of eternal life.'

Again, our relation to Jesus Christ demands exclusive love to Him. 'Demands' is an ugly word to bracket with love. We might say, and perhaps more truly, permits or privileges. It is the joy of the betrothed that her duty is to love, and to keep her heart clear from all competing affections. But it is none the less her duty because it is her joy. What Christ is to you, if you are a Christian, and what He longs to be to us all, whether we are Christians or not, is of such a character as that the only fitting attitude of our hearts to Him in response is that of exclusive affection. I do not mean that we are to love nothing but Him, but I mean that we are to love all things else in Him, and that, if any creature so delays or deflects our love as that either it does not pass, by means of the creature, into the presence of the Christ, or is turned away from the Christ by the creature, then we have fallen beneath the sweet level of our lofty privilege, and have won for ourselves the misery due to distracted and idolatrous hearts. Love to one who has done what He has done for us is in its very nature exclusive, and its exclusiveness is all-pervasive exclusiveness. The centre diamond makes the little stones set round it all the more lustrous. We must love Jesus Christ all in all or not at all. Divided love incurs the condemnation that falls heavily upon the head of the faithless bride.

Dear friends, the conception of the essence of religion as being love is no relaxation, but an increase, of its stringent requirements. The more we think of that sweet bond as being the true union of the soul with God, who is its only rest and home, the more reasonable and imperative will appear the old commandment, 'Thou shalt love Him with all thy heart, and soul, and strength, and mind.'

But, further, our relation to Jesus Christ is such as that nothing short of absolute obedience to His commandment corresponds to it. There must be the simplicity, the single-mindedness that thus obeys, obeys swiftly, cheerfully, constantly. In all matters His command is my law, and, as surely as I make His command my law, will He make my desire His motive. For He Himself has said, in words that bring together our obedience to His will and His compliance with our wishes, in a fashion that we should not have ventured upon unless He had set us an example, 'If ye love Me, keep My commandments. If ye ask anything in My name I will do it.' The exclusive love that binds us, by reason of our faith in Him alone, to that Lord ought to express itself in unhesitating, unfaltering, unreserved, and unreluctant obedience to every word that comes from His mouth.

These brief outlines are but the poorest attempt to draw out what the words of my text imply. But such as they are, let us remember that they do set forth the only proper response of the saved man to the saving Christ. 'Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.' Anything short of a faith that rests on Him alone, of a love that knits itself to His single, all-sufficient heart, and of an obedience that bows the whole being to the sweet yoke of His commandment is an unworthy answer to the Love that died, and that lives for us all.

II. And now I have only time to glance at the solicitude for the maintenance of this exclusive single-mindedness towards Christ.

Think of what threatens it. I say nothing about the ferment of opinion in this day, for for one man that is swept away from a thorough whole-hearted faith by intellectual considerations, there are a dozen from whom it is filched without their knowing it, by their own weaknesses and the world's noises. And so it is more profitable that we should think of the whole crowd of external duties, enjoyments, sweetnesss, bitternesses, that solicit us, and would seek to draw us away. Who can hear the low voice that speaks peace and wisdom when Niagara is roaring past his ears? 'The world is too much with us, late and soon. Buying and selling we lay waste our powers,' and break ourselves away from our simple devotion to that dear Lord. But it is possible that we may so carry into

all the whirl the central peace, as that we shall not be disturbed by it; and possible that 'whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we may do all to His glory,' so that we can, even in the midst of our daily pressing avocations and cares be keeping our hearts in the heavens, and our souls in touch with our Lord.

But it is not only things without that draw us away.

Our own weaknesses and waywardnesses, our strong senses, our passions, our desires, our necessities, all these have a counteracting force, which needs Continual watchfulness in order to be neutralised. No man can grasp a stay, which alone keeps him from being immersed in the waves, with uniform tenacity, unless every now and then he tightens his muscles. And no man can keep himself firmly grasping Jesus Christ without conscious effort directed to bettering his hold.

