Ephesians - Commentaries by James Lampden Harris

Notes from Christian Annotator, Ephesians 4:21 (4:21)

... as the truth is in Jesus. This is often quoted as though it were written "the truth as it is in Jesus," and is thus used as a compendious expression for the doctrines of grace. But such a use is likely to make us overlook the important doctrine which Christ teaches by his Spirit, and which follows in the context, viz. that the believer in Christ has put off the old man, has put on the new man, has been renewed in the spirit of his mind. (Cp. Col. 3:9, 10.) He is therefore to walk after the pattern of the new man, "in righteousness and holiness of truth." "Wherefore putting away," &c.

Presbutes The Christian Annotator 3:218 (1856).

Present Testimony Papers, He That Descended (4:10)

"My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8, 9).

Such is one great oracle of God. "The word of God is living." It is the word of Him who "knows what is in man." "With God there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning," but among the great variety of the human family, savage or civilized, bond or free, religious or philosophical (the Jew and the Greek of the Apostle), man is found in contrariety to God both in his thoughts and in his ways.

Let us take the thoughts and ways of man in reference to the very end of his being. His end and object is himself: He thinks and acts from himself and for himself. But is this God's object in creating man; or, indeed, any creