

Ephesians 6 Maclaren

EPHESIANS 6

SERMONS BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN

THE PANOPLY OF GOD

'Take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand.' —

Ephesians 6:13.

THE military metaphor of which this verse is the beginning was obviously deeply imprinted on Paul's mind. It is found in a comparatively incomplete form in his earliest epistle, the first to the Thessalonians, in which the children of the day are exhorted to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. It reappears, in a slightly varied form, in the Epistle to the Romans, where those whose salvation is nearer than when they believed, are exhorted, because the day is at hand, to cast off, as it were, their night-gear, and to put on the 'armour of light'; and here, in this Epistle of the Captivity, it is most fully developed. The Roman legionary, to whom Paul was chained, here sits all unconsciously for his portrait; every detail of which is pressed by Paul into the service of his vivid imagination; the virtues and graces of the Christian character, which are 'the armour of light,' are suggested to the Apostle by the weapon which the soldier by his side wore. The vulgarest and most murderous implements assume a new character when looked upon with the eyes of a poet and a Christian. Our present text constitutes the general introduction to the great picture which follows, of 'the panoply of God.'

I. We must be ready for times of special assaults from evil

Most of us feel but little the stern reality underlying the metaphor, that the whole Christian life is warfare, but that in that warfare there are crises, seasons of special danger. The interpretation which makes the 'evil day' coextensive with the time of life destroys the whole emphasis of the passage: whilst all days are days of warfare, there will be, as in some prolonged siege, periods of comparative quiet; and again, days when all the cannon belch at once, and scaling ladders are reared on every side of the fortress. In a lamp winter there are days sunny and calm followed, as they were preceded, by days when all the winds are let loose at once. For us, such times of special danger to Christian character may arise from temporal vicissitudes. Joy and prosperity are as sure to occasion them as are sorrows, for to Paul the 'evil day' that which, especially threatens moral and spiritual character, and these may be as much damaged by the bright sunshine of prosperity as by the midwinter of adversity, just as fierce sunshine may be as fatal as killing frost. They may, also, arise, without any such change in circumstances, from some temptation coming with more than ordinary force, and directed with terrible accuracy to our weakest point.

These evil days are ever wont to come on us suddenly; they are heralded by no storm signals and no falling barometer. We may be like soldiers sitting securely round their camp fire, till all at once bullets begin to fall among them. The tiger's rear is the first signal of its leap from the jungle. Our position in the world, our ignorance of the future, the heaped-up magazines of combustibles within, needing only a spark, all lay us open to unexpected assaults, and the temptation comes stealthily, 'as a thief in the night.' Nothing is so certain as the unexpected. For these reasons, then, because the 'evil day' will certainly come, because it may come at any time, and because it is most likely to come 'when we look not for it,' it is the dictate of plain common sense to be prepared; if the good man of the house had known at what hour the thief would have come, he would have watched; but he would have been a wiser man if he had watched all the more, because he did not know at what hour the thief would come.

II. To withstand these we must be armed against them before they come.

The main point of the exhortation is this previous preparation. It is clear enough that it is no time to fly to our weapons when the enemy is upon us. Alder-shot, not the battlefield, is the place for learning strategy. Belshazzar was sitting at his drunken feast while the Persians were marching on Babylon, and in the night he was slain. When, great crises arise in a nation's history, some man whose whole life has been preparing him for the hour starts to the front and does the needed work. If a sailor put off learning navigation till the wind was howling and a reef lay ahead, his corpse would be cut on the cruel rocks. It is well not to be 'over-exquisite,' to cast the fashion of 'uncertain evils,' but certain ones cannot be too carefully anticipated, nor too sedulously prepared for.

The manner in which this preparation is to be carried out is distinctly marked here. The armour is to be put on before the conflict begins. Now, without anticipating what will more properly come in considering subsequent details, we may notice that such a previous assumption implies mainly two things — a previous familiarity with God's truth, and a previous exercise of Christian virtues. As to the former, the subsequent context speaks of taking the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and of having the loins girt with truth, which may be objective truth. As to the latter, we need not elaborate the Apostle's main thought that

resistance to sudden temptations is most vigorous when a man is accustomed to goodness. One of the prophets treats it as being all but impossible that they who have been accustomed to evil shall learn to do well, and it is at least not less impossible that they who have been accustomed to do well shall learn to do evil. Souls which habitually walk in the clear spaces of the bracing air on the mountains of God will less easily be tempted down to the shut-in, valleys where malaria reigns. The positive exercise of Christian graces tends to weaken the force of temptation. A mind occupied with these has no room for it. Higher tastes are developed which makes the poison sweetness of evil unsavoury, and just as the Israelites hungered for the strong, coarse-smelling looks and garlic of Egypt, and therefore loathed 'this light bread,' So they whose palates have been accustomed to manna will have little taste for leeks and garlic. The, mental and spiritual activity involved in the habitual exercise of Christian virtues will go far to make the soul unassailable by evil. A man, busily occupied, as the Apostle would have us to be, may be tempted by the devil, though less frequently the more he is thus occupied; but one who has no such occupations and interests tempts the devil. If our lives are inwardly and secretly honeycombed with evil, only a breath will be needed to throw down the structure. It is possible to become so accustomed to the calm delights of goodness, that it would need a moral miracle to make a man fall into sin.

III. To be armed with this armour, we must get it from God.

Though it consists mainly of habitudes and dispositions of our own minds, none the less have we to receive these from above. It is 'the panoply of God,' therefore we are to be endued with it, not by exercises in our own strength, but by dependence on Him. In old days, before a squire was knighted, he had to keep a vigil in the chapel of the castle, and through the hours of darkness to watch his armour and lift his soul to God, and we shall never put on the armour of light unless in silence we draw near to Him who teaches our hands to war and our fingers to fight. Communion with Christ, and only communion with Christ, receives from Him the life which enables us to repel the diseases of our spirits. What He imparts to those who thus wait upon Him, and to them only, is the Spirit which helps their infirmities and clothes their undefended nakedness with a coat of mail. If we go forth to war with evil, clothed and armed only with what we can provide, we shall surely be worsted in the fray. If we go forth into the world of struggle from the: secret place of the Most High, 'no weapon that is formed, against us shall prosper,' and we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

But waiting on God to receive our weapons from Him is but part of what is needful for our equipment. It is we who have to gird our loins and put on the breastplate, and shoe our feet, and take the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. The cumbrous armour of old days could only be put on by the help of another pulling straps, and fixing buckles, and lifting and bracing heavy shields on arms, and fastening helmets upon heads; but we have, by our own effort, to clothe ourselves with .God's great gift, which is of no use to us, and is in no real sense ours, unless we do. It takes no small effort to keep ourselves in the attitude of dependance and receptivity, without which none of the great gifts of God come to us, and, least of all, the habitual practice of Christian virtues. The soldier who rushed into the fight, leaving armour and arms huddled together on the ground, would soon fall, and God's giving avails nothing for our defence unless there is also our taking. It is the woful want of taking the things that are freely given to us of God, and of making our own what by His gift is our own, that is mainly responsible for the defeats of which we are all conscious. Looking back on our own evil days, we must all be aware that our defeats have mainly come from one or other of the two errors which lie so near us all, and which are intimately connected with each other — the one being that of fighting in our own strength, and the other being that of leaving-unused our God-given power.

IV. The issue of successful resistance is increased firmness of footing.

If we are able to 'withstand in the evil day,' we shall 'stand' more securely when the evil day has stormed itself away. If we keep erect in the shock of battle, we shall stand more secure when the wild charge has been beaten back. The sea hurls tons of water against the slender lighthouse on the rock, and if it stands, the smashing of the waves consolidates it. The reward of firm resistance is in increased firmness. As the Red Indians used to believe that the strength of the slain enemies whom they had scalped passed into their arms, so we may have power developed by conflict, and we shall more fully understand, and more passionately believe in, the principles and truths which have served us in past fights. David would not wear Saul's armor because, as he said, 'I have not proved it,' and the Christian who, has come victoriously through one struggle should, be ready to say, 'I have proved it'; we have the, word: of the Lord, which is tried, to trust to, and not we only, but generations, have tested it, and it has stood the tests. Therefore, it is not for us to hesitate as to the worth of our weapons, or to doubt that they are more than sufficient for every conflict which we may be called upon to wage.

The text plainly implies that all our life long we shall be in danger of sudden assaults. It does contemplate victory in the evil day, but it also contemplates that after we have withstood, we have still to stand and be ready for another attack to-morrow. Our life here is, and must still be, a continual warfare. Peace is not bought by any victories;' There is no discharge in that war Like the ten thousand Greeks who fought their way home through clouds of enemies from the heart of Asia, we are never, safe till we come to the mountaintop, where we can cry, 'The Sea!' But though all our paths lead us through enemies, we have Jesus, who has conquered them all, with us, and our hearts should not fail so long as we can hear His brave voice encouraging us: 'In the world ye have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.'

'THE GIRDLE OF TRUTH'**'Stand, therefore, having girded your loins with truth.' — Ephesians 6:14 (R.V.)**

THE general exhortation here points to the habitual attitude of the Christian soldier. However many conflicts he may have waged, he is still to be ever ready for fresh assaults, for in regard to them he may be quite sure that to-morrow will bring its own share of them, and that the evil day is never left behind so long as days still last. That general exhortation is followed by clauses which are sometimes said to be cotemporaneous with it, and to be definitions of the way in which it is to be accomplished, but they are much rather statements of what is to be done before the soldier takes his stand. He is to be fully equipped first: he is to take up his position second. We may note that, in all the list of His equipment, there is but one weapon of offence — the sword of the Spirit; all the rest are defensive weapons. The girdle, which is the first specified, is not properly a weapon at all, but it comes first because the heir keeps all the other parts of the armour in place, and gives agility to the wearer. Having girded your loins (R.V.) is better than having your loins girded (A.V.), as bringing out more fully that the assumption of the belt is the soldier's own doing.

