

# PRACTICAL RELIGION.

BEING PLAIN PAPERS ON THE DAILY DUTIES, EXPERIENCE,  
DANGERS, AND PRIVILEGES OF PROFESSING CHRISTIANS.

BY

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## XVI.

### THE FAMILY OF GOD.

*“The whole family in heaven and earth.”*—EPHES. iii. 15.

THE words which form the title of this paper ought to stir some feelings in our minds at any time. There lives not the man or woman on earth who is not member of some “family.” The poorest as well as the richest has his kith and kin, and can tell you something of his “family.”

Family gatherings at certain times of the year, such as Christmas, we all know, are very common. Thousands of firesides are crowded then, if at no other time of the year. The young man in town snatches a few days from business, and takes a run down to the old folks at home. The young woman in service gets a short holiday, and comes to visit her father and mother. Brothers and sisters meet for a few hours. Parents and children look one another in the face. How much there is to talk about! How many questions to be asked! How many interesting things to be told! Happy indeed is that fireside which sees gathered round it at Christmas “the whole family!”

Family gatherings are natural, and right, and good. I approve them with all my heart. It does me good to see them kept up. They are one of the very few pleasant things which have survived the fall of man. Next to the grace of God, I see no principle which unites people so much in this sinful world as family feeling. Community of blood is a most powerful tie. It was a fine saying of an American naval officer, when his men insisted on helping the English sailors in fighting the Taku forts in China,—“I cannot help it: blood is thicker than water.” I have often observed that people will stand up for their relations, merely because they *are* their relations,—and refuse to hear a word against them,—even when they have no sympathy with their tastes and ways. Anything which helps to keep up family feeling ought to be commended. It is a wise thing, when it can be done, to gather together at Christmas “the whole family.”

Family gatherings, nevertheless, are often sorrowful things. It would be strange indeed, in such a world as this, if they were not. Few are the family circles which do not show gaps and vacant places as years pass away. Changes and deaths make sad havoc as time goes on. Thoughts will rise up within us, as we grow older, about faces and voices no longer with us, which no Christmas merriment can entirely keep down. When the young members of the family have once begun to launch forth into the world, the old heads may long survive the scattering of the nest; but after a certain time, it seldom happens that you see together “the whole family.”

There is one great family to which I want all the readers of this paper to

belong. It is a family despised by many, and not even known by some. But it is a family of far more importance than any family on earth. To belong to it entitles a man to far greater privileges than to be the son of a king. It is the family of which St. Paul speaks to the Ephesians, when he tells them of the “whole family in heaven and earth.” It is the family of God.

I ask the attention of every reader of this paper while I try to describe this family, and recommend it to his notice. I want to tell you of the amazing benefits which membership of this family conveys. I want you to be found one of this family, when its gathering shall come at last,—a gathering without separation, or sorrow, or tears. Hear me while, as a minister of Christ, and friend to your soul, I speak to you for a few minutes about “the whole family in heaven and earth:”—

- I. First of all, *what is this family?*
- II. Secondly, *what is its present position?*
- III. Thirdly, *what are its future prospects.*

I wish to unfold these three things before you, and I invite your serious consideration of them. Our family gatherings on earth must have an end one day. Our last earthly Christmas must come. Happy indeed is that Christmas which finds us prepared to meet God!

I. *What is that family* which the Bible calls “the whole family in heaven and earth”? Of whom does it consist?

The family before us consists of all real Christians,—of all who have the Spirit,—of all true believers in Christ,—of the saints of every age, and Church, and nation, and tongue. It includes the blessed company, of all faithful people. It is the same as the election of God,—the household of faith,—the mystical body of Christ,—the bride,—the living temple,—the sheep that never perish,—the Church of the first-born,—the holy Catholic Church. All these expressions are only “the family of God” under other names.

Membership of the family before us does not depend on any earthly connection. It comes not by natural birth, but by new birth. Ministers cannot impart it to their hearers. Parents cannot give it to their children. You may be born in the godliest family in the land, and enjoy the richest means of grace a Church can supply, and yet never belong to the family of God. To belong to it you must be born again. None but the Holy Ghost can make a living member of His family. It is His special office and prerogative to bring into the true Church such as shall be saved. They that are born again are born, “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John i. 13.)

