

CONSOLATION.

Colossians 2— Paul here expresses the nature of the anxiety he entertained with regard to the brethren at Colosse, Laodicea, and elsewhere, and thereby causes us to understand what he would have desired concerning us had he been alive now; and therefore what we ought to strive to attain as regards spiritual condition. He desires *"that their hearts might be comforted."* This is a supremely desirable condition. It is not to be realised perfectly till he comes who will *"comfort all"* that mourn, when those who *"weep now"* with a *"godly weeping,"* *"shall be comforted."* Yet, a degree of it is attainable even in the dreariness of our pilgrimage. Paul speaks of being comforted in all his tribulations (2 Corinthians 1: 4). This comfort he derived from two sources. The main source he indicates thus: *"As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ."* The knowledge that Christ is with the Father as our Friend, living for ever while all is change and death around us, and that he is coming again at the appointed time to deliver us from the weakness of this corruptible, and give us a place in the glorious society of the perfected sons of God, is a continual comfort in this valley of the shadow of death. On this, indeed, we must rely as the supreme comfort; for all others may fail.

The other comfort that Paul experienced he describes in Romans 1: 12, as *"being comforted together with the mutual faith"* of himself and the brethren. This also is a great and thrilling comfort, but rarely attainable in our day on account of the scarcity of real faith. Friendly people are to be met with; people interested in your personal concerns, or the workings of the truth in an ecclesiastical sense; but where are those whose hearts, emancipated from the pettiness of this provisional life, are occupied with a genuine appreciation of the great things that are of God, and filled with hopes, and sighs, and prayers? They are here and there; their name is not legion. You do not necessarily find them where people profess the name of Christadelphians; but, thank God, they are on the increase. They were naturally more numerous in Paul's day, on account of the powerful means employed in the sowing of the good seed; though even then, Paul had to lament that *"all seek their own, and not the things that are Jesus Christ's"* (Philippians 2: 21). No marvel if this lament should have a tenfold force in this cloudy and dark day. To discern the truth, and be able to define it is one thing; but to set about the service of it and those connected with it, in the spirit of self-sacrifice, is another and a scarcer thing, and yet the only thing that will stand in the day of trial; for the Great President at that trial has said: *"He that taketh not his cross and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it"* (Matthew 10: 38-39).

The foundation or cause of the comfort in one another, that Paul desired the brethren to realise, is thus expressed by him: *"Being knit together in love and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God and of the Father and of Christ."* Love is an indispensable element in mutual comfort. Faith and hope are refreshing to behold— so much so, indeed, in these barren days, that we can love intensely where they are manifested, even if they are unaccompanied by the manifestation of benevolence. But the truly joyful and love-evoking combination is where the greatest of the three stands high in the centre of the group, and faith and hope stand obeisantly at each side.

This love will flourish when faith and hope are swallowed up in the glories of God's realised purpose. Faith and hope are greatly marred if love stands not with them. A pugilistic and cantankerous faith scarcely supported by a hope at all, and which has chased away the leading beauty of the group, is an abomination. A man with neither faith, hope, nor love, is an

insipid being indeed (and there are many such), a tree twice dead and plucked up by the roots.

That which is commonly talked about as "love," is not the apostolic "love." The popular love consists of an emasculated mind and honeyed words. The apostolic "*knitting together in love*" is on the goodly foundation of *all riches of the full assurance of UNDERSTANDING.*" It is a love springing from identical convictions— a common love resulting from a common enlightenment; a mutual affection spontaneously generated by unity of knowledge and judgment, and this not in the scanty form of "opinion" or the cold uncertainty of "views" but in the richness of a positive and pronounced "assurance of understanding": enthusiastic convictions if you will, without which there can be no true discipleship of Christ. This is a state of mind that stops not short at "*good words and fair speeches,*" but shows its faith by "*works,*" without which, a man, whatever his knowledge and understanding, or ability to speak with even higher than human tongues, is a "*sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.*" There be many fig trees fair and promising to look upon, which, when the Master comes to inspect them and finds nothing but leaves, will wither up before his destroying curse.

The "*full assurance of understanding*" in which brethren are knit together is, of course, something higher than general intelligence. What is known as "general intelligence," will do nothing for a man as regards redeeming him from the power of the grave. "General intelligence" will land a man among the worms at last, and leave him in their everlasting company. The "understanding" that delivers from death, in full assurance thereof, is that of which John speaks when he says "*The Son of God is come and hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true*" (1 John 5: 20). It is the knowledge of God that redeems, as Jesus saith: "*This is eternal life, to know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*" (John 17: 3). It is those that know not God that are to be punished with everlasting destruction at the revelation of Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1: 9). Paul is in harmony with all this when he speaks of "*the full assurance of understanding,*" for he defines the operation of it in this way: "*To the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.*" To "*know Him that was true,*" in the apostolic age, was to acknowledge "*the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit*" (1 Timothy 3:16). Any "*full assurance of understanding*" that came short of the acknowledgment of this mystery was a full assurance of mis-understanding or non-understanding. What was this "*mystery of God*"? An amended translation would make it more apparent than it is in the common version. It should read: "*The mystery of God, even of the Father, and of Christ.*" That is, the "*mystery*" comprehends the Father and Christ as the items of its constitution. As Paul elsewhere by the Spirit defines it: "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself*" (2 Corinthians 5: 19). Or as Jesus declares it: "*Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me. . . . He that hath seen me hath seen the Father also*" (John 14: 10, 9). Or the testimony of John: "*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1: 14).

The mystery of God presented for the recognition of the world in Paul's day, was that the man crucified by Pontius Pilate, at the instigation of the Jews, was no mere man, but the manifestation of the Creator of heaven and earth by the Spirit, in the seed of David according to the flesh, for the condemnation of ancestral sin in the flesh, that the Father might be just in justifying those who should believe in the crucified one (Rom. iii. 26); that the praise might be of God and not of men (2 Corinthians 4: 7). This was a "*mystery,*" whether as regards its own nature or its place in the Divine plan of working. It was a thing not to be comprehended, as men comprehend common things, that God should veil Himself in a man; yet it was the

solution of the other mystery, how God was to save a condemned race consistently with his own unchangeable methods. The acknowledgment of this mystery will always come with a full assurance of understanding. There were some in Paul's day who lacked this understanding. Their mode of thought in the case is described by Jesus as a "*judging after the flesh*" (John 8: 15); that is, a making of their experience of this earthly nature the measure of their conceptions of the workings of God in relation thereto, as though God, who created this corruptible, had no higher ways than are known to them "*as natural brute beasts.*" The judging by this rule developed the class who "*denied the Lord that bought them,*" in saying that Christ was a mere man, thus denying his name Emmanuel (God with us), and enunciating what Peter styles "*damnable heresy.*" We must beware of "*judging after the flesh.*" We must be careful to "*acknowledge the mystery of God, even of the Father, and of Christ,*" remembering the words of warning uttered by the apostle John: "*Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son*" (2 John 9).

"Wherein," says Paul, "*are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*" Why does he say this? He answers: "*This I say lest any man beguile you with enticing words?*" This shows that "*enticing words*" were being employed to draw the views of the brethren in a contrary direction. What was the character of these enticing words? We gather it from the words almost immediately following: "*Beware, lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ*" (verse 8). Here were two classes of teaching, "*philosophy*" the tradition of men, with which the Colossians, as Greeks, were surrounded; and Judaizing (the rudiments or elements of the world). Both these turned away from Christ, as we see in our own days. The words in which they did so were "*enticing*" or pleasant words: "*good words and fair speeches which deceived the hearts of the simple,*" as it is at this day. Philosophy taught that all men were equally important by reason of their participation in a common Divinity, and that to direct attention to one in particular, as the Gospel did to Christ, was absurd and unphilosophical—that Christ was all very well in his own place as a remarkable moral hero, but that to exalt him to the position of a fellow of the Creator, and assign him supremacy over men to whom every knee must bow, and to make human salvation dependent in every case upon his goodwill, was the outrageous freak of an over-heated enthusiasm. This was flattering to human vanity, and greatly liable to "*spoil*" those who gave ear to the enticing words. Judaism, on the other hand, contended that as the law of Moses was Divine, and had been the glory of Israel for ages, it could not be superseded, and that any goodness that appertained to the doctrine of the Nazarene had been borrowed from it, nay more, stolen from it, and made the basis of blasphemous pretences on the part of an unlearned Jew of Nazareth, who, even if he rose from the dead, could never be admitted to come into competition with what God spake by Moses.

Against both classes of enticing words Paul places the declaration that "*in Christ dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*" This fact is the foundation of his antagonism to the "*enticing words.*" Facts are facts, and no amount of fine argument could displace from Paul's mind, or allow him to tolerate the attempt to displace from the minds of the brethren the fact, that (mystery though it may seem) in Christ is personally focalised, by the indwelling of the Deity, all power and goodness, law and wisdom in relation to the human race. Plainly enough do we see that "*philosophy*" is a broken cistern, holding no water; for where is there hope in any of the contrivances of man; he cometh forth like a flower and is cut down; he fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not. Generation follows generation to the grave, and who can bring them from thence? Well may we say, with Paul, as we stand in the silent graveyard,

Westminster Abbey though it be, with the ashes of the "illustrious" dead all around, *"Where is the wise? where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"* Yes; the wisdom of man can do nothing for him when he lies down as food for the worms. The living may admire the dead, and fill their heads with their traditions left behind in the "many books" of the making of which there is no end; but their own turns will come, and they too must go to the generation of their fathers, never to see light; for *"man that is in honour, and understandeth not (the wisdom of God), is like the beasts that perish"* (Psalm 49: 19- 20).

But Jesus Christ lives. He is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever (Hebrews 13: 8). To him is all power committed in heaven and in earth (Matthew 28: 18), power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as the Father gives him (John 17: 3). His command is all that is needed to re-organise the ashes of the sleepers: for creative power is in him. The dead shall hear his voice and shalt, come forth. The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son (John 5: 22). He has but to say, My dead body arise, *"Awake and sing ye that dwell in the dust"* (Isaiah 26: 19), and *"many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake"* (Daniel 12: 2). He has the keys of the grave and death (Revelation 1: 18). He will use them on the prison doors of his brethren only, and these, he tells us, are those who do the will of the Father (Matthew 13: 50), and this is the will of the Father, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent (John 6: 29), and *"do whatsoever I command"* (John 15: 14).

Let us beware, then, of *"enticing words,"* which would turn from the simplicity that is in Christ: the fountain of living waters. And how much better off are those who, in Paul's day, made acceptance turn on meats and drinks, and new moons, and holy days? Let the desolations of the past eighteen centuries testify. Israel wanders without hope. God has not given them eyes to see that the law was but a shadow of good things to come, that the body (or substance) is of Christ, in whom all the good things typified are and will be realised. Blindness in part is happened unto Israel. A remnant in the apostolic era, were wise enough to understand that, through them (including Paul), we Gentiles are privileged to see clearly. Let us remember that we stand by faith, and that if we use not our position in all humility, and diligence and obedience, and prayer, we shall be plucked out of our place in the good olive tree, and cast amongst the withered branches to be burnt.

We cannot put Christ too high. God hath given him a name above every name, even His own name, the name of God, which shortly cometh from far. He is the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Resurrection, the Hope. He is the Head; the beginning of the creation of God, the first-born of every creature, Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Lord Almighty (Revelation 1: 8, 11, 17). His name shall endure for ever. The earth shall at the last and for evermore be filled with His glory, when the institutions and the pomp, and the pride, and the theories of men shall for ever have disappeared from below the sun. Let us, then, give good heed to the apostolic warning. If we nurse defective, not to say degrading, views of the greatness of Christ, we shall be unfitted to participate in the song of his renown, or fill an acceptable place in his service when he comes to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe.

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