If there be dangers around us, and dangers within us, the discipline which we have to pursue in order to secure this uniform, single-hearted devotion is plain enough. Let us be vividly conscious of the peril — which is what some of us are not. Let us take stock of ourselves lest creeping evil may be encroaching upon us, while we are all unaware — which is what some of us never do. Let us clearly contemplate the possibility of an indefinite increase in the closeness and thoroughness of our surrender to Him — a conviction which has faded away from the minds of many professing Christians. Above all, let us find time or make time for the patient, habitual contemplation of the great facts which kindle our devotion. For if you never think of Jesus Christ and His love to you, how can you love Him back again? And if you are so busy carrying out your own secular affairs, or pursuing your own ambitions, or attending to your own duties, as they may seem to be, that you have no time to think of Christ, His death, His life, His Spirit, His yearning heart over His bride, how can it be expected that you will have any depth of love to Him? Let us, too, wait with prayerful patience for that Divine Spirit who will knit us more closely to our Lord.

Unless we do so, we shall get no happiness out of our religion, and it will bring no praise to Christ or profit to ourselves. I do not know a more miserable man than a half-and-half Christian, after the pattern of, I was going to say, the ordinary average of professing Christians of this

generation. He has religion enough to prick and sting him, and not enough to impel him to forsake the evil which yet he cannot comfortably do. He has religion enough to 'inflamm his conscience,' not enough to subdue his will and heart. How many of my hearers are in that condition it is for them to settle. If we are to be Christian men at all, let us be it out and out. Half-and-half religion is no religion.

'One foot in sea, and one on shore;
To one thing constant never!'

That is the type of thousands of professing Christians. 'I fear lest by any means your minds be corrupted from the simplicity that is towards Christ,'

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

'For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' — 2 Corinthians 12:8-9.

This very remarkable page in the autobiography of the Apostle shows us that he, too, belonged to the great army of martyrs who, with hearts bleeding and pierced through and through with a dart, yet did their work for God. It is of little consequence what his thorn in the flesh may have been. The original word suggests very much heavier sorrow than the metaphor of 'a thorn' might imply. It really seems to mean not a tiny bit of thorn that might lie half concealed in the finger tip, but one of those hideous stakes on which the cruel punishment of impalement used to be inflicted. And Paul's thought is, not that he has a little, trivial trouble to bear, but that he is, as it were, forced quivering upon that tremendous torture

Unquestionably, what he means is some bodily ailment or other. The hypothesis that the 'thorn in the flesh' was the sting of the animal nature inciting him to evil is altogether untenable, because such a thorn could never have been left when the prayer for its removal was earnestly presented; nor could it ever have been, when left, an occasion for glorifying. Manifestly it was no weakness removable by his own effort, no incapacity for service which in any manner approximated to being a fault, but purely and simply some infliction from God's hand (though likewise capable of being regarded as a 'messenger of Satan') which hindered him in his work, and took down any proud flesh and danger of spiritual exaltation in consequence of the largeness of his religious privileges.

Our text sets before us three most instructive windings, as it were, of the stream of thoughts that passed through the Apostle's mind, in reference to this burden that he had to carry, and may afford wholesome contemplation for us to-day. There is, first, the instinctive shrinking which took refuge in prayer. Then there is the insight won by prayer into the sustaining strength for, and the purposes of, the thorn that was not to be plucked out. And then, finally, there is the peace of acquiescence, and a will that accepts — not the

inevitable, but the loving

I. First of all we see the instinctive shrinking from that which tortured the flesh, which takes refuge in prayer.

There is a wonderful, a beautiful, and, I suppose, an intentional parallel between the prayers of the servant and of the Master. Paul's petitions are the echo of Gethsemane. There, under the quivering olives, in the broken light of the Paschal moon, Jesus 'thrice' prayed that the cup might pass from Him. And here the servant, emboldened and instructed by the example of the Master, 'thrice' reiterates his human and natural desire for the removal of the pain, whatever it was, which seemed to him so to hinder the efficiency and the fulness, as it certainly did the joy, of his service.