Do you ask the reason of this name which the Bible gives to the company of all true Christians? Would you like to know why they are called “a family”? Listen and I will tell you.

(a) True Christians are called “a family” because they have all *one Father*. They are all children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. They are all born of one Spirit. They are all sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. They have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby they cry, Abba Father. (Gal. iii. 26; John iii. 8; 2 Cor. vi. 18; Rom. viii. 15.) They do not regard God with slavish fear, as an austere Being, only ready to punish them. They look up to Him with tender confidence, as a reconciled and loving parent,—as one forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, to all who believe on Jesus,—and full of pity even to the least and feeblest. The words, “Our Father which art in heaven,” are no mere form in the mouth of true Christians. No wonder they are called God’s “family.”

(b) True Christians are called “a family,” because they all *rejoice in one name*. That name is the name of their great Head and Elder Brother, even Jesus Christ the Lord. Just as a common family name is the uniting link to all the members of a Highland clan, so does the name of Jesus tie all believers together in one vast family. As members of outward visible Churches they have various names and distinguishing appellations. As living members of Christ, they all, with one heart and mind, rejoice in one Saviour. Not a heart among them but feels drawn to Jesus as the only object of hope. Not a tongue among them but would tell you that “Christ is all.” Sweet to them all is the thought of Christ’s death for them on the cross. Sweet is the thought of Christ’s intercession for them at the right hand of God. Sweet is the thought of Christ’s coming again to unite them to Himself in one glorified company for ever. In fact, you might as well take away the sun out of heaven, as take away the name of Christ from believers. To the world there may seem little in His name. To believers it is full of comfort, hope, joy, rest, and peace. No wonder they are called “a family.”

(c) True Christians, above all, are called “a family” because there is so strong *a family likeness* among them. They are all led by one Spirit, and are marked by the same general features of life, heart, taste, and character. Just as there is a general bodily resemblance among the brothers and sisters of a family, so there is a general spiritual resemblance among all the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. They all hate sin and love God. They all rest their hope of salvation on Christ, and have no confidence in themselves. They all endeavour to “come out and be separate” from the ways of the world, and to set their affections on things above. They all turn naturally to the same Bible, as the only food of their souls and the only sure guide in their pilgrimage toward heaven: they find it a “lamp to their feet, and a light to their path.” (Psa. cxix. 105.) They all go to the same throne of grace in prayer, and find

it as needful to speak to God as to breathe. They all live by the same rule, the Word of God, and strive to conform their daily life to its precepts. They have all the same inward experience. Repentance, faith, hope, charity, humility, inward conflict, are things with which they are all more or less acquainted. No wonder they are called “a family.”

This family likeness among true believers is a thing that deserves special attention. To my own mind it is one of the strongest indirect evidences of the truth of Christianity. It is one of the greatest proofs of the reality of the work of the Holy Ghost. Some true Christians live in civilized countries, and some in the midst of heathen lands. Some are highly educated, and some are unable to read a letter. Some are rich and some are poor. Some are Churchmen and some are Dissenters. Some are old and some are young. And yet, notwithstanding all this, there is a marvellous oneness of heart and character among them. Their joys and their sorrows, their love and their hatred, their likes and their dislikes, their tastes and their distastes, their hopes and their fears, are all most curiously alike. Let others think what they please, I see in all this the finger of God. His handiwork is always one and the same. No wonder that true Christians are compared to “a family.”

Take a converted Englishman and a converted Hindoo, and let them suddenly meet for the first time. I will engage, if they can understand one another’s language, they will soon find common ground between them, and feel at home. The one may have been brought up at Eton and Oxford, and enjoyed every privilege of English civilization. The other may have been trained in the midst of gross heathenism, and accustomed to habits, ways, and manners as unlike the Englishman’s as darkness compared to light. And yet now in half an hour they feel that they are friends! The Englishman finds that he has more in common with his Hindoo brother than he has with many an old college companion or school-fellow! Who can account for this? How can it be explained? Nothing can account for it but the unity of the Spirit’s teaching. It is “one touch” of grace (not nature) “that makes the whole world kin.” God’s people are in the highest sense “a family.”

