

# SERMONS

BY THE

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## SERMON V.

### *THE PRAYER OF ST. PAUL FOR THE EPHESIANS.*

EPHESIANS iii. 14–19.

*For this cause I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend, with all saints, what is the breadth and length and depth and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.*

WHEN St. Paul wrote these words he was a prisoner at Rome, and expected soon to suffer death. His sufferings and bonds were the consequences of his preaching the Gospel. Had he remained a Jew, he might have continued to live in ease, and to enjoy the respect of the world. But no painful reflections on account of his sufferings appear to have haunted his mind. On the contrary, it is remarkable, that in none of his Epistles do we find higher commendations of the Gospel, nobler descriptions of its privileges, and stronger evidence of his “glorying” in it, than in those which were written during his imprisonment at Rome. In the Epistle, for instance, from which my text is taken, we find one of his most animated descriptions of the happiness of true Christians; and then, with his heart enlarged by the contemplation of that heavenly inheritance and those Divine blessings of which they were partakers, he suddenly adverts to his own situation as a prisoner. With a noble disdain of his personal sufferings, he exhorts the Ephesians not to be distressed by them; “I desire,” says he, “that ye faint not at my tribulation for you, which is your glory.” And that they might still further be strengthened to regard all sufferings whatever as unworthy to be compared with the glorious privileges of the Gospel, he pours forth the fervent aspirations of his soul to God in their behalf, in the interesting words which I have chosen as my text.

“For this cause,” says he, “I bow my knees:” for this cause,—namely, that the disciples might not “faint” at his or their own “tribulations; that they might take joyfully the spoiling of their goods;” that they might rejoice

“they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ’s sake;” that they might gladly “suffer the loss of all things for Christ, and count them but as dung, or dross, for the excellency of the knowledge of him.”

We are all, my brethren, “born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.” If even we do not suffer from the persecution or oppression of wicked men, still we must suffer from other causes: and is not that man blessed, who possesses a sure resource under every trial; who is lifted above it, by an elevation of soul arising from the contemplation of privileges and happiness in comparison of which all that mortals can endure here is a mere trifle? Such a superiority to the trials of life is to be attained through faith in Christ and the knowledge of his Gospel. These it was the prayer of the Apostle that the Ephesians might obtain.—Let us follow the Apostle in his petitions, and lift up our hearts to the God of all grace, to impart to ourselves the blessings which were desired for them.

He thus commences: “*I bow my knees,*” in prayer.—Prayer is the source of the Christians strength. The dispensation under which he lives is a system of intercourse between God and man. Man approaches his God, and spreads before him his wants, his dangers, and his sufferings: and God communicates to him, from heaven, mercy, grace, and strength, as the answer to his prayer and the fruit of his faith.—Oh! think not by the resolutions of your own will, by the mere exertion of natural fortitude, by the force of moral considerations, or even by the mere speculative knowledge of the Gospel-system and its powerful motives, to endure afflictions as a Christian. No. The knowledge which is efficacious must be acquired by frequently “bowing the knees” in prayer. It must be imparted from above, by the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Be not satisfied, then, with merely listening to the preaching of the Gospel, and endeavouring to understand its theory; but, by earnest prayer to God, seek to have its great principles deeply impressed upon your hearts, and made effectual by the power of his Spirit.

“I bow my knees,” he continues, “unto *the Father* of our Lord Jesus Christ.”—The blessed God has many titles by which he may justly be addressed: but there is no one which could be chosen with more propriety in offering up such a prayer as this, than that which the Apostle has employed. The object of the prayer is, that the “Holy Spirit may strengthen us;” that “Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith;” and “that we may know his love.” How properly, then, is God addressed by the title of the “Father of Jesus Christ!” It is He who, with the Son, sent the Spirit. He sent the Son to be our