But He who prayed in Gethsemane was He to whom Paul addressed his prayer. For, as is almost always the case in the New Testament, 'the Lord' here evidently means Christ, as is obvious from the connection of the answer to the petition with the Apostle's final confidence and acquiescence. For the answer was, 'My strength is made perfect in weakness'; and the Apostle's conclusion is, 'Most gladly will I glorify in infirmity,' that the strength or 'power of Christ may rest upon me.' Therefore the prayer with which we have to deal here is a prayer offered to Jesus, who prayed in Gethsemane, and to whom we can bring our petitions and our desires.

Notice how this thought of prayer directed to the Master Himself helps to lead us deep into the sacredest and most blessed characteristics of prayer. It is only telling Christ what is in our hearts. Oh, if we lived in the true understanding of what prayer really is — the emptying out of our inmost desire and thoughts before our Brother, who is likewise our Lord — questions as to what it was permissible to pray for, and what it was not permissible to pray for, would be irrelevant, and drop away of themselves. If we had a less formal notion of prayer, and realised more thoroughly what it was — the speech of a confiding heart to a sympathising Lord then everything that fills our hearts would be seen to be a fitting object of prayer. If anything is large enough to interest me, it is not too small to be spoken about to Him.

So the question, which is often settled upon very abstract and deep grounds that have little to do with the matter — the question as to whether prayer for outward blessings is permissible — falls away of itself. If I am to talk to Jesus Christ about everything that concerns me, am I to keep my thumb upon all that great department and be silent about it? One reason

why our prayers are often so unreal is, because they do not fit our real wants, nor correspond to the thoughts that are busy in our minds at the moment of praying. Our hearts are full of some small matter of daily interest, and when we kneel down not a word about it comes to our lips. Can that be right?

The difference between the different objects of prayer is not to be found in the rejection of all temporal and external, but in remembering that there are two sets of things to be prayed about, and over one set must ever be written 'If it be Thy will, ' and over the other it need not be written, because we are sure that the granting of our wishes is His will. We know about the one that 'if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us.' That may seem to be a very poor and shrunken kind of hope to give a man, that if his prayer is in conformity with the previous determination of the divine will, it will be answered. But it availed for the joyful confidence of that Apostle who saw deepest into the conditions and the blessedness of the harmony of the will of God and of man. But about the other set we can only say, 'Not my will, but Thine be done.' With that sentence, not as a formula upon our lips but deep in our hearts, let us take everything into His presence — thorns and stakes, pinpricks and wounds out of which the life-blood is ebbing — let us take them all to Him, and be sure that we shall take none of them in vain.

So then we have the Person to whom the prayer is addressed, the subjects with which it is occupied, and the purpose to which it is directed. 'Take away the burden' was the Apostle's petition; but it was a mistaken petition and, therefore, unanswered.

II. That brings me to the second of the windings, as I have ventured to call them, of this stream — viz. the insight into the source of strength for, and the purpose of, the thorn that could not be taken away. The Lord said unto me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee. For My strength' (where the word 'My' is a supplement, but a necessary one) 'is made perfect in weakness.'

The answer is, in form and in substance, a gentle refusal of the form of the petition, but it is a more than granting of its essence. For the best answer to such a prayer, and the answer which a true man means when he asks, 'Take away the burden,' need not be the external removal of the pressure of the sorrow, but the infusing of power to sustain it. There are two ways of lightening a burden, one is diminishing its actual weight, the other is

increasing the strength of the shoulder that bears it. And the latter is God's way, is Christ's way, of dealing with us.