I. We must be braced up if we are to fight.

Concentration and tension of power is an absolute necessity for any effort, no matter how poor may be the aims to which it is directed, and what is needed for the successful prosecution of the lowest transient successes will surely not be less indispensable in the highest forms of life. If a poor runner for a wreath of parsley or of laurel cannot hope to win the fading prize unless all his powers are strained to the uttermost, the Christian athlete has still more certainly to run, so as the racer has to do, 'that he may obtain.' Loose-flowing robes are caught by every thorn by the way, and a soul which is not girded up is sure to be hindered in its course. 'This one thing I do' is the secret of all successful doing, and obedience to the command of Jesus, 'let your loins be girded about,' is indispensable, if we would avoid polluting contact with evil. His other command associated with it will never be accomplished without it. The lamps will not be burning unless the loins are girt. The men who scatter their loves and thoughts over a wide space, and to whom the discipline which confines their energies within definite channels is distasteful, are destined to be failures in the struggle of life. It is better to have our lives running between narrow banks, and so to have a scour in the stream, than to have them spreading wide and shallow, with no driving force in all the useless expanse. Such concentration and bracing of oneself up is needful, if any of the rest of the great exhortations which follow are to be fulfilled.

It may be that Paul here has haunting his memory 'our Lord's words which we have just quoted; and, in any case, he is in beautiful accord with his brother Peter, who begins all the exhortations of his epistle with the words, 'Wherefore, girding up the loins of your mind, be sober, and set your minds perfectly upon the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.' Peter, indeed, is not thinking of the soldier's belt, but he is, no doubt, remembering many a time when, in the toils of the fishing-boat, he had to tighten his robes round his waist to prepare for tugging at the oar, and he feels that such concentration is needful if a Christian life is ever to be sober, and to have its hope set perfectly on Christ and His grace.

II. The girdle is to be truth.

The question immediately arises as to whether truth here means objective truth — the truth of the Gospel, or subjective truth, or, as we are accustomed to say, truthfulness. It would seem that the former signification is rather included in the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and it is best to regard the phrase 'with (literally "in") truth' here as having its ordinary meaning, of which we may take as examples the phrases, 'the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth'; 'love rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth'; 'whom I love in truth.' Absolute sincerity and transparent truthfulness may well be regarded as the girdle which encloses and keeps secure every other Christian grace and virtue.

We do not need to go far to find a slight tinge of unreality marring the Christian life: we have only to scrutinise our own experiences to detect some tendency to affectation, to saying a little more than is quite true, even in our sincerest worship. And we cannot but recognise that in all Christian communities there is present an element of conventionalism in their prayers, and that often the public expression of religious emotions goes far beyond the realities of feeling in the worshippers. In fact, terrible as the acknowledgment may be, we shall be blind if we do not recognise that the average Christianity of this day suffers from nothing more than it does from the lack of this transparent sincerity, and of absolute correspondence between inward fact and outward expression. Types of Christianity which make much of emotion are, of course, specially exposed to such a danger, but those which make least of it are not exempt, and we all need to lay to heart, far more seriously than we ordinarily do, that God 'desires truth in the outward parts.' The sturdy English moralist who proclaimed 'Clear your mind of cant' as the first condition of attaining wisdom, was not so very far from Paul's point of view in our text, but his exhortation covered but a small section of the Apostles.

This absolute sincerity is hard to attain, and still harder to retain. Hideous as the fact of posing or attitudinising in our religion may be, it is one that comes very easily to us all, and, when it comes, spreads fast and spoils everything. Just as the legionary's armour was held in its place by the girdle, and if that worked loose or was carelessly fastened, the breastplate would be sure to get out of

position, so all the subsequent graces largely depend for their vigorous exercise on the prime virtue of truthfulness. Righteousness and faith will be weakened by the fatal taint of insincerity, and, on the other hand, conscious truthfulness will give strength to the whole man Braced up and concentrated, our powers for all service and for all conflict will be increased. 'The bond of perfectness' is, no doubt, 'Love,' but that perfect bond will not be worn by us, unless we have girded our loins with truthfulness.

It may be that in Paul's memory there is floating Isaiah's great vision of the 'Branch' out of the stock of Jesse, on whom the Spirit of the Lord was to rest, and on whom it was proclaimed that faithfulness (or as it is rendered in the Septuagint, by the same phrase which the Apostle here employs, 'in truth') was to be the girdle of his reins; but, at all events, that which the prophet saw to be in the ideal Messiah, the Apostle sees as essential to all the subjects of that King.

III. Our truthfulness is the work of God's truth.

We have already pointed out that the expression in the text may either be taken as referring to the subjective quality of truthfulness, or to the objective truth of God as contained in the Gospel, but these two interpretations may be united, for the main factor in producing the former is the faithful use of the latter and an honest submission to its operation. The Psalmist of old had learned that the great safeguard against sin was the resolve, 'Thy word have I hid in my heart.'

That word brings to bear the mightiest motives that can sway life. It moves by love, by fear, by hope: it proposes the loftiest aim, even to imitate God as dear children; it gives clear directions, and draws straight and plain the pilgrim's path; it holds out the largest promises, and in a measure fulfils them, even in the narrowest and most troubled lives. If we have made God's truth our own, and are faithfully applying it to the details of daily life and submitting our whole selves to its operation, we shall be truthful and shall instinctively shrink from all unreality. If we know the truth as it is in Jesus, and walk in it, that 'truth will make us free,' and if thus 'we are in Him that is true, even in His Son, Jesus Christ,' that truth abiding in us, and with us, for ever, will make us truthful. In a heart so occupied and filled there is no room for the make-believes which are but too apt to creep into religious experience. Such a soul will recoil with an instinct of abhorrence from all that savours of ostentation, and will feel that its truest treasure cannot be shown. It is our duty not to hide God's righteousness within our hearts, but it is equally our duty to hide His word there. We have to seek to make manifest the 'savour of His knowledge in every place,' but we have also to remember that in our hearts there is a secret place, and that 'not easily forgiven are they who draw back the curtains,' and let a careless world look in. It is not for others to pry into the hidden mysteries of the fellowship of a soul with the indwelling Christ, however it may be the Christian duty to show to all and sundry the blessed and transforming effects of that fellowship.

But God's truth must be received and its power submitted to, if it is to implant in us the supreme grace of perfect truthfulness. Our minds and hearts must be saturated with it by many an hour of solitary reflection, by meditation which will diffuse its aroma like a fragrant perfume through our characters, and by the habit of bringing all circumstances, moods, and desires to be tested by its infallible criterion, and by the un-reluctant acceptance of its guidance at every moment of our lives. There are many of us who, in a real though terribly imperfect sense, hold the truth, but who know nothing, or next to nothing, of its power to make us truthful. If it is to be of any use to us, we must make it ours in a far deeper sense than it is ours now; for many of us the girdle has been hut carelessly fastened and has worked loose, and because, by our own faults, we have not 'abode in the truth,' it has come to pass that there is 'no truth in us.' We have set before us in the text the one condition on which all Christian progress depends, and if by any slackness we loosen the girdle of truthfulness, and admit into our religious life any taint of unreality, if our prayers say just a little more than is quite true, and our penitence a little less, we shall speedily find that hypocrisy and trivial insincerity are separated by very narrow limits. God's truth in the Gospel cleanses the inner man, but not without his own effort, and, therefore, we are commanded to 'cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness, in the fear of the Lord.'

><> ><> ><>

'THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS'

Having put on the breastplate of righteousness. — Ephesians 6:14.

THERE can be no doubt that in this whole context the Apostle has in mind the great passage in Isaiah 59. where the prophet, in a figure of extreme boldness, describes the Lord as arming Himself to deliver the oppressed faithful, and coming as a Redeemer to Zion. In that passage the Lord puts on righteousness as a breastplate — that is to say, God, in His manifestation of Himself for the deliverance of His people, comes forth as if arrayed in the glittering armour of righteousness. Paul does not shrink from applying the same metaphor to those who are to be 'imitators of God as beloved children,' and from urging upon them that, in their humble degree and lowly measure, they too are to be clothed in the bright armor of moral rectitude. This righteousness is manifested in character and in conduct, and as the breastplate guards the vital organs from assault, it will keep the heart unwounded.

We must note that Paul here gathers up the whole sum of Christian character and conduct into one word. All can be expressed, however diversified may be the manifestations, by the one sovereign term 'righteousness,' and that is not merely a hasty generalisation, or a too rapid synthesis. As all sin has one root and is generically one, so all goodness is at bottom one. The germ

of sin is living to oneself: the germ of goodness is living to God. Though the degrees of development of either opposite are infinite, and the forms of its expression innumerable, yet the root of each is one.

Paul thinks of righteousness as existent before the Christian soldier puts it on. In this thought we are not merely relying on the metaphor of our text, but bringing it into accord with the whole tone of New Testament teaching, which knows of only one way in which any soul that has been living to self, and therefore to sin, can attain to living to God, and therefore can be righteous. We must receive, if we are ever to possess, the righteousness which is of God, and which becomes ours through Jesus. Christ. The righteousness which shines as a fair but unattainable vision before sinful men, has a real existence, and may be theirs. It is not to be self-elaborated, but to be received.

That existent righteousness is to be put on. Other places of Scripture figure it as the robe of righteousness; here it is conceived of as the breastplate, but the idea of assumption is the same. It is to be put on, primarily, by faith. It is given in Christ to simple belief. He that hath faith thereby has the righteousness which is through faith in Christ, for in his faith he has the one formative principle of reliance on God, which will gradually refine character and mould conduct into whatsoever things are lovely end of good report. That righteousness which faith receives is no mere forensic treating of the unjust as just, but whilst it does bring with it pardon and oblivion from past transgressions, it makes a man in the depths of his being righteous, however slowly it may afterwards transform his conduct. The faith which is a departure from all reliance on works of righteousness which we have done, and is a single-eyed reliance on the work of Jesus Christ, opens the heart in which it is planted to all the influences of that life which was in Jesus, that from Him it may be in us. If Christ be in us (and if He is not, we are none of His), 'the spirit is life because of righteousness,' however the body may still be 'dead because of sin.'

But the putting on of the breastplate requires effort as well as faith, and effort will be vigorous in the measure in which faith is vivid, but it should follow, not precede or supplant, faith. There is no more hopeless and weary advice than would be the exhortation of our text if it stood alone. It is a counsel of despair to tell a man to put on that breastplate, and to leave him in doubt where he is to find it, or whether he is to hammer it together by his own efforts before he can put it on. There is no more unprofitable expenditure of breath than the cry to men, Be good! Be good! Moral teaching without Gospel preaching is little better than a waste of breath.