Saviour, and the object of our faith. His love was the same with that of the Son; for it was the Father who planned that wonderful scheme, the redemption of fallen man by the death of his Son, which the Son afterwards executed.—And here, my brethren, allow me to observe, that it is not always a matter of indifference by what title we address God in prayer. The title is, in a measure, significant of the views with which we regard him. To regard him merely as a wise, a just, a holy, an almighty Being, as the Governor of the universe, or as the Judge of man:—this, though a just, is not the proper Christian view of the Most High. Taught by Christ, we draw nigh to him in “the Spirit of adoption, crying, Abba, Father!” We approach his throne as children: we feel the sentiments of filial confidence, of holy boldness, of grateful affection, of lively hope, and of thankful exultation. We address him as “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and, in that character as our own Father through Christ, who was partaker of our flesh;—as the Father of Christ, and therefore the Father of love and mercy;—as the Father of Christ, and therefore the Author and Giver of all spiritual blessings in him. What hopes does not this title express! May our hearts be deeply affected by it whenever we “bow our knees” to God in prayer!

The Apostle, having thus addressed God as “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” adds next this description of God, that “*of the whole family in heaven and earth is named.*”

The Church of Christ below is considered as “family.”—“A family” is a term which conveys every tender and endearing idea. It supposes a society sprung from one common parent, and united by the strongest bonds, dwelling with each other in harmony and peace. And such a society is that of Christians, when they are truly partakers of the Spirit of the Master they serve. Of this family there are two branches, Men and Angels; both sprung from one common Father; disunited and separated for a time by sin, but now made one in Jesus Christ;—angels ministering to the heirs of salvation; angels waiting to receive the souls of the faithful, to be incorporated into their own blessed society. Of him, then, this whole “family in heaven and earth is named.” He is become the illustrious Head of both: he is their common Lord. They derive a common glory and dignity from the relation which they bear to him. They look up with a common confidence to the Great Head of the family in earth and heaven; and, through him, to that Father who loves them for his sake.—How do those, my brethren, disparage Christianity, who fail to acknowledge the admirable dispositions it has a tendency to create! What a spirit of love and goodwill to our fellow-Christians does it instil, by

teaching us to regard them as members of the same “family!” What a dignity does it impart to the poorest creatures around us, when we regard them as united to the family of angels above! And what a feeling of holy courage and confidence does it inspire, when we look up to Him who is the Head of the family, even Jesus Christ, who, from love to man, took our nature upon him, and became “bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh!”

We now come to the petitions contained in this prayer. The first petition is, that God would “*grant them, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit, in the inner man.*”—The Spirit of God is the Source of all strength in the Christian. Man, in himself, is a feeble creature, yielding to the slightest temptation, falling before the most trifling opposition, dismayed by the most insignificant dangers. It is therefore the office of the Holy Spirit to receive him, when engrafted into the family of Christ, as his charge; to enlighten him with knowledge; to open his understanding to the truths of the Gospel; to affect his heart by those powerful motives which it suggests; to incline him to adopt those principles which it proposes.

And the Spirit “strengthens us *in the inner man.*” The heart is the seat of pure principles and holy affections; and it is the heart which the Holy Spirit purifies. All external reformation, while the heart is unaffected, is but hypocrisy or self-deceit. All appearance of fortitude, either in resisting temptations or in bearing persecution, is but a vain show, unless “the inner man” be fortified with holy principles, and be strengthened with Divine aid. But if “the inner man” is cleansed, the outward man will be pure, and will appear to be so. The Spirit strengthens us with might more than human: with might sufficient to bear whatever we may be called to suffer for Christ’s sake; with might to resist temptation, to overcome our corruptions, to mortify our fleshly appetites, to “pluck out the right eye, or cut off the right hand.” With what might were the primitive Christians endured, when they “took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, and were tortured, not accepting deliverance!” With what might were women, the feebler sex, strengthened, when they encouraged their children to suffer death, even in their own presence, rather than deny Christ! With what might are the disciples of Christ strengthened, when inveterate habits are resisted, the besetting sin subdued, the strongest passions of the soul controlled; when they, who, like the Corinthian converts, were once “unrighteous, idolaters, fornicators, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, extortioners,” become sanctified, holy, pure, heavenly-minded, sober, temperate, full of good-will towards their fellow-