Now mark that the answer which this faithful prayer receives is no communication of anything fresh, but it is the opening of the man's eyes to see that already he has all that he needs. The reply is not, 'I will give thee grace sufficient,' but 'My grace' (which thou hast now) 'All sufficient for thee.' That grace is given and possessed by the sorrowing heart at the moment when it prays. Open your eyes to see what you have, and you will not ask for the load to be taken away. Is not that always true? Many a heart is carrying some heavy weight; perhaps some have an incurable sorrow, some are stricken by disease that they know can never be healed,

some are aware that the shipwreck has been total, and that the sorrow that they carry to-day will lie down with them in the dust. Be it so! 'My grace (not shall be, but) is sufficient for thee.' And what thou hast already in thy possession is enough for all that comes storming against thee of disease, disappointment, loss, and misery. Set on the one side all possible as well as all actual weaknesses, burdens, pains, and set on the other these two words — 'My grace,' and all these dwindle into nothingness and disappear. If troubled Christian men would learn what they have, and would use what they already possess, they would less often beseech Him with vain petitions to take away their blessings which are in the thorns in the flesh. 'My grace is sufficient.'

How modestly the Master speaks about what He gives 'Sufficient'? Is not there a margin? Is there not more than is wanted? The overplus is 'exceeding abundant,' not only 'above what we ask or think,' but far more than our need. 'Two hundred penny worth of Bread is not sufficient that every one may take a little,' says Sense. Omnipotence says, 'Bring the few small loaves and fishes unto Me'; and Faith dispensed them amongst the crowd; and Experience 'gathered up of the fragments that remained' more than there had been when the multiplication began. So the grace utilised increases; the gift grows as it is employed. 'Unto him that hath shall be given.' And the sufficiency is not a bare adequacy, just covering the extent of the need, with no overlapping margin, but is large beyond expectation, desire, or necessity; so leading onwards to high hopes and a wider opening of the open mouths of our need that the blessing may pour in.

The other part of this great answer, that the Christ from Heaven spoke in or to the praying spirit of this not disappointed, though refused, Apostle,

unveiled the purpose of the sorrow, even as the former part had disclosed the strength to bear it. For, says He, laying down therein the great law of His kingdom in all departments and in all ways, 'My strength is made perfect' — that is, of course, perfect in its manifestation or operations, for it is perfect in itself already. 'My strength is made perfect in weakness.' It works in and through man's weakness.

God works with Broken reeds. If a man conceits himself to be an iron pillar, God can do nothing with. or by him. All the self-conceit and confidence have to be taken out of him first. He has to be brought low before the Father can use him for His purposes. The lowlands hold the water, and, if only the sluice is open, the gravitation of His grace does all the rest and carries the flood into the depths of the lowly heart.

His strength loves to work in weakness, only the weakness must be conscious, and the conscious weakness must have passed into conscious dependence. There, then, you get the law for the Church, for the works of Christianity on the widest scale, and in individual lives. Strength that conceits itself to be such is weakness; weakness that knows itself to be such is strength. The only true source of Power, both for Christian work and in all other respects, is God Himself; and our strength is ours but by derivation from Him. And the only way to secure that derivation is through humble dependence, which we call faith in Jesus Christ. And the only way by which that faith in Jesus Christ can ever be kindled in a man's soul is through the sense of his need and emptiness. So when we know ourselves weak, we have taken the first step to strength; just as, when we know ourselves sinners, we have taken the first step to righteousness; just as in all regions the recognition of the doleful fact of our human necessity is the beginning of the joyful confidence in the glad, triumphant fact of the divine fulness. All our hollownesses, if I may so say, are met with His fulness that fits into them. It only needs that a man be aware of that which he is, and then turn himself to Him who is all that he is not, and then into his empty being will flow rejoicing the whole fulness of God. 'My strength is made perfect in weakness.'

III. Lastly, mark the calm final acquiescence in the loving necessity of continued sorrow. 'Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmity that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' The will is entirely harmonised with Christ's. The Apostle begins with instinctive shrinking, he passes onwards to a perception of the purpose of his trial and of the