This is the family to which I wish to direct the attention of my readers in this paper. This is the family to which I want you to belong. I ask you this day to consider it well, if you never considered it before. I have shown you the Father of the family,—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have shown you the Head and Elder Brother of the family,—the Lord Jesus Himself. I have shown you the features and characteristics of the family. Its members have all great marks of resemblance. Once more I say, consider it well.

Outside this family, remember, there is no salvation. None but those who belong to it, according to the Bible, are in the way that leads to heaven. The

salvation of our souls does not depend on union with one Church or separation from another. They are miserably deceived who think that it does, and will find it out to their cost one day, except they awake. No! the life of our souls depends on something far more important. This is life eternal, to be a member of “the whole family in heaven and earth.”

II. I will now pass on to the second thing which I promised to consider. *What is the present position* of the whole family in heaven and earth?

The family to which I am directing the attention of my readers this day is divided into two great parts. Each part has its own residence or dwelling-place. Part of the family is in heaven, and part is on earth. For the present the two parts are entirely separated from one another. But they form one body in the sight of God, though resident in two places; and their union is sure to take place one day.

Two places, be it remembered, and two only, contain the family of God. The Bible tells us of no third habitation. There is no such thing as purgatory, whatever some Christians may think fit to say. There is no house of purifying, training, or probation for those who are not true Christians when they die. Oh no! There are but two parts of the family,—the part that is seen and the part that is unseen, the part that is in “heaven” and the part that is on “earth.” The members of the family that are not in heaven are on earth, and those that are not on earth are in heaven. Two parts, and two only! Two places, and two only! Let this never be forgotten.

Some of God’s family are safe *in heaven*. They are at rest in that place which the Lord Jesus expressly calls “Paradise.” (Luke xxiii. 43.) They have finished their course. They have fought their battle. They have done their appointed work. They have learned their lessons. They have carried their cross. They have passed through the waves of this troublesome world and reached the harbour. Little as we know about them, we know that they are happy. They are no longer troubled by sin and temptation. They have said good-bye for ever to poverty and anxiety, to pain and sickness, to sorrow and tears. They are with Christ Himself, who loved them and gave Himself for them, and in His company they must needs be happy. (Phil. i. 23.) They have nothing to fear in looking back to the past. They have nothing to dread in looking forward to things to come. Three things only are lacking to make their happiness complete. These three are the second advent of Christ in glory, the resurrection of their own bodies, and the gathering together of all believers. And of these three things they are sure.

Some of God’s family are still *upon earth*. They are scattered to and fro in the midst of a wicked world, a few in one place and a few in another. All are more or less occupied in the same way, according to the measure of their grace. All are running a race, doing a work, warring a warfare, carrying a

cross, striving against sin, resisting the devil, crucifying the flesh, struggling against the world, witnessing for Christ, mourning over their own hearts, hearing, reading, and praying, however feebly, for the life of their souls. Each is often disposed to think no cross so heavy as his own, no work so difficult, no heart so hard. But each and all hold on their way,—a wonder to the ignorant world around them, and often a wonder to themselves.

But, however divided God's family may be at present in dwelling-place and local habitation, it is still one family. Both parts of it are still one in character, one in possessions, and one in relation to God. The part in heaven has not so much superiority over the part on earth as at first sight may appear. The difference between the two is only one of degree.

(a) Both parts of the family love the same Saviour, and delight in the same perfect will of God. But the part on earth loves with much imperfection and infirmity, and lives by faith, not by sight.—The part in heaven loves without weakness, or doubt, or distraction. It walks by sight and not by faith, and sees what it once believed.