This injunction is continuously imperative upon all Christian soldiers. They are on the march through the enemy's country, and can never safely lay aside their armour. After all successes, and no less after all failures, we have still to arm ourselves for the fight, and it is to be remembered, that the righteousness of which Paul speaks differs from common earthly moralities only as including and transcending them all. It is, alas, too true that Christian righteousness has been by Christians set forth as something fantastic and unreal, remote from ordinary life, and far too heavenly-minded to care for common virtues. Let us never forget that Jesus Himself has warned us, that except our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, we shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The greater orbit enclose the lesser within itself.

The breastplate of righteousness is our defence against evil. The opposition to temptation is best carried on by the positive cultivation of good. A habit of righteous conduct is itself a defence against temptation. Untilled fields bear abundant weeds. The used tool does not rust, nor the running water gather scum. The robe of righteousness will guard the heart as effectually as a coat of mail. The positive employment with good weakens temptation, and arms us against evil. But so long as we are here our righteousness must be militant, and we must be content to live ever armed to meet the enemy which is always hanging round us, and watching for an opportunity to strike. The time will come when we shall put off the breastplate and put on the fine linen 'clean and white,' which is the heavenly and final form of the righteousness of Saints.

>< >< ><

A SOLDIER'S SHOES

'Your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.' — Ephesians 6:15.

PAUL drew the first draft of this picture of the Christian armour in his first letter. It is a finished picture here. One can fancy that the Roman soldier to whom he was chained in his captivity, whilst this letter was being written, unconsciously sat for him likeness, and that each piece of his accoutrements was seized in succession by the Apostle's imagination and turned to a Christian use. It is worth noticing that there is only one offensive weapon mentioned — 'the sword of the Spirit.' All the rest are defensive — helmet, breastplate, shield, girdle, and shoes. That is to say, the main part of our warfare consists in defence, in resistance, and in keeping what we have, in spite of everybody, men and devils, who attempt to take it from us. 'Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown.'

Now, it seems to me that the ordinary reader does not quite grasp the meaning of our text, and that it would be more intelligible if, instead of 'preparation,' which means the process of getting a thing ready, we read 'preparedness,' which means the state of mind of the man who is ready. Then we have to notice that the little word 'of' does duty to express two different relations, in the two

instances of its use here. In the first case — ‘the preparedness of the Gospel’ — it states the origin of the thing in question. That condition of being ready comes from the good news of Christ. In the second case — ‘the Gospel of peace’ — it states the result of the thing in question. The good news of Christ gives peace. So, taking the whole clause, we may paraphrase it by saying that the preparedness of spirit, the alacrity which comes from the possession of a Gospel that sheds a calm over the heart and brings a man into peace with God, is what the Apostle thinks is like the heavy hob-nailed boots that the legionaries wore, by which they could stand firm, whatever came against them.

I. The first thing that I would notice here is that the Gospel brings peace.

I suppose that there was ringing in Paul's head some echoes of the music of Isaiah's words, 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of Him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good!' But there is a great deal more than an unconscious quotation of ancient words here; for in Paul's thought, the one power which brings a

man into harmony with the universe and to peace with himself, is the power which proclaims that God is at peace with him. And Jesus Christ is our peace, because He has swept away the root and bitter fountain of all the disquiet of men's hearts, and all their chafing at providences — the consciousness that there is discord between themselves and God. The Gospel brings peace in the deepest sense of that word, and, primarily, peace with God, from out of which all other kinds of tranquillity and heart-repose do come — and they come from nothing besides.

But what strikes me most here is not so much the allusion to the blessed truth that was believed and experienced by these Ephesian Christians, that the Gospel brought peace, and was the only thing that did, as the singular emergence of that idea that the Gospel was a peace-bringing power, in the midst of this picture of fighting. Yes, it brings both. It brings us peace first, and then it says to us, 'Now, having got peace in your heart, because peace with God, go out and fight to keep it.' For, if we are warring with the devil we are at peace with God; and if we are at peace with the devil we are warring with God. So the two states of peace and war go together. There is no real peace which has not conflict in it, and the Gospels' the Gospel of peace,' precisely because it enlists us in Christ's army and sends us out to fight Christ's battles.

So, then, dear brother, the only way to realise and preserve 'the peace of God which passes understanding' is to fling ourselves manfully into the fight to which all Christ's soldiers are pledged and bound. The two conditions, though they seem to be opposite, will unite; for this is the paradox of the Christian life, that in all regions it makes compatible apparently incompatible and contradictory emotions. 'As sorrowful' — and Paul might have said 'therefore' instead of 'yet' — 'as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as having nothing yet' — therefore — 'possessing all things'; as in the thick of the fight, and yet kept in perfect peace, because the soul is stayed on God. The peace that comes from friendship with Him, the peace that fills a heart tram-quiet because satisfied, the peace that soothes a conscience emptied of all poison and robbed of all its sting, the peace that abides because, on all the horizon in front of us nothing can be seen that we need to be afraid of — that peace is the peace which the Gospel brings, and it is realised in warfare and is consistent with it. All the armies of the world may camp round the fortress, and the hurtling noise of battle may be loud in the plains, but up upon the impregnable cliff crowned by its battlements there is a central citadel, with a chapel in the heart of it; and to the worshippers there none of the noise ever penetrates. The Gospel which laps us in peace and puts it in our hearts makes us soldiers.

II. Further, this Gospel of peace will prepare us for the march.

A wise general looks after his soldiers' boots. If they give out, nothing else is of much use. The roads are very rough and very long, and there need to be strong soles and well-sewed uppers, and they will be none the worse for a bit of iron on the heels and the toes, in order that they may not wear out in the midst of the campaign. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,' and these metals are harder than any of the rock that you will have to clamber over. Which being translated into plain fact is just this — a tranquil heart in amity with God is ready for all the road, is likely to make progress, and is fit for anything that it may be called to do.

A calm heart makes a light foot; and he who is living at peace with God, and with all disturbance within hushed to rest, will, for one thing, be able to see what his duty is. He will see his way as far as is needful for the moment. That is more than a good many of us can do when our eyes get confused, because our hearts are beating so loudly and fast, and our own wishes come in to hide from us God's will. But if we are weaned from ourselves, as we shall be if we are living in possession of the peace of God which passes understanding, the atmosphere will be transparent, as it is on some of the calm last days of autumn, and we shall see far ahead and know where we ought to go.

The quiet heart will be able to fling its whole strength into its work. And that is what troubled hearts never can do, for half their energy is taken up in steadying or quieting themselves, or is dissipated in going after a hundred other things. But when we are wholly engaged in quiet fellowship with Jesus Christ we have the whole of our energies at our command, and can fling ourselves wholly into our work for Him. The steam-engine is said to be a very imperfect machine which wastes more power than it utilises. That is true of a great many Christian people; they have the power, but they are so far away from that deep sense of tranquillity

with God, of which my text speaks, that they waste much of the power that they have. And if we are to have for our motto 'Always Ready,' as an old Scottish family has, the only way to secure that is by having 'our feet shod with the preparedness' that comes from the Gospel that brings us peace. Brethren, duty that is done reluctantly, with hesitation, is not done. We must fling ourselves into the work gladly and be always 'ready for all Thy perfect will.'

There was an English commander, who died some years ago, who was sent for to the Horse Guards one day and asked, 'How long will it take for you to be ready to go to Scinde?' 'Half an hour' said he; and in three-quarters he was in the train, on his road to reconquer a kingdom That is how we ought to be; but we never shall be, unless we live habitually in tranquil communion with God, and in the full faith that we are at peace with Him through the blood of His Son. A quiet heart makes us ready for duty.

III. Again, the Gospel of peace prepares us for combat.

In ancient warfare battles were lost or won very largely according to the weight of the masses of men that were hurled against each other; and the heavier men, with the firmer footing, were likely to be the victors. Our modern scientific way of fighting is different from that. But in the old time the one thing needful was that a man should stand firm and resist the shock of the enemies as they rushed upon him. Unless our footing is good we shall be tumbled over by the onset of some unexpected antagonist. And for good footing there are two things necessary. One is a good, solid piece of ground to stand on, that is not slippery nor muddy, and the other is a good, strong pair of soldier's boots, that will take hold on the ground and help the wearer to steady himself. Christ has set our feet on the rock, and so the first requisite is secured. If we, for our part, will keep near to that Gospel which brings peace into our hearts, the peace that it brings will make us able to stand and bear unmoved any force that may be hurled against us. If we are to be 'steadfast, unmovable,' we can only be so when our feet are shod with the preparedness of the Gospel of peace.

The most of your temptations, most of the things that would pluck you away from Jesus Christ, and upset you in your standing will come down upon you unexpectedly. Nothing happens in this world except the unexpected; and it is the sudden assaults that we were not looking for that work most disastrously against us. A man may be aware of some special weakness in his character, and have given himself carefully and patiently to try to fortify himself against it, and, lo! all at once a temptation springs up from the opposite side; the enemy was lying in hiding there, and whilst his face was turned to fight with one foe, a foe that he knew nothing about came storming behind him. There is only one way 'to stand, and that is not merely by cultivating careful watchfulness against our own weaknesses, but by keeping fast hold of Jesus Christ manifested to us in His Gospel. Then the peace .that comes from that communion will itself guard us.

You .remember what Paul says in one of his other letters, where he has the same beautiful blending together of him two ideas of peace and warfare: 'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall garrison your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' It will be, as it were, an armed force within your heart which will repel all antagonism, and will enable you to abide in that Christ, through whom and in whom alone all peace comes. So, because we are thus liable to be overwhelmed by a sudden rush of unexpected temptation, and surprised into a sin before we know where we are, let us keep fast hold by that Gospel which brings peace, which will give us steadfastness, however suddenly the masked battery may begin to play upon us, and the foe may steal out of his ambush and make a rush against our unprotectedness. That is the only way, as I think, by which we can walk scatheless through the world.