sustaining grace; and he comes now to acquiescence which is not passivity, but glad triumph. He is more than submissive, he gladly glories in his infirmity in order that the power of Christ may 'spread a tabernacle over' him. 'It is good for me that I have been afflicted,' said the old prophet. Paul says, in a yet higher note of concord with God's will, 'I am glad that I sorrow. I rejoice in weakness, because it makes it easier for me to cling, and, clinging, I am strong, and conquer evil.' Far better is it that the sting of our sorrow should be taken away, by our having learned what it is for, and having bowed to it, than that it should be taken away by the external removal which we sometimes long for. A grief, a trial, an incapacity, a limitation, a weakness, which we use as a means of deepening our sense of dependence upon Him, is a blessing, and not a sorrow. And if we would only go out into the world trying to interpret its events in the spirit of this great text, we should less frequently wonder and weep over what sometimes seem to us the insoluble mysteries of the sorrows of ourselves and of other men. They are all intended to make it more easy for us to realise our utter hanging upon Him, and so to open our hearts to receive more fully the quickening influences of His omnipotent and self-sufficing grace.

Here; then, is a lesson for those who have to carry some cross and know they must carry it throughout life. It will be wreathed with flowers if you accept it. Here is a lesson for all Christian workers. Ministers of the Gospel especially should banish all thoughts of their own cleverness, intellectual ability, culture, sufficiency for their work, and learn that only when they are emptied can they be

filled, and only when they know themselves to be nothing are they ready for God to work through them. And here is a lesson for all who stand apart from the grace and power of Jesus Christ as if they needed it not. Whether you know it or not, you are a broken reed; and the only way of your ever being bound up and made strong is that you shall recognise your sinfulness, your necessity, your abject poverty, your utter emptiness, and come to Him who is righteousness, riches, fulness, and say, 'Because I am weak, be Thou my strength.' The secret of all noble, heroic, useful, happy life lies in the paradox, 'When I am weak, then am I strong,' and the secret of all failures, miseries, hopeless losses, lies in its converse, 'When I am strong, then am I weak.'

NOT YOURS BUT YOU

'I seek not yours, but you.' — 2 Corinthians 12:14.

MEN are usually quick to suspect others of the vices to which they themselves are prone. It is very hard for one who never does anything but with an eye to what he can make out of it, to believe that there are other people actuated by higher motives. So Paul had, over and over again, to meet the hateful charge of making money out of his apostleship. It was one of the favourite stones that his opponents in the Corinthian Church, of whom there were very many, very bitter ones, flung at him. In this letter he more than once refers to the charge. He does so with great dignity, and with a very characteristic and delicate mixture of indignation and tenderness, almost playfulness. Thus, in the context, he tells these Corinthian grumblers that he must beg their pardon for not having taken anything of them, and so honoured them. Then he informs them that he is coming again to see them for the third time, and that that visit will be marked by the same independence of their help as the others had been. And then he just lets a glimpse of his pained heart peep out in the words of my text. 'I seek not yours, but you.' There speaks a disinterested love which feels obliged, and yet reluctant, to stoop to say that His love, and that it is disinterested. Where did Paul learn this passionate desire to possess these people, and this entire suppression of self in the desire? It was a spark from a sacred fire, a drop from an infinite ocean, an echo of a divine voice. The words of my text would never have been Paul's if the spirit of them had not first been Christ's. I venture to take them in that aspect, as setting forth Christ's claims upon us, and bearing very directly on the question of Christian service and of Christian liberality.

I. So, then, first of all, I remark, Christ desires personal surrender.

'I seek not yours, But you,' is the very mother-tongue of love; but upon our lips, even when our love is purest, there is a tinge of selfishness blending with it, and very often the desire for another's love is as purely selfish as the desire for any material good. But in so far as human love is pure in its desire to possess another, we have the right to believe the deep and wonderful thought that there is something corresponding to it in the heart of Christ, which is a revelation for us of the heart of God; and that, however little we may be able to construe the whole meaning of the fact,

He does stretch out an arm of desire towards us; and for His own sake, as for ours, would fain draw us near to Himself, and is 'satisfied,' as He is not without it, when men's hearts yield themselves up to Him, and let Him love them and lavish Himself upon them. I do not venture into these depths, but I would lay upon our hearts that the very inmost meaning of all that Jesus Christ has said, and is saying, to each of us by the records of His life, by the pathos of His death, by the miracle of His Resurrection, by the glory of His Ascension, by the power of His granted Spirit, is, 'I seek you.'