creatures!—Behold, then, my Christian brethren, your lofty privileges! We do not call you to “mortify the flesh” by your own unassisted resolutions;—but we bid you expect aid from above; we bid you look to Him, who is the Author of all strength and grace, to “work in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” that, by Him, you may escape the corruptions that are in the world, and be made partakers of a Divine nature.—Nor, my brethren, let the other clause of the passage I have read to you be forgotten. The Apostle prays that all this may be done “according to the riches of the Divine glory.” The glorious power of God is displayed, his inscrutable wisdom magnified, his unsearchable grace honoured, when the sinner is thus endued with Divine power, and “strengthened with might” by the operation of his Spirit. O forget not the animating consideration, that, while you contend for salvation, God himself is interested in your success, and that his grace will be glorified by it!

The next petition of the Apostle for his disciples is, that *Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith*. Christ may be justly said to dwell in the hearts of his people, either by his Spirit, which he has given them, or by his doctrine abiding in them. By virtue of their union to the Spirit, they become one with Christ and Christ with them. It is not, however, I apprehend, this union, which the Apostle here makes the subject of his prayer; for this has already been requested in the former petition.

I rather understand it of the doctrines of Christ. Thus our Saviour says, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” And in like manner St. John: “He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Son and the Father.” Let us, then, consider the full import of the doctrine of Christ “dwelling in the heart by faith.” It supposes a clear and lively apprehension of Christ, in his glorious person, his infinite love, his meritorious death, his kind offices,—to abide in the heart, that is, to make a deep impression on the heart,—to remain fixed there as an object perpetually present. It supposes the mind to be deeply penetrated with a sense of his infinite importance to the soul; to place a constant dependence upon his merit and promises; to study continually his word and commandments; to be perpetually looking to him for grace and mercy in every time of need. When Christ thus dwells in our hearts, as the object of our frequent meditation and our lively faith, his person and his name will be received by us with entire veneration; our obligation to him as a Saviour and Redeemer will appear to require every sacrifice which he demands, and every proof of attachment which can be shown to

him. In our prayers, then, we should have respect only to *his* mediation. In our thanksgivings, his worth and his blessings will inspire our hearts with gratitude and our tongues with praise. When oppressed with trouble, we shall look to Christ for succour, and be comforted. In combating with our corruptions, it will be from the intercession and aid of our Saviour that we shall expect strength, and courage, and constancy. In sickness, the name of Christ will be health to our souls; and in the hour of death, his rod and his staff will comfort us: we shall lean upon him while we pass through the dark valley of the shadow of death. Where Christ truly “dwells in the heart by faith,” he will never for a long period be absent from our thoughts. Our hopes will be too much fixed upon him; our peace will be too manifestly derived from him, to permit us long to remain without meditation upon the power and grace of Him who is at once our Shepherd, our Friend, our Lord, our Life, our Light, our Glory, our Redeemer, our Intercessor, our “all in all.”

My brethren, I would then ask, “What think ye of Christ?” Does he thus dwell in hearts by faith? Are you, with an earnestness unfelt on other subjects, accustomed to meditate upon his mercies, and to study his word? Not to have the heart supremely fixed upon him, is not to know him aright. A right knowledge of him will discover such infinite obligations to him, will reveal in him such perfections and such glory, that we cannot but consider him as the most glorious object upon which the contemplation of man can be fixed. Suffer me to ask; Do *you*, my friends, know him in this way? Do your thoughts dwell upon him with inexpressible delight and confidence? If not, how can you call yourselves his disciples? How can you consider yourselves as redeemed by no less a sacrifice than that of his own precious life, how can you imagine that he is interceding in your behalf in the courts of Heaven, while you refuse to give him the chief place in your hearts and affections?