(b) Both parts of the family are saints. But the saints on earth are often poor weary pilgrims, who find the "flesh lusting against the spirit and the spirit lusting against the flesh, so that they cannot do the things they would." (Gal. v. 17.) They live in the midst of an evil world, and are often sick of themselves and of the sin they see around them.—The saints in heaven, on the contrary, are delivered from the world, the flesh, and the devil, and enjoy a glorious liberty. They are called "the spirits of just men made perfect." (Heb. xii. 23.)

(c) Both parts of the family are alike God's children. But the children in heaven have learned all their lessons, have finished their appointed tasks, have begun an eternal holiday.—The children on earth are still at school. They are daily learning wisdom, though slowly and with much trouble, and often needing to be reminded of their past lessons by chastisement and the rod. Their holidays are yet to come.

(d) Both parts of the family are alike God's soldiers. But the soldiers on earth are yet militant. Their warfare is not accomplished. Their fight is not over. They need every day to put on the whole armour of God.—The soldiers in heaven are all triumphant. No enemy can hurt them now. No fiery dart can reach them. Helmet and shield may both be laid aside. They may at last say to the sword of the Spirit, "Rest and be still." They may at length sit down, and need not to watch and stand on their guard.

(2) Last, but not least, both parts of the family are alike safe and secure. Wonderful as this may sound, it is true. Christ cares as much for His members on earth as His members in heaven. You might as well think to pluck the stars out of heaven, as to pluck one saint, however feeble, out of Christ's hand. Both parts of the family are alike secured by "an everlasting covenant

ordered in all things and sure.” (2 Sam. xxiii. 5.) The members on earth, through the burden of the flesh and the dimness of their faith, may neither see, nor know, nor feel their own safety. But they are safe, though they may not see it. The whole family is “kept by the power of God, through faith unto salvation.” (1 Peter i. 5.) The members yet on the road are as secure as the members who have got home. Not one shall be found missing at the last day. The words of the Christian poet shall be found strictly true:—

“More happy, but not more secure,  
The glorified spirits in heaven.”

Before I leave this part of my subject, I ask every reader of this paper to understand thoroughly the present position of God’s family, and to form a just estimate of it. Learn not to measure its numbers or its privileges by what you see with your eyes. You see only a small body of believers in this present time. But you must not forget that a great company has got safe to heaven already, and that when all are assembled at the last day they will be “a multitude which no man can number.” (Rev. vii. 9.) You only see that part of the family which is struggling’ on earth. You must never forget that the greater part of the family has got home and is resting in heaven.—You see the militant part, but not the triumphant. You see the part that is carrying the cross, but not the part which is safe in Paradise. The family of God is far more rich and glorious than you suppose. Believe me, it is no small thing to belong to the “whole family in heaven and earth.”

III. I will now pass on to the last thing which I promised to consider.—*What are the future prospects of the whole family in heaven and earth?*

The future prospects of a family! What a vast amount of uncertainty these words open up when we look at any family now in the world! How little we can tell of the things coming on any of us! What a mercy that we do not know the sorrows and trials and separations through which our beloved children may have to pass, when we have left the world! It is a mercy that we do not know “what a day may bring forth,” and a far greater mercy that we do not know what may happen in twenty years. (Prov. xxvii. 1.) Alas, foreknowledge of the future prospects of our belongings would spoil many a family gathering, and fill the whole party with gloom!

Think how many a fine boy, who is now the delight of his parents, will by and by walk in the prodigal’s footsteps, and never return home! Think how many a fair daughter, the joy of a mother’s heart, will follow the bent of her self-will after a few years, and insist on some miserably mistaken marriage! Think how disease and pain will often lay low the loveliest of a family circle, and make her life a burden and weariness to herself, if not to others!



Think of the endless breaches and divisions arising out of money matters! Alas, there is many a life-long quarrel about a few pounds, between those who once played together in the same nursery! Think of these things. The “future prospects” of many a family which meets together every Christmas are a solemn and serious subject. Hundreds, to say the least, are gathering together for the last time: when they part, they will never meet again.

But, thank God, there is one great family whose “prospects” are very different. It is the family of which I am speaking in this paper, and commending to your attention. The future prospects of the family of God are not uncertain. They are good, and only good,—happy, and only happy. Listen to me, and I will try to set them in order before you.