Now, dear brethren, remember that this text is part of a commandment. We are to put on the shoes. How is that to be done? By a very simple way: a way which, I am afraid, a great many Christian people do not practise with anything like the constancy that they ought. For it is the Gospel that Brings the peace, and if its peace brings the preparedness, then the way to get the preparedness is by soaking our minds and hearts in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

You hear a good deal nowadays about deepening the spiritual life, and people hold conventions for the purpose. All right; I have not a word to say against that. But, conventions or no conventions, there is only one thing that deepens the spiritual life, and that is keeping near the Christ from whom all the fulness of the spiritual life flows. If we will hold fast by our Gospel, and let its peace lie upon our minds, as the negative of a photograph lies upon the paper that it is to be printed upon, until the image of Jesus Christ Himself is reproduced in us, then we may laugh at temptation. For there will be no temptation when the heart is full of Him, and there will be no sense of surrendering anything that we wish to keep when the superior sweetness of His grace fills our souls. It is empty vessels into which poison can be poured. If the vessel is full there will be no room for it. Get your hearts and minds filled with the wine of the kingdom, and the devil's venom of temptation will have no space to get in. It is well to resist temptation; it is better to be lifted above it, so that it ceases to tempt.

And the one way to secure that is to live near Jesus Christ, and let the Gospel of His grace take up more of our thoughts and more of our affections than it has done in the past. Then we shall realise the fulfilment of the promise: 'He will not suffer thy foot to be moved.'

THE SHIELD OF FAITH

'Above all, taking the shield of faith, whereby ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. — Ephesians 6:16,

THERE were two kinds of shields in use in ancient warfare — one smaller, carried upon the arm, and which could be used, by a movement of the arm, for the defence of threatened parts of the body in detail; the other large, planted in front of the soldier, fixed in the ground, and all but covering his whole person. It is the latter which is referred to in the text, as the word which describes it clearly shows. That word is connected with the Greek word meaning 'door,' and gives a rough notion of the look of the instrument of defence — a great rectangular, oblong, behind which a man could stand untouched and untouchable. And that is the kind of shield, says Paul, which we are to have — no little defence which may protect some part of the nature, but a great wall, behind which he who crouches is safe.

'Above all' does not mean here, as superficial readers take it to mean, most especially and primarily, as most important, but it simply means in addition to all these other things. Perhaps with some allusion to the fact that the shield protected the breastplate, as well as the breastplate protected the man, there may be a reference to the kind of double defence which comes to him who that breastplate and lies behind the shelter of a strong and resolute faith.

I. Now, looking at this metaphor from a practical point of view, the first thing to note is the missiles 'the fiery darts of the wicked.'

Archaeologists tell us that there were in use in ancient warfare javelins tipped with some kind of combustible, which were set on fire, and flung, so that they had not only the power of wounding but also of burning; and that there were others with a hollow head, which was in like manner filled, kindled, and thrown into the ranks of the enemy. I suppose the Apostle's reason for specifying these fiery darts was simply that they were the most formidable offensive weapons that he had ever heard of. Probably, if he had lived to-day, he would have spoken of rifle-bullets or explosive shells, instead of fiery darts. But, though probably the Apostle had no further meaning in the metaphor than to suggest that faith was mightier than the mightiest assaults that can be hurled against it, we may venture to draw attention to two particulars in which this figure is specially instructive and warning. The one is the action of certain temptations in setting the soul on fire; the other is the suddenness with which they assail us.

'The fiery darts.' Now, I do not wish to confine that metaphor too narrowly to any one department of human nature, for our whole being is capable of being set on fire, and 'set on fire of hell,' as James says. But there are things in us all to which the fiery darts do especially appeal: desires, appetites, passions; or — to use the word which refined people are so afraid of, although the Bible is not, 'lusts — which war against the soul,' and which need only a touch of fire to flare up like a tar-barrel, in thick foul smoke darkening the heavens. There are fiery darts that strike these animal natures of ours, and set them all aflame.

But, there are other fiery darts than these. There are plenty of other desires in us: wishes, cowardices, weaknesses of all sorts, that, once touched with the devil's dart, will burn fiercely enough. We all know that.

Then there is the other characteristic of suddenness. The dart comes without any warning. The arrow is invisible until it is buried in the man's breast. The pestilence walks in darkness, and the victim does not know until its poison fang is in him. Ah! yes! brethren, the most dangerous of our temptations are those that are sprung upon us unawares. We are going quietly along the course of our daily lives, occupied with quite other thoughts, and all at once, as if a door had opened, not out of heaven but out of hell, we are confronted with some evil thing that, unless we are instantaneously on our guard, will conquer us almost before we know. Evil tempts us because it comes to us, for the most part, without any beat of drum or blast of trumpet to say that it is coming, and to put us upon our guard. The batteries that do most harm to the advancing force are masked until the word of command is given, and then there is a flash from every cannon's throat and a withering hail of shot that confounds by its unexpectedness as well as kills by its blow. The fiery darts that light up the infernal furnace in a man's heart, and that smite him all unawares and unsuspecting, these are the weapons that we have to fear most.

II. Consider next, the defence: 'the shield of faith.'

Now, the Old Testament says things like this: 'Fear not, Abraham; I am thy Shield.' The psalmist invoked God, in a rapturous exuberance of adoring invocations, as his fortress, and his buckler, and the horn of his salvation, and his high tower. The same psalm says, 'The Lord is a shield to all them that put their trust in Him'; and the Book of Proverbs, which is not given to quoting psalms, quotes that verse. Another psalm says, 'The Lord God is a sun and shield.'

And then Paul comes speaking of 'the shield of faith.' What has become of the other one? The answer is plain enough. My faith is nothing except for what it puts in front of me, and it is God who is truly my shield; my faith is only called a shield, because it brings me behind the bosses of the Almighty's buckler, against which no man can run a tilt, or into which no man can strike his lance, nor any devil either. God is a defence; and my trust, which is nothing in itself, is everything because of that with which it brings me into

connection. Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of God's power flowing into me, and working in me. And when that power flows into me, and works in me, then I can laugh at the fiery darts, because 'greater is He that is with us than all they that are with them.'

So all the glorification which the New Testament pours out upon the act of faith properly belongs, not to the act itself, but to that with which the act brings us into connection. Wherefore, in the first Epistle of John, the Apostle, who recorded Christ's saying, 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world,' translates it into, 'This is the victory that overcometh the world' — not, our Christ, but — 'even our faith.' And it overcomes because it binds us in deep, vital union with Him who has overcome; and then all His conquering power comes into us.

That is the explanation and vindication of the turn which Paul gives to the Old Testament metaphor here, when he makes our shield to be faith. Suppose a man was exercising trust in one that was unworthy of it, would that trust defend him from anything? Suppose you were in peril of some great pecuniary loss, and were saying to yourself, 'Oh! I do not care. So-and-so has guaranteed me against any loss, and I trust to him,' and suppose he was a bankrupt, what would be the good of your trust? It would not bring the money back into your pocket. Suppose a man is leaning upon a rotten support; the harder he leans the sooner it will crumble. So there is no defence in the act of trust except what comes into it from the object of trust; and my faith is a shield only because it grasps the God who is the shield.

But, then, there is another side to that thought. My faith will quench, as nothing else will, these sudden impulses of fiery desires, because my faith brings me into the conscious presence of God, and of the unseen realities where He dwells. How can a man sin when God's eye is felt to be upon him? Suppose conspirators plowing some dark deed in a corner, shrouded by the night, as they think; and suppose, all at once, the day were to blaze in upon them, they would scatter, and drop their designs. Faith draws back the curtain which screens off that unseen world from so many of us, and lets in the light that shines down from above and shows us that we are compassed about by a cloud of witnesses, and the Captain of our Salvation in the midst of them. Then the fiery darts fizzle out, and the points drop off them. No temptation continues to flame when we see God.

They have contrivances in mills that they call 'automatic sprinklers.' When the fire touches them it melts away a covering, and a gas is set free that puts the fire out. And if we let in the thought of God, it will extinguish any flame. 'The sun puts out the fire in our grates,' the old women say. Let God's sun shine into your heart, and you will find that the infernal light has gone out. The shield of faith quenches the fiery darts of the 'wicked.'

Yes! and it does it in another way. For, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews, faith realities 'the things hoped for,' as well as 'unseen.' And if a man is walking in the light of the great promises of Heaven, and the great threatenings of a hell, he will not be in much danger of being set on fire, even by 'the fiery darts of the wicked.' He that receives into his heart God's strength; he that by faith is conscious of the divine presence in communion with him; he that by faith walks in the light of eternal retribution, will triumph over the most sudden, the sharpest, and the most fiery of the darts that can be launched against him.

III. The Grasp of the Shield.

'Taking the shield,' then, there is something to be done in order to get the benefit of that defence. Now, there are a great many very good people at present who tell Christian men that they ought to exercise faith for sanctifying, as they exercise it for justifying and acceptance. And some of them — I do not say all — forget that there is effort needed to exercise faith for sanctifying; and that our energy has to be put forth in order that a man may, in spite of all resistance, keep himself in the attitude of dependence. So my text, whilst it proclaims that we are to trust for defence against, and victory over, recurring temptations, just as we trusted for forgiveness and acceptance at the beginning, proclaims also that there must be effort to grasp the shield, and to realise the defence which the shield gives to us.

For to trust is an act of the heart and will far more than of the head, and there are a great many hindrances that rise in the way of it; and to keep behind the shield, and not depend at all upon our own wit, our wisdom, or our strength, but wholly upon the Christ who gives us wit and wisdom, and strengthens our fingers to fight — that will take work! To occupy heart and mind with the object of faith is not an easy thing.

So, brethren, effort to compel the will and the heart to trust; effort to keep the mind in touch with the verities and the Person who are the objects of our faith; and effort to keep ourselves utterly and wholly ensconced behind the Shield, and never to venture out into the open, where our own arm has to keep our own heads, but to hang wholly upon Him — these things go to 'taking' the shield of faith. And it is because we fail in these, and not because there are any holes or weak places in the shield, that so many of the fiery darts find their way through, and set on fire and wound us. The Shield is impregnable, beaten as we have often been. 'This is the victory that overcometh the world' — and the devil and his darts — 'even our faith.'

THE HELMET OF SALVATION

‘Take the helmet of salvation.’ — Ephesians 6:17.