And, Brethren, our self-surrender is the essence of our Christianity. Our religion lies neither in our heads nor in our acts; the deepest notion of it is that it is the entire yielding up of ourselves to Jesus Christ our Lord. There is plenty of religion which is a religion of the head and of creeds. There is plenty of religion which is the religion of the hand and of the tongue, and of forms and ceremonies and sacraments; external worship. There is plenty of religion which surrenders to Him some of the more superficial parts of our personality, whilst the ancient Anarch, Self, sits undisturbed on his dark throne, in the depths of our being. But none of these are the religion that either Christ requires or that we need. The only true notion of a Christian is a man who can truly say, 'I live, yet not I, But Christ liveth in me.'

And that is the only kind of life that is Blessed; our only true nobleness and Beauty and power and sweetness are measured by, and accurately correspond with, the completeness of our surrender of ourselves to Jesus Christ. As long as the earth was thought to Be the centre of the planetary system there was nothing But confusion in the heavens. Shift the centre to the sun and all becomes order and Beauty. The root of sin, and the mother of death, is making myself my, own law and Lord; the germ of righteousness, and the first pulsations of life, lie in yielding ourselves to God in Christ, because He has yielded Himself unto us.

I need not remind you, I suppose, that this self-surrender is a great deal more than a vivid metaphor: that it implies a very hard fact; implies at least two things, that we have yielded ourselves to Jesus Christ, by the love of our hearts, and by the unreluctant submission of our wills, whether He commands or whether He sends sufferings or joys.

And, oh, Brethren, be sure of this, that no such giving of myself away, in the sweet reciprocities of a higher than human affection, is possible, in the general, and on the large scale, if you evacuate from the Gospel the great truth, 'He loved me, and gave Himself for

me,' I Believe — and therefore I am Bound to preach it — that the only power which can utterly annihilate and cast out the dominion of self from a human soul is the power that is lodged in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross for sinful men.

And whilst I would fully recognise all that is noble, and all that is effective, in systems either of religion, or of irreligious morality, which have no place within their bounds for that great motive, I am sure of this, that the evil self within us is too strong to be exorcised by anything short of the old message, 'Jesus Christ has given His life for thee, wilt thou not give thyself unto Him?'

II. Christ seeks personal service.

'I seek... you'; not only for My love, but for My tools; for My instruments in carrying out the purposes for which I died, and establishing My dominion in the world. Now I want to say two or three very plain things about this matter, which lies very near my heart, as to some degree responsible for the amount of Christian activity and service in this my congregation. Brethren, the surrender of ourselves to Jesus Christ in acts of direct Christian activity and service, will be the outcome of a real surrender of ourselves to Him in love and obedience.

I cannot imagine a man who, in any deed sense, has realised his obligations to that Saviour, and in any real sense has made the great act of self-renunciation, and crowned Christ as his Lord, living for the rest of his life, as so many professing Christians do, dumb and idle, in so far as work for the Master is concerned. It seems to me that, among the many wants of this generation of professing Christians, there is none that is more needed than that a wave of new consecration should pass over the Church. If men who call themselves Christians lived more in habitual contact with the facts of their redeeming Saviours sacrifice for them, there would be no need to lament the fewness of the labourers, as measured against the overwhelming multitude of the fields that are white to harvest. If once that flood of a new sense of Christ's gift, and a consequent new completeness of our returned gifts to Him, flowed over the churches, then all the little empty ravines would be filled with a flashing tide. Not a shuttle moves, not a spindle revolves, until the strong impulse born of fire rushes in; and then, all is activity. It is no use to flog, flog, flog, at idle Christians, and try to make them work. There is only one thing that will set them to work, and that is that they shall live nearer their Master, and find out more of what they owe to Him; and so render themselves up to be His instruments for any purpose for which He may choose to use them.