(a) The members of God’s family shall all be *brought safe home* one day. Here upon earth they may be scattered, tried, tossed with tempests, and bowed down with afflictions. But not one of them shall perish. (John x. 28.) The weakest lamb shall not be left to perish in the wilderness: the feeblest child shall not be missing when the muster-roll is brought out at the last day. In spite of the world, the flesh, and the devil, the whole family shall get home. “If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” (Rom. v. 10.)

(b) The members of God’s family *shall all have glorious bodies* one day. When the Lord Jesus Christ comes the second time, the dead saints shall all be raised and the living shall all be changed. They shall no longer have a vile mortal body, full of weaknesses and infirmities: they shall have a body like that of their risen Lord, without the slightest liability to sickness and pain. They shall no longer be clogged and hindered by an aching frame, when they want to serve God: they shall be able to serve Him night and day without weariness, and to attend upon Him without distraction. The former things will have passed away. That word will be fulfilled, “I make all things new.” (Rev. xxi. 5.)

(c) The members of God’s family shall all be *gathered into one company* one day. It matters nothing where they have lived or where they have died. They may have been separated from one another both by time and space. One may have lived in tents, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and another travelled by railway in our own day. One may have laid his bones in an Australian desert, and another may have been buried in an English churchyard. It makes no difference. All shall be gathered together from north and south, and east and west, and meet in one happy assembly, to part no more. The earthly partings of God’s family are only for a few days. Their meeting is for eternity. It matters little where we live. It is a time of scattering now, and not of gathering. It matters little where we die. All graves are equally near to Paradise. But it does matter much whether we belong to God’s family. If we

do we are sure to meet again at last.

(d) The members of God's family shall all be *united in mind and judgment* one day. They are not so now about many little things. About the things needful to salvation there is a marvellous unity among them. About many speculative points in religion, about forms of worship and Church government, they often sadly disagree. But there shall be no disagreement among them one day. Ephraim shall no longer vex Judah, nor Judah Ephraim. Churchmen shall no more quarrel with Dissenters, nor Dissenters with Churchmen. Partial knowledge and dim vision shall be at an end for ever. Divisions and separations, misunderstandings and misconstructions, shall be buried and forgotten. As there shall only be one language, so there shall only be one opinion. At last, after six thousand years of strife and jangling, perfect unity and harmony shall be found. A family shall at length be shown to angels and men in which all are of one mind.

(e) The members of God's family shall all be *perfected in holiness* one day. They are not literally perfect now, although "complete in Christ." (Col. ii. 10.) Though born again, and renewed after the image of Christ, they offend and fall short in many things. (James iii. 2.) None know it better than they do themselves. It is their grief and sorrow that they do not love God more heartily and serve Him more faithfully. But they shall be completely freed from all corruption one day. They shall rise again at Christ's second appearing without any of the infirmities which cleave to them in their lives. Not a single evil temper or corrupt inclination shall be found in them. They shall be presented by their Head to the Father, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing,—perfectly holy and without blemish,—fair as the moon, and clear as the sun. (Eph. v. 27; Cant. v. 10.) Grace, even now, is a beautiful thing, when it lives, and shines, and flourishes in the midst of imperfection. But how much more beautiful will grace appear when it is seen pure, unmixed, unmingled, and alone! And it shall be seen so when Christ comes to be glorified in His saints at the last day.

(f) Last, but not least, the members of God's family shall all be *eternally provided for* one day. When the affairs of this sinful world are finally wound up and settled, there shall be an everlasting portion for all the sons and daughters of the Lord almighty. Not even the weakest of them shall be overlooked and forgotten. There shall be something for everyone, according to his measure. The smallest vessel of grace, as well as the greatest, shall be filled to the brim with glory. The precise nature of that glory and reward it would be folly to pretend to describe. It is a thing which eye has not seen, nor mind of man conceived. Enough for us to know that each member of God's family, when he awakes up after His Master's likeness, shall be "satisfied." (Psalm xvii. 15.) Enough, above all, to know that their joy, and glory, and reward shall be for ever. What they receive in the day of the Lord they will never lose. The

inheritance reserved for them, when they come of age, is “incorruptible, undefiled, and fadeth not away.” (1 Peter i. 4.)