WE may, perhaps, trace a certain progress in the enumeration of the various pieces of the Christian armour in this context. Roughly speaking, they are in three divisions. There are first our graces of truth, righteousness, preparedness, which, though they are all conceived as given by God, are yet the exercises of our own powers. There is next, standing alone, as befits its all-comprehensive character, faith which is able to ward against and overcome not merely this and that temptation, but all forms of evil. That faith is the root of the three preceding graces, and makes the transition to the two which follow, because it is the hand by which we lay hold of God’s gifts. The two final parts of the Christian armour are God’s gifts, pure and simple — salvation and the word of God. So the progress is from circumference to centre, from man to God. From the central faith we have on the one hand that which it produces in us; on the other, that which it lays hold of from God. And them two last pieces of armour, being wholly God’s, gift, we are bidden with especial emphasis which is shown by a change in construction, to take or receive these.

I. The Salvation.

Once more Old Testament prophecy suggest the words of this exhortation. In Isaiah’s grand vision of God, arising to execute judgment which is also redemption, we have a wonderful picture of His arraying Himself in armour. Righteousness is His flashing breastplate: on His head is an helmet of salvation. The gleaming steel is draped by garments of retributive judgment, and over all is cast, like a cloak, the ample folds of that ‘zeal’ which expresses the inexhaustible energy and intensity of the divine nature and action. Thus arrayed He comes forth to avenge and save. His redeeming work is the manifestation and issue of all these characteristics of His nature. It flames with divine fervour: it manifests the justice which repays, but its inmost character is righteousness, and its chief purpose is to save. His helmet is salvation; the plain, prose meaning of which would appear to be that His great purpose of saving men is its own guarantee that His purpose should be effected, and is the armour by which His work is defended.

The Apostle uses the old picture with perfect freedom, quoting the words indeed, but employing them quite differently. God’s helmet of salvation is His own purpose; man’s helmet of salvation is God’s gift. He is strong to save because He wills to save; we are strong and safe when we take the salvation which He gives.

It is to be further noticed that the same image appears in Paul’s rough draft of the Christian armour in Thessalonians, with the significant difference that there the helmet is ‘the hope of salvation,’ and here it is the salvation itself. This double representation is in full accord with all Scripture teaching, according to which we both possess and hope for salvation, and our possession determines the measure of our hope. That great word negatively implies deliverance from evil of any kind, and in its lower application, from sickness or peril of any sort. In its higher meaning in Scripture the evil from which we are saved is most frequently left unexpressed, but sometimes a little glimpse is given, as when we read that ‘we are saved from wrath through Him,’ or ‘saved from sin.’ What Christ saves us from is, first and chiefly, from sin in all aspects, its guilt, its power, and its penalty; but His salvation reaches much further than any mere deliverance from threatening evil, and positively means the communication to our weakness and emptiness of all blessings and graces possible for man. It is inward and properly spiritual, but it is also outward, and it is not fully possessed until we are clothed with ‘salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.’

Hence, in Scripture our salvation is presented as past, as present, and as future. As past it is once for all received by initial faith in Christ; and, in view of their faith, Paul has no scruples as to saying to the imperfect Christians whose imperfections he scourges, ‘Ye have been saved,’ or in building upon that past fact his earnest exhortations and his scathing rebukes. The salvation is present if in any true sense it is past. There will be a daily growing deliverance from evil and a daily growing appropriation and manifestation of the salvation which we have received. And so Paul more than once speaks of Christians as ‘being saved.’ The process begun in the past is continued throughout the present, and the more a Christian man is conscious of its reality even amidst flaws, failures, stagnation, and lapses, the more assured will be his hope of the perfect salvation in the future, when all that is here, tendency often thwarted, and aspirations often balked, and sometimes sadly contradicted, will be completely, uninterruptedly, and eternally realised. If that hope flickers and is sometimes all but dead, the reason mainly lies in its flame not being fed by present experience.

II. The helmet of salvation.

This salvation in its present form will keep our heads in the day of battle. Its very characteristic is that it delivers us from evil, and all the graces with which Paul equips his ideal warrior are parts of the positive blessings which our salvation brings us. The more assured we are in our own happy consciousness of possessing the salvation of God, the more shall we be defended from all the temptations that seek to stir into action our lower selves. There will be no power in our fears to draw us into sin, and the possible evils that appeal to earthly passions of whatever sort will lose their power to disturb us, in the precise measure in which we know that we are saved in Christ. The consciousness of salvation will tend to damp down the magazine of combustibles that we all carry

within us, and the sparks that fall will be as innocuous as those that light on wet gunpowder. If our thoughts are occupied with the blessings which we possess they will be guarded against the assaults of evil. The full cup has no room for poison. The eye that is gazing on the far-off white mountains does not see the filth and frivolities around. If we are living in conscious possession and enjoyment of what God gives us, we shall pass scatheless through the temptations which would otherwise fall on us and rend us. A future eagerly longed for, and already possessed in germ, will kill a present that would otherwise appeal to us with irresistible force.

III. Take the helmet.

We might perhaps more accurately read receive salvation, for that salvation is not won by any efforts of our own, but if we ever possess it, our possession is the result of our accepting it as a gift from God. The first word which the Gospel speaks to men and which makes it a Gospel, is not Do this or that, but Take this from the hands that were nailed to the Cross. The beginning of all true life, of all peace, of all self-control, of all hope, lies in the humble and penitent acceptance by faith of the salvation which Christ brings, and with which we have nothing to do but to accept it.

But Paul is here speaking to those whom he believes to have already exercised the initial faith which united them to Christ. and made His salvation theirs, and to these the exhortation comes with special force. To such it says, 'See to it that your faith ever grasps and feeds upon the great facts on which your salvation reposes — God's changeless love, Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice and ascended life, which He imparts to us if we abide in Him. Hold fast and prolong by continual repetition the initial act by which you received that salvation. It is said that on his death-bed Oliver Cromwell asked the Puritan divine who was standing by it whether a man who had once been in the covenant could be lost, and on being assured that he could not, answered, 'I know that I was once in it'; but such a building on past experiences is a building on sand, and nothing but continuous faith will secure a continuous salvation. A melancholy number of so-called Christians in this day have to travel far back through the years before they reach the period when they took the helmet of salvation. They know that they were far better men, and possessed a far deeper apprehension of Christ and His power in the old days than is theirs now, and they need not wonder if God's great gift has unnoticed slipped from their relaxed grasp. A hand that clings to a rock while a swollen flood rushes past needs to perpetually be tightening its grip, else the man will be swept away; and the present salvation, and, still more, the hope of a future salvation, are not ours on any other terms than a continual repetition of the initial act by which we first received them. But there must also be a continually increased appropriation and manifestation in our lives of a progressive salvation that will come as a result of a constantly renewed faith; but it will not come unless there be continuous effort to work into our characters, and to work out in our lives, the transforming and vitalising power of the life given to us in Jesus.

If our present experience yields no sign of growing conformity to the image of our Saviour, there is only too abundant reason for doubting whether we have experienced a past salvation or have any right to anticipate a perfect future salvation.

The last word to be said is, Live in frequent anticipation of that perfect future. If that anticipation is built on memory of the past and experience of the present, it cannot be too confident. That hope maketh not ashamed. In the region of Christian experience alone the weakest of us has a right to reckon on the future, and to be sure that when that great to-morrow dawns for us, it 'shall be as this day and much more abundant.' With this salvation in its imperfect form brightening the present, and in its completeness filling the future with unimaginable glory, we can go into all the conflicts of this fighting world and feel that we are safe because God covers our heads in the day of battle. Unless so defended we shall go into the fight as the naked Indians did with the Spanish invaders, and be defeated as they were. The plumes may be shorn off the helmet, and it may be easily dented, but the head that wore it will be unharmed. And when the battle and the noise of battle are past, the helmet will be laid aside, and we shall be able to say, 'I have fought a good fight, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.'

><> ><> ><>

'THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT'

'The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.' — Ephesians 6:17.

WE reach here the last and only offensive weapon in the panoply. The 'of' here does not indicate apposition, as in the 'shield of faith.' or 'the helmet of salvation,' nor is it the 'of' of possession, so that the meaning is to be taken as being the sword which the Spirit wields, but it is the 'of' expressing origin, as in the 'armour of God'; it is the sword which the Spirit supplies. The progress noted in the last sermon from subjective graces to objective divine facts, is completed here, for the sword which is put into the Christian soldier's hand is the gift of God, even more markedly than is the helmet which guards his head in the day of battle.

I. Note what the word of God is.

The answer which would most commonly and almost unthinkingly be given is, I suppose, the Scriptures; but while this is on the whole time, it is to be noted that the expression employed here properly means a word spoken, and not the written record. Both in

the Old and in the New Testaments the word of God means more than the Bible; it is the authentic utterance of His will in all shapes and applying to all the facts of His creation. In the Old Testament, 'God said' is the expression in the first chapter of Genesis for the forth-putting of the divine energy in the act of creation, and long ages after that divine poem of creation was written a psalmist re-echoed the thought when he said 'For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in the heavens. Thou hast established the earth and it abideth.'

But, further, the expression designates the specific messages which prophets and others received. These are not in the Old Testament spoken of as a unity: they are individual words rather than a word. Each of them is a manifestation of the divine will and purpose; many of them are commandments; some of them are warnings; and all, in some measure, reveal the divine nature.

That self-revelation of God reaches for us in this life its permanent climax, when He who 'at sundry times and in divers manner spake unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by a Son.' Jesus is the personal 'word of God,' though that name by which He is designated in the New Testament is a different expression from that employed in our text, and connotes a whole series of different ideas.

The early Christian teachers and apostles had no hesitation in taking that sacred name — the word of the Lord — to describe the message which they spoke. One of their earliest prayers when they were left alone was, that with all boldness they might speak Thy word; and throughout the whole of the Acts of the Apostles the preached Gospel is designated as the word of God, even as Peter in his epistle quotes one of the noblest of the Old Testament sayings, and declares that the 'word of the Lord' which 'abideth for ever' is 'the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.'