The Apostle proceeds next to pray, that the disciples, “*being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with saints, what is the length, and breadth, and depth, and height of the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.*”

The “love of Christ” to his church—that love, of which many in the world so seldom think, and which they estimate at so low a value—that love, the Apostles, while they speak of it, feel themselves at a loss for words adequately to describe. Hence St. Paul speaks of it as we speak of infinite space, the boundaries of which we cannot perceive, and the extent of which

we cannot define. But even this expression, strong as it is, and vast as is the idea it conveys of the love which is the subject of it, does not satisfy the Apostle. He adds, which “passeth,” or surpassed, “all knowledge.” It is as though he had said: Raise your ideas to the utmost elevation, extend them to the remotest bounds; still they are inadequate: the love of Christ no mind ever yet fully conceived.

But, you may ask, why should it not be conceived? What is the love which you so labour to magnify? In what particulars does it differ from the most exalted human love, or from the still more pure and generous affection of an angelic being? I answer—It differs essentially. But in order to comprehend it aright, it is necessary that we should form some adequate conception of the glory of the Son of God, as the object of adoration to all the hosts of heaven;—that we should understand, in a degree, the perfections of his nature;— that we should ourselves feel somewhat of that ardent love to his Father’s law, which glowed within his breast;—that we should also be actuated, in a degree, by that inexpressible hatred of all pollution and sin which he felt;—that we should entertain a just conception of man, and be sensible how low and worthless a creature, in his fallen state, he is;—that we should understand something of what it would necessarily cost to redeem the soul, and to expiate Divine Justice. We should feel a portion, also, of what Jesus felt in the garden of Gethsemane, when his sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood. We should feel something of the breadth of that love which extended to the covering of such a multitude of sins; sins of such a complicated dye; sins of the memory, the will, the imagination; sins of revolt against God, of willing service to satan, of hatred of the Almighty; sins of backsliding and treachery; sins against the clearest light and knowledge. We should also enter into eternity; should survey the duration of that love, which was from everlasting to everlasting; should behold the thrones of glory, and the eternal bliss to which that love will advance the redeemed. Oh! my brethren, how well did the Apostle exclaim, it “passeth knowledge!”

And yet this love, as the Apostle tells us, is the object of the contemplation of “all saints.” They desire, at least, to understand it. The little they do know of that love inspires them with a “hope full of immortality,” and communicates a peace which “passeth all understanding.” In this love may we be “rooted and grounded!” May the knowledge of it not be a mere transient emotion; but may we be “rooted and grounded in it;” so fixed and established in it, that we may derive from the knowledge of this love, as the tree from the soil in which it is rooted, a powerful influence, which will in-

vigorate all our endeavours in the service of God, and produce in us the fruits of righteousness, to the praise of his holy name!

Finally, The effect of our knowledge of the “breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of this love will be, as we here learn, that we shall be “*filled with all the fulness of God.*” The Apostle prays that our understandings may be filled with such high and extensive thoughts of the Divine perfections and glory, as to cover, and as it were overwhelm, the mind; that our hearts may be altogether absorbed by the great work of salvation; by its suitableness to the state of man, and its sufficiency to satisfy all his wants; that we may be amazed at the greatness of the Gospel; and that we may perceive it to be truly worthy of Him who is infinite in wisdom, in glory, and in power.

The time will not permit me to make more than one short reflection on what has been said. I would propose it in the form of a question: it is this; How far does the subject-matter of our prayers correspond with that of the Apostle? We pray for pardon of sin; for grace to live a sober and godly life: it is well. But do we pray, also, that “Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith that we may be “grounded and rooted in the knowledge of his love;” that we may “comprehend, with all saints, what is the length, and breadth, and depth, and height” of it?—There are many who never consider the acquiring of a knowledge of the love of Christ as a duty. But, my fellow-Christians, it is indeed the first of your duties to be sensible of your obligation to a Redeemer; and methinks it should be the chief end for which we live. Pray, then, that “Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith;” that your heart may be the temple and throne of your Saviour. You will soon discover and acknowledge the unspeakable benefit of his presence. It will enliven you, it will embolden you, it will comfort you, it will shield you, it will strengthen you, it will sanctify you; for the knowledge of Christ is the light, the honour, and the glory of the church. To him, therefore, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, let us give, as is most justly due, all glory, honour, majesty, and dominion, henceforth, and for evermore. *Amen.*