This surrender of ourselves for direct Christian service is the only solution of the problem of how to win the world for Jesus Christ. Professionals cannot do it. Men of my class cannot do it. We are clogged very largely by the fact that, being necessarily dependent on our congregations for a living, we cannot, with as clear an emphasis as you can, go to people and say, 'We seek not yours, but yore' I have nothing to say about the present ecclesiastical arrangements of modern Christian communities. That would take me altogether from my present purposes, but I want to lay this upon your consciences, dear brethren, that you who have other means of living than proclaiming Christ's name have an advantage, which it is at your peril that you fling away. As long as the Christian Church thought that an ordained priest was a man who could do things that laymen could not do, the limitation of Christian service to the priesthood was logical. But when the Christian Church, especially as represented by us Nonconformists, came to believe that a minister was only a man who preached the Gospel, which every Christian man is bound to do, the limitations of Christian service to the official class became an illogical survival, utterly incongruous with the fundamental principles of our conception of the Christian Church. And yet here it is, devastating our churches to-day, and making hundreds of good people perfectly comfortable, in an unscriptural and unchristian indolence, because, forsooth, it is the minister's business to preach the Gospel. I know that there is not nearly as much of that indolence as there used to be. Thank God for that. There are far more among our congregations than in former times who have realised the fact that it is every Christian man's task, somehow or other, to set forth the great name of Jesus Christ. But still, alas, in a church with, say, 400 members, you may knock off the last cypher, and you will get a probably not too low statement of the number of people in it who have realised and fulfilled this obligation. What about the other 360 'dumb dogs, that will not bark'? And in that 360 there will probably be several men who can make speeches on political platforms, and in scientific lecture-halls, and about social and economical questions, only they cannot, for the life of them, open their mouths and say a word to a soul about Him whom they say they serve, and to whom they say they belong.

Brethren, this direct service cannot be escaped from, or commuted by a money payment. In the old days a man used to escape serving in the militia

if he found a substitute, and paid for him. There are a great many good Christian people who seem to think that Christ's army is recruited on that principle. But it is a mistake. 'I seek you, not yours.'

III. Lastly, and only a word. Christ seeks us, and ours.

Not you without yours, still less yours without you. This is no place, nor is the fag end of a sermon the time, to talk about so wide a subject as the ethics of Christian dealing with money. But two things I will say — consecration of self is extremely imperfect which does not include the consecration of possessions, and, conversely, consecration of possessions which does not flow from, and is not accompanied by, the consecration of self, is nought.

If, then, the great law of self-surrender is to run through the whole Christian life, that law, as applied to our dealing with what we own, prescribes three things. The first is stewardship, not ownership; and that all round the circumference of our possessions. Depend upon it, the angry things that we hear to-day about the unequal distribution of wealth will get angrier and angrier, and will be largely justified in becoming so by the fact that so many of us, Christians included, have firmly grasped the notion of possession, and utterly forgotten the obligation of stewardship.

Again, the law of self-surrender, in its application to all that we have, involves our continual reference to Jesus Christ in our disposition of these our possessions. I draw no line of distinction, in this respect, between what a man spends upon himself, and what he spends upon 'charity,' and what he spends upon religious objects. One principle is to govern, getting, hoarding, giving, enjoying, and that is, that in it all Christ shall be Master.

Again, the law of self-surrender, in its application to our possessions, implies that there shall be an element of sacrifice in our use of these; whether they be possessions of intellect, of acquirement, of influence, of position, or of material wealth. The law of help is sacrifice, and the law for a Christian man is that he shall not offer unto the Lord his God that which costs him nothing.

So, dear friends, let us all get near to that great central fire till it melts our hearts. Let the love which is our hope be our pattern. Remember that though only faintly, and from afar, can the issues of Christ's great sacrifice be reproduced in any actions of ours, the spirit which brought Him to die is the spirit which must instruct and inspire us to live. Unless we can say, 'He loved me, and gave Himself for me; I yield myself to Him'; and unless our lives confirm the utterance, we have little right to call ourselves His disciples.