Clearly, then, Paul here is exhorting the Ephesian Christians, most of whom probably were entirely ignorant of the Old Testament, to use the spoken words which they had heard from him and other preachers of the Gospel as the sword of the Spirit. Since he is evidently referring to Christian teaching, it is obvious that he regards the old and the new as one whole, that to him the proclamation of Jesus was the perfection of what had been spoken by prophets and psalmists. He claims for his message and his brethren's the same place and dignity that belonged to the former messengers of the divine will. He asserts, and all the more strongly, because it is an assertion by implication only, that the same Spirit which moved in the prophets and saints of former days is moving in the preachers of the Gospel, and that their message has a wider sweep, a deeper content, and a more radiant light than that which had been delivered in the past. The word of the Lord had of old partially declared God's nature and His will: the word of God which Paul preached -was in his judgment the complete revelation of God's loving heart, the complete exhibition to men of God's commandments of old; longing eyes had seen a coming day and been glad and confidently foretold it, now the message was 'the coming one has come.'

It is as the record and vehicle of that spoken Gospel, as well as of its earlier premonitions, that the Bible has come to be called the word of God, and the name is true in that He speaks in this book. But much harm has resulted from the appropriation of the name exclusively to the book, and the forgetfulness that a vehicle is one thing and that which it carries quite another.

II. The purpose and power of the word.

The sword is the only offensive weapon in the list. The spear which played so great a part in ancient warfare is not named. It may well be noted that only a couple of verses before our text we read of the Gospel of peace, and that here with remarkable freedom of use of his metaphors, Paul makes the word of God, which as we have seen is substantially equivalent to the preached Gospel, the one weapon with which Christian men are to cut and thrust. Jesus said 'I come not to send peace, but a sword,' but Paul makes the apparent contradiction still more acute when he makes the very Gospel itself the sword. We may recall as a parallel, and possibly a copy of our text, the great words of the Epistle to the Hebrews which speak of the word of God as 'living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.' And we cannot forget the magnificent symbolism of the Book of Revelation which saw in the midst of the candlestick one like unto a Son of Man; and 'out of His mouth proceeded a sharp, two edged sword.' That image is the poetic embodiment of our Lord's own words which we have just quoted, and implies the penetrating power of the word which Christ's gentle lips have uttered. Gracious and healing as it is, a Gospel of peace, it has an edge and a point which cut down through all sophistications of human error, and lay bare the 'thoughts and intents of the heart.' The revelation made by Christ has other purposes which are not less important than its ministering of consolation and hope. It is intended to help us in our fight with evil, and the solemn old utterance, 'with the breath of His mouth He will slay the wicked,' is true in reference to the effect of the word of Christ on moral evil. Such slaying is but the other side of the life-giving power which the word exercises on a heart subject to its influence. For the Christian soldier's conflict with evil as threatening the health of his own Christian life, or as tyrannising over the lives of others, the sword of the Spirit is the best weapon.

We are not to take the rough-and-ready method, which is so common among good people, of identifying this spirit-given sword with the Bible. If for no other reason, yet because it is the Spirit which supplies it to the grasp of the Christian soldier, our possession of it is therefore a result of the action of that Spirit on the individual Christian spirit; and what He gives, and we are to wield, is 'the engrafted word which is able to save our souls.' That word, lodged in our hearts, brings to us a revelation of duty and a chart of life,

because it brings a loving recognition of the character of our Father, and a glad obedience to His will. If that word dwell in us richly, in all wisdom, and if we do not dull the edge of the sword by our own unworthy handling of it, we shall find it pierce to the 'dividing asunder of joints and marrow,' and the evil within us will either be east out from us, or will shrivel itself up. and bury itself deep in dark corners.

Love to Christ will be so strong, and the things that are not seen will so overwhelmingly outweigh the things that are seen, that the solemn majesty of the eternal will make the temporal look to our awed eyes the contemptible unreality which it really is. They who humbly receive and faithfully use that engrafted word, have in it a sure touchstone against which their own sins and errors are shivered. It is for the Christian consciousness the true Ithuriel's spear, at the touch of which 'upstarts in his own shape the fiend' who has been pouring his whispered poison into an unsuspecting ear. The standard weights and measures are kept in government custody, and traders have to send their yard measures and scales thither if they wish them tested; but the engrafted word, faithfully used and submitted to, is always at hand, and ready to pronounce its decrees, and to cut to the quick the evil by which the understanding is darkened and conscience sophisticated.

III. The manner of its use.

Here that is briefly but sufficiently expressed By the one commandment, 'take,' or perhaps more accurately, 'receive.' Of course, properly speaking, that exhortation does not refer to our manner of fighting with the sword, but to the previous act by which our hand grasps it. But it is profoundly true that if we take it in the deepest sense, the possession of it will teach the use of it. No instruction win impart the last, and little instruction is needed for the first. What is needed is the simple act of yielding ourselves to Jesus Christ, and looking to Him only, as our guide and strength. Before all Christian warfare must come the possession of the Christian armour, and the commandment that here lies at the beginning of all Paul's description of it is 'Take.' Our fitness for the conflict all depends on our receiving God's gift, and that reception is no mere passive thing, as if God's grace could be poured into a human spirit as water is into a bucket. Hence, the translation of this commandment of Paul's by 'take' is better than that by 'receive,' inasmuch as it brings into prominence man's activity, though it gives too exclusive imperforate to that, to the detriment of the far deeper and more essential element of the divine action. The two words are, in fact, both needed to cover the whole ground of what takes place when the giving God and the taking man concur in the great act by which the Spirit of God takes up its abode in a human spirit. God's gift is to be received as purely His gift, undeserved, unearned by us, But undeserved and unearned as it is, and given 'without money and without price,' it is not ours unless our hand is stretched out to take, and our fingers closed tightly over the free gift of God. There is a dead lift of effort in the reception; there is a still greater effort needed for the continued possession, and there is a life-long discipline and effort needed for the effective use in the struggle of daily life of the sword of the Spirit.

If that engrafted word is ever to become sovereign in our lives, there must be a life-long attempt to bring the tremendous truths as to God's will for human conduct which it plants in our minds into practice, and to bring all our practice under their influence. The motives which it brings to bear on our evils will be powerless to smite them, unless these motives are made sovereign in us by many an hour of patient meditation and of submission to their sweet and strong constraint. One sometimes sees on a wild briar a graft which has been carefully inserted and bandaged up, but which has failed to strike, and so the strain of the briar goes on and no rosebuds come. Are there not some of us who profess to have received the engrafted word and whose daily experience has proved, by our own continual sinfulness, that it is unable to 'save our souls'?

There are in the Christian ranks some soldiers whose hands are too nerveless or too full of worldly trash to grasp the sword which they have received, much less to strike home with it at any of the evils that are devastating their own lives or darkening the world. The feebleness of the Christian conflict with evil, in all its forms, whether individual or social, whether intellectual or moral, whether heretical or grossly and frankly sensual, is mainly due to the feebleness with which the average professing Christians grasp the sword of the Spirit. When David asked the priests for weapons, and they told him that Goliath's sword was lying wrapt in a cloth behind the ephod, and that they had none other, he said, 'There is none like that, give it me.' If we are wise, we will take the sword that lies in the secret place, and, armed with it, we shall not need to fear in any day of battle.

We do well that we take heed to the word of Gods 'as unto a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawn,' when swords will be no more needed, and the Word will no longer shine in darkness but be the Light that makes the Sun needless for the brightness of the New Jerusalem.

>< >< ><

PEACE, LOVE, AND FAITH

'Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith.' — Ephesians 6:23.

THE numerous personal greetings usually found at the close of Paul's letters are entirely absent from this Epistle. All which we

have in their place is this entirely general good wish, and the still more general and wider one in the subsequent verse.

There is but one other of the Apostle's letters similarly devoid of personal messages, viz. the Epistle to the Galatians, and their absence there is sufficiently accounted for by the severe and stern tone of that letter. But it is very difficult to understand how they should not appear in a letter to a church with which the Apostle had such prolonged and cordial relations as he had with the church at Ephesus. And hence the absence of these personal greetings is a strong confirmation of the opinion that this Epistle was not originally addressed to the church at Ephesus, but was a kind of circular intended to go round the various churches in Asia Minor, and only sent first to that at Ephesus. That opinion is further confirmed by the fact known to many of you that in some good ancient manuscripts the words 'at Ephesus' are omitted from the first verse of the letter; which thus stands without any specific address.

Be that as it may, this trinity of inward graces is Paul's highest and best wish for his friends. He has no earthly prosperity to wish for them. His ambition soars higher than that; he desires for them peace, love, faith.

Now, will you take the lesson? There is no better test of a man than the things that he wishes for the people that he loves most. He desires for them, of course, his own ideal of happiness. What do you desire most for those that are dearest to you? You parents, do you train up your children, for instance, so as to secure, or to do your best to secure, not outward prosperity, but these loftier gifts; and for yourselves, when you are forming your wishes, are these the things that you want most? 'Set your affections on things above,' and remember that whoso has that trinity of graces, peace, love, faith, is rich and blessed, whatsoever else he has or needs. And whoso has them not is miserable and poor.

But I wish especially to look a little more closely at these three things in themselves and in their relation to one another. I take it that the Apostle is here tracking the stream to its fountain; that he is beginning with effects and working backwards and downwards to causes; so that to get the order of nature and of time we must reverse the order here, and begin where he ends and end where he begins. The Christian life in its higher vigour and excellence is rooted in faith. That faith associates to itself, and is inseparably connected with love, and the faith and love together issue in a deep restful tranquillity which nothing can break.

Now let us look at these three things as the three greatest blessings that any can bear in their hearts, and wring out of time, sorrow, and change.

I. First, the root of everything is a continuous and growing trust.

Remember that this prayer or wish of my text was spoken in reference to brethren; that is to say, to those who, by the hypothesis, already possessed Christian faith. And Paul wishes for them, and can wish for them, nothing better and more than the increase and continuousness of that which they already possess. The highest blessing that the brethren can receive is the enlargement and the strengthening of their faith.