These prospects of God’s family are great realities. They are not vague shadowy talk of man’s invention. They are real true things, and will be seen as such before long. They deserve your serious consideration. Examine them well.

Look round the families of earth with which you are acquainted, the richest, the greatest, the noblest, the happiest. Where will you find one among them all which can show prospects to compare with those of which you have just heard. The earthly riches, in many a case, will be gone in a hundred years hence. The noble blood, in many a case, will not prevent some disgraceful deed staining the family name. The happiness, in many a case, will be found hollow and seeming. Few, indeed, are the homes which have not a secret sorrow, or “a skeleton in the closet.” Whether for present possessions or future prospects, there is no family so well off as “the whole family in heaven and earth.” Whether you look at what they have now, or will have hereafter, there is no family like the family of God.

My task is done. My paper is drawing to a close. It only remains to close it with a few words of practical application. Give me your attention for the last time. May God bless what I am going to say to the good of your soul!

(1) I ask you a plain question. Take it with you to every family gathering which you join at any season of the year. Take it with you, and amidst all your happiness make time for thinking about it. It is a simple question, but a solemn one,—*Do you yet belong to the family of God?*

To the family of God, remember! This is the point of my question. It is no answer to say that you are a Protestant, or a Churchman, or a Dissenter. I want to hear of something more and better than that. I want you to have some soul-satisfying and soul-saving religion,—a religion that will give you peace while you live, and hope when you die. To have such peace and hope you must be something more than a Protestant, or a Churchman, or a Dissenter. You must belong to “the family of God.” Thousands around you do not belong to it, I can well believe. But that is no reason why you should not.

If you do not yet belong to God’s family, I invite you this day to join it without delay. Open your eyes to see the value of your soul, the sinfulness of sin, the holiness of God, the danger of your present condition, the absolute necessity of a mighty change. Open your eyes to see these things, and repent this very day.—Open your eyes to see the great Head of God’s family, even Christ Jesus, waiting to save your soul. See how He has loved you, lived for you, died for you, risen again for you, and obtained complete redemption for you. See how He offers you free, full, immediate pardon, if you will believe in Him. Open your eyes to see these things. Seek Christ at once. Come and

believe on Him, and commit your soul to His keeping this very day.

I know nothing of your family or past history. I know not where you go to spend your leisure weeks, or what company you are going to be in. But I am bold to say, that if you join the family of God you will find it the best and happiest family in the world.

(2) If you really belong to the whole family in heaven and earth, count up your privileges, and *learn to be more thankful*. Think what a mercy it is to have something which the world can neither give nor take away,—something which makes you independent of sickness or poverty,—something which is your own for evermore. The old family fireside will soon be cold and tenantless. The old family gatherings will soon be past and gone for ever. The loving faces we now delight to gaze on are rapidly leaving us. The cheerful voices which now welcome us will soon be silent in the grave. But, thank God, if we belong to Christ's family there is a better gathering yet to come. Let us often think of it, and be thankful!

The family gathering of all God's people will make amends for all that their religion now costs them. A meeting where none are missing,—a meeting where there are no gaps and empty places,—a meeting where there are no tears,—a meeting where there is no parting,—such a meeting as this is worth a fight and a struggle. And such a meeting is yet to come to “the whole family in heaven and earth.”

In the meantime let us strive to live worthy of the family to which we belong. Let us labour to do nothing that may cause our Father's house to be spoken against. Let us endeavour to make our Master's name beautiful by our temper, conduct, and conversation. Let us love as brethren, and abhor all quarrels. Let us behave as if the honour of “the family” depended on our behaviour.

So living, by the grace of God, we shall make our calling and election sure, both to ourselves and others. So living, we may hope to have an abundant entrance, and to enter harbour in full sail, whenever we change earth for heaven. (2 Peter i. 11.) So living, we shall recommend our Father's family to others, and perhaps by God's blessing incline them to say, “We will go with you.”