Now we talk so much in Christian teaching about this 'faith' that, I fancy, like a worn sixpence in a man's pocket, its very circulation from hand to hand has worn off the lettering. And many of us, from the very familiarity of the word, have only a dim conception of what it means. It may not be profitless, then, to remind you, first of all, that this faith is neither more nor less than a very familiar thing which you are constantly exercising in reference to one another — that is to say, simple confidence. You trust your husband, your wife, your child, your parent, your friend, your guide, your lawyer, your doctor, your banker. Take that very same emotion and attitude of the mind by which you put your well-being, in different aspects and provinces, into the hands of men and women round about you; lift the trailing flowers that go all straggling along the ground, and twine them round the pillars of God's throne, and you get the confidence, the trust, of the praises and glories of which the New Testament is full. There is nothing mysterious in it, it is simply the exercise of confidence, the familiar cement that binds all human relationship together, and makes men brotherly and kindred with their kind. Faith is trust, and trust saves a man's soul.

Then, remember further that the faith which is the foundation of everything is essentially personal trust reposing upon a person, upon Jesus Christ. You cannot get hold of a man in any other way than by that. The only real bond that binds people together is the personal bond of confidence, manifesting itself in love. And it is no mere doctrine that we present for a man's faith, but it is the person about whom the doctrine speaks. We say, indeed, that we can only know the person on whom we must trust by the revelation of the truths concerning Him which make the Christian doctrines; but a man may believe the whole of them, and have no faith. And what is the step in advance which is needed in order to turn credence into faith — belief in a doctrine into trust? In one view it is the step from the doctrine to the person. When you grasp Christ, the living Christ, and not merely the doctrine, for yours, then you have faith.

Only remember, my brother, if you say you trust Christ, the question has immediately to be asked: What Christ is it that you are trusting? Is it the Christ that died for your sins on the Cross, or is it a Christ that taught you some great moral truths and set you a lovely example of life and conduct? Which of the two is it? for these two Christs are very different, and the faith that grasps the one is extremely unlike the faith that grasps the other. And so I press upon you this question: What Christ is it to Whom your confidence turns, and for what is it that you are looking to Him? Is it for help and guidance of some vague kind; is it for pattern or example, or

is it for the salvation of your sinful souls, by the might of His great sacrifice?

Then, remember still further, that this personal outgoing of confidence, which is the action both of a man's will and of a man's intellect, to the person revealed to us in the great doctrines of the Gospel — that this faith, if it is to be worth anything, must be continuous. Paul could desire nothing better for his Ephesian friends than that they should have that which they had — faith; that they should continue to have it, and that it should be perennial and increasing all through their lives. You can no more get present good from past faith than the breath you drew yesterday into your lungs will be sufficient to oxygenate your blood at this moment. As soon as you break the electric contact, the electric light goes out, and no matter how long a man has been living a life of faith, that past life will not in the smallest degree help him at the present moment unless the faith is continuous. Remember this, then, a broken faith is a broken peace; a broken faith is a broken salvation; and so long, and only so long, as you are knit to Jesus Christ by the conscious exercise of a faith realised at the moment, are you in the reception of blessing from Him at the moment.

And, still further, this faith ought to be progressive. So Paul desired it to be with these people. If there is no growth, do you think there is much life? I know I am speaking to plenty of people who call themselves Christians, whose faith is not one inch better to-day than it was when it was born — perhaps a little less rather than more. Oh! the hundreds and thousands of professing Christians, average Christians, that clog and weaken all churches, whose faith has no progressive element in it, and is not a bit stronger by all the discipline of life and by their experience of its power. Brethren! is it so with us? Let us ask ourselves that; and let us ask very solemnly this other question: If my faith has no growth, how do I know that it has got any life?

And so let me remind you further that this faith, the personal outgoing of a man's intellect and will to the personal Saviour revealed in the Scriptures as the sacrifice for our sins, and the life of our spirits, which ought to be continuous and progressive, is the foundation of all strength, blessedness, goodness, in a human character; and if we have it we have the germ of all possible excellence and growth, not because of what it is in itself, for in itself it is nothing more than the opening of the heart to the reception of the celestial influences of grace and righteousness that He pours down. And, therefore, this is the thing that a wise man will most desire for himself, and for those that are dearest to him.

Depend upon it, whether it is what we want moot or not, it is what God wants most for us. He does not care nearly so much that our lives should be joyful as that they should be righteous and full of faith; and He subjects us to many a sorrow and loss and disappointment in order that the life of nature may be broken and the life of faith may be strong. If we rightly understand the relative value of outward and of inward things, we shall be thankful for the storms that drive us nearer to Him; for the darkening earth that may make the pillar of Cloud glow at the heart into a pillar of fire, and for all the discipline, painful though it may be, with which God answers the prayer, 'Lord, increase our faith.'

II. And now, next, notice how inseparably associated with a true faith is love.

The one is effect that never is found without its cause; the other is cause which never but produces its effect. These two are braided together by the Apostle as inseparable in reality and inseparable in thought. And that it is so is plain enough, and there follow from it some practical lessons that I desire to lay upon your hearts and my own.

There are, then, here two principles, or rather two sides of one thought; no faith without love, no love without faith.

No faith is genuine and deep which does not at once produce in the heart where it is lodged an answering love to God. That is clear enough. Faith is, as I have said, the recognition and the reception of the divine love into the heart; and we are so constituted as that if a man once knows and believes in any real sense the love that God has to him, he answers it back again with his love as certainly as an echo which gives back the sound that reaches it.

Our faith is, if I may so say, like a burning-glass, which concentrates the rays of the divine love upon our hearts, and focuses them into a point that kindles our hearts into flame. If we have the confidence that God loves us, in any real depth, we shall answer by the gush of our love to Him.

And so here is a test for men's faith. You call yourselves Christians. If I were to come to you and ask you, 'Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?' most of you would say, 'Yes!' Try your faith, my friend, by this test: Does it make you love Him at all? If it does not, it is more words than anything else; and it needs a wonderful deepening before it can have any real power in your hearts. There is no faith worthy the name unless its child, all but as Old as itself, be the answer of the heart to Him, pouring itself out in thankful gratitude.

No love without faith; 'we love Him because He first loved us.' God must begin, we can only come second. Man's natural selfishness is only overcome by the clearest demonstration of the love of God to him; and until that love, in its superheat because its lowliest form, the form of the sacrifice on the Cross, has penetrated into a man's heart through his faith, there will be no love.

So then, dear friends, there is a test for your love. We hear a great deal said nowadays, as there has 'always been a great deal

said, about the essence of all religion consisting in love to God; and about men 'rejecting the cumbrous dogmas of the New Testament, and falling back upon the great and simple truths, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; and thy neighbour as thyself, and saying 'that is their religion' Well, I venture to say that without the faith of the heart in, not the cumbrous dogmas, but the central fact of the New Testament, that Christ died on the Cross for me, you will never get the old commandment of love to God with heart and soul and strength and mind really kept and carried out; and that if you want men to have their hearts and wills bound into loving fellowship with God, it is only by the path of faith in Him who is the sacrifice for sin that such fellowship is reached. Hence there follows a very plain, practical advice. Do you want your heart's love to be increased? Learn the way to do it. You cannot work yourselves into a fervour of religious emotion of any valuable kind. A man cannot get to love more by saying, 'I am determined I will.' We have no direct control over our affections in that fashion. You cannot make water boil except by one way, and that is by putting plenty of fire under it; and you cannot make your affections melt and flow except by heating them by the contemplation of the truth which is intended to bring them out. That is to say, the more we exercise our minds on the contemplation of Christ's great love to us, and the more we put forth the energies of our souls in the act of simple self-distrust and reliance upon Him, the more will our love be fervent and strong. You can only increase love by increasing the faith from which it comes. So do you see to it, if you call yourselves Christians, that you try to deepen all your Christian affections by an honest, meditative, prayerful contemplation and grasp of the great love of God in Jesus Christ. And do not wonder if your Christian life be, as it is in so many of us, stunted, not progressive, bringing no blessing to ourselves, and little good to anybody else. The explanation is easy enough. You do not look at the Cross of Christ, nor live in the contemplation and reception of His great grace.

III. And now, lastly, these two inseparably associated graces of faith and love bring with them, and lead to, the third — peace.

It seems to be but a very modest, sober-tinted wish which the Apostle here has for his brethren that the highest and best thing he can ask for them is only quiet. Very modest by the side of joy and excitement, in their coats of many colours, and yet the deepest and truest blessing that any of us can have — peace. It comes to us by one path, and that is by the path of faith and love.

These two bring peace with God, peace in our inmost spirits, the peace of self-annihilation and submission, the peace of obedience, the peace of ceasing from our own works, and entering, therefore, into the rest of God.

Trust is peace. There is no tranquillity like that of feeling 'I am not responsible for this: He is; and I rest myself on Him.'

Love is peace. There is no rest for our hearts but on the bosom of some one that is dear to us, and in whom we can confide. But ah, brother! every tree in which the dove nestles is felled down sooner or later, and the nest torn to pieces, and the bird flies away. But if we turn ourselves to the undying Christ, the perpetual revelation of the eternal God, then, then our love and our faith will bring us rest. There will be peace in trusting Him whom we never can trust and be put to shame. There will be peace in loving Him who is more than worthy of and able to repay the deep and perennial love of all hearts.

Self-surrender is peace. It is our wills that trouble us. Disturbance comes, not from without, but from within. When the will bows, when I say, 'Be it then as Thou wilt,' when in faith and love I cease to strive, to murmur, to rebel, to repine, and enter into His loving purposes, then there is peace.

Obedience is peace, To recognise a great will that is sovereign, and to bow myself to it, not because it is sovereign, but because it is sweet, and sweet because I love it, and love Him whose it is — that is peace. And then, whatever may be outward circumstances, there shall be 'peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation'; and deep in my soul I may be tranquil, though all about me may be the hurly-burly of the storm.

The Christian peace is an armed peace, paradoxical as it appears; and according to the great word of the Apostle, is a sentry which garrisons the beleaguered heart and mind, surrounded by many foes, and keeps them in Christ Jesus.

'There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked,' he is 'as a troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt'; but over the wildest commotion one Voice, low, gentle, omnipotent, says: 'Peace! be still!' and the heart quiets itself, though there may be a ground swell, and the weather clears. He is your peace, trust Him, love Him, and you cannot but possess the 'peace of God which passeth understanding.'

>< >< ><

THE WIDE RANGE OF GOD'S GRACE

'Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.' — Ephesians 6:24

IN turning to the great words which I have read as a text, I ask you to mark their width and their simplicity. They are wide; they

follow a very comprehensive benediction, with which, so to speak, they are concentric. But they sweep a wider circle. The former verse says, 'Peace be to the brethren.' But beyond the brethren in these Asiatic churches (as a kind of circular letter to whom this epistle was probably sent) there rises before the mind of the Apostle a great multitude, in every nation, and they share in his love, and in the promise and the prayer of my text. Mark its simplicity everything is brought down to its most general expression. All the qualifications for receiving the divine gift are gathered up in one — love All the variety of the divine gifts, is summed up in that one comprehensive expression — 'grace.'

I. So then, note, first, the comprehensive designation of the recipients of grace.

They are 'all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in incorruption.' Little need be said explanatory of the force of this general expression. We usually find that where Scripture reduces the whole qualification for the reception of the divine gift, and the conditions which unite to Jesus Christ, to one, it is faith, not love, that is chosen. But here the Apostle takes the proem at the second stage, and instead of emphasising the faith which is the first step, he dwells upon the love which is its uniform consequence. This love rests upon the faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Then note the solemn fulness of the designations of the object of this faith-born love. 'Jesus Christ our Lord' — the name of His humanity; the name of His office; the designation of His dominion- He is Jesus the Man. Jesus is the Christ, the Fulfiller of all prophecy; the flower of all previous revelation; the Anointed of God with the fulness of His Divine Spirit as Prophet, Priest, and King. Jesus Christ is the Lord — which, at the lowest, expresses sovereignty, and if regard be had to the Apostolic usage, expresses something more, even participation in Deity. And it is this whole Christ, the Jesus, the Christ, the Lord; the Jove to whom, built upon the faith in Him in all these aspects and characteristics, constitutes the true unity of the true Church.

That Church is not built upon a creed, but it is built upon a whole Christ, and not a maimed one. And so we must have a love which answers to all those sides of that great revealed character, and is warm with human love to Jesus; and is trustful with confiding love to the Christ; and is lowly with obedient love to the Lord. And I venture to go a step further, and say, — and is devout with adoring love to the eternal Son of the Father. This is the Apostle's definition of what makes a Christian: Faith that grasps the whole Christ and love that therefore flows to Him. It binds all who possess it into one great unity. As against a spurious liberalism which calls them Christians who lay hold of a fragment of the one entire and perfect chrysolite, we must insist that a Christian is one who knows Jesus, who knows Christ, who knows the Lord, and who loves Him in all these aspects. Only we must remember, too, that many a time a man's heart outruns his creed, and that many a soul glows with truer, deeper, more saving devotion and trust to a Christ whom the intellect imperfectly apprehends, than are realised by unloving hearts that are associated with clearer heads. Orchids grow in rich men's greenhouses, fastened to a bit of stick, and they spread a fairer blossom that lasts longer than many a plant that is rooted in a more fertile soil. Let us be thankful for the blessed inconsistencies which knit some to the Christ who is more to them than they know.

There is also here laid down for us the great principle, as against all narrowness and all externalism, and all so-called ecclesiasticism, that to be joined to Jesus Christ is the one condition which brings a man into the blessed unity of the Church. Now it seems to me that, however they may be to be lamented on other grounds, and they are to be lamented on many, the existence of diverse Churches does not necessarily interfere with this deep-seated and central unity. There is a great deal said to-day about the reunion of Christendom, by which is meant the destruction of existing communions and the formation of a wider one. I do not believe, and I suppose you do not, that our existing ecclesiastical organisations are the final form of the Church of the living God. But let us remember that the two things are by no means contradictory, the belief in, and the realising of, the essential unity of the Church, and the existence of diverse communions. You will see on the side of many a Cumberland hill a great stretch of limestone with clefts a foot or two deep in it — there are flowers in the clefts, by the bye — but go down a couple of yards and the divisions have all disappeared, and the base-rock stretches continuously. The separations are super-tidal; the unity is fundamental. Do not let us play into the hands of people whose only notion of unity is that of a mechanical juxtaposition held together by some formula or orders; but let us recognise that the true unity is in the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst, and in the common grasp of Him by us all.

There is a well-known hymn which was originally intended as a High Church manifesto, which thrusts at us Nonconformists when it sings:

'We are not divided, All one body we.'

And oddly enough, but significantly too, it has found its way into all our Nonconformist hymn-books, and we, 'the sects,' are singing it, with perhaps a nobler conception of what the oneness of the body, and the unity of the Church is, than the writer of the words had. 'We are not divided,' though we be organised apart. 'All one body we,' for we all partake of that one bread, and the unifying principle is a common love to the one Jesus Christ our Lord.

II. Mark the impartial sweep of the divine gifts.

My text is a benediction, or a prayer; but it is also a prophecy, or a statement, of the inevitable and uniform results of love to Jesus Christ. The grace will follow that love, necessarily and certainly, and the lovers will get the gift of God because their has brought them into living contact With Jesus Christ; and His life will flow over into theirs. I need not remind you that the word 'grace' in Scripture means, first of all, the condescending love of God to inferiors, to sinners, to those who deserved something else; and; secondly, the whole fulness of blessing and gift that follow upon that love.

And, says Paul, these great gifts from heaven, the one gift in which all are comprised, will surely follow the opening of the heart in love to Jesus Christ.

Ah, brethren! God's grace makes uncommonly short work of ecclesiastical distinctions. The great river flows through territories that upon men's maps are painted in different colours, and of which the inhabitants speak in different tongues. The Rhine laves the pine-trees of Switzerland, and the vines of Germany, and the willows of Holland; and God's grace flows through all places where the men that love Him do dwell. It rises, as it were, right over the barriers that they have built between each other. The little pools on the sea-shore are separate when the tide is out, but when it comes up it fills all the pot-holes that the pebbles have made, and unifies them in one great flashing, dancing mass; and so God's grace comes to all that love Him, and confirms their unity.

Surely that is the true test of a living Church. 'When Barnabas came, and saw the grace of God, he was glad.' It was not what he had expected, but he Was open to conviction. The Church where he saw it had been very irregularly constituted; it had no orders and no sacraments, and had been set a-going by the spontaneous efforts of private Christians, and he came to look into the facts. He asked for nothing more when he saw that the converts had the life within them. And so we, with all our faults — and God forbid that I should seem to minimise these — with all our faults, we poor Nonconformists, left to the un-covenanted mercies, have our share of that gift of grace as truly, and, if our love be deeper, more abundantly, than the Churches that are blessed with orders and sacraments, and an 'unbroken historical continuity.' And when we are unchurched for our lack of these, let us fall back upon St. Augustine's 'Where Christ is, there the Church is'; and believe that to us, even to us also, the promise is fulfilled, 'Lo! I am with you always, even to the end of the world.'

III. Lastly, note the width to which our sympathies should go.

The Apostle sends out his desires and prayers so as to encircle the same area as the grace of God covers and as His love enfolds. And we are bound to do the same.

I am not going to talk about organic unity. The age for making new denominations is, I suppose, about over. I do not think that any sane man would contemplate starting a new Church nowadays. The rebound from the iron rigidity of a mechanical unity that took place at the Reformation naturally led to the multiplication of communities, each of which laid bold of something that to it seemed important. The folly of ecclesiastical rulers who insisted upon non-essentials lays the guilt of the schism at their doors, and not at the doors of the minority who could not, in conscience, accept that which never should have been insisted upon as a condition. But whilst we must all feel that power is lost, and much evil ensues from the isolation, such as it is, of the various Churches, yet we must remember that re-union is a slow process; that an atmosphere springs up round each body which is a very subtle, but none the less a very powerful, force, and that it will take a very, very long time to overcome the difficulties and to bring about any reconstruction on a large scale. But why should there be three Presbyterian Churches in Scotland, with the same creed, confessions of faith, and ecclesiastical constitution? Why should there be half a dozen Methodist bodies in England, of whom substantially the same thing may be said? Will it always pass the wit of man for Congregationalists and Baptists to be one body, without the sacrifice of conviction upon either side? Surely no! You young men may see these fair days; men like me can only hope that they will come and do a little, such as may be possible in a brief space, to help them on.

Putting aside, then, all these larger questions, I want, in a sentence or two, to insist with you upon the duty that lies on us all, and which every one of us may bear a share in discharging. There ought to be a far deeper consciousness of our fundamental unity. They talk a great deal about 'the rivalries of jarring sects.' I believe that is such an enormous exaggeration that it is an untruth. There is rivalry, but you know as well as I do that, shabby and shameful as it is, it is a kind of commercial rivalry between contiguous places of worship, be they chapels or churches, be they buildings belonging to the same or to different denominations. I, for my part, after a pretty long experience now, have seen so little of that said bitter rivalry between the Nonconformist sects, as sects, that to me it is all but non-existent. And I believe the most of us ministers, going about amongst the various communities, could say the same thing. But in the face of a cultivated England laughing at your creed of Jesus, the Christ, the Lord; and in the face of a strange and puerile recrudescence of sacerdotalism and sacramentarianism, which shoves a priest and a rite into the place where Christ should stand, it becomes us Nonconformists who believe that we know a more excellent way to stand shoulder to shoulder, and show that the unities that bind us are far more than the diversities that separate.

It becomes us, too, to further conjoint action in social matters. Thank God we are beginning to stir in that direction in Manchester — not before it was time. And I beseech you professing Christians, of all Evangelical communions, to help in bringing Christian motives and principles to bear on the discussion of social and municipal and economical conditions in this great city of ours.

And there surely ought to be more concert than we have had in aggressive work; that we should a little more take account of each other's action in regulating our own; and that we should not have the scandal, which we too often have allowed to exist, of overlapping one another in such a fashion as that rivalry and mere trade competition is almost inevitable.

These are very humble, prosaic suggestions, but they would go a long way, if they were observed, to sweeten our own tempers, and to make visible to the world our true unity. Let us all seek to widen our sympathies as widely as Christ's grace flows; to count none strangers whom He counts friends; to discipline ourselves to feel that we are girded with that electric chain which makes all who grasp it one, and sends the same keen thrill through them all. If a circle were a mile in diameter, and its circumference were dotted with many separate points, how much nearer each of these would be if it were moved inwards, on a straight line, closer to the centre, so as to make a circle a foot across. The nearer we come to the One Lord, in love, communion, and likeness, the nearer shall we be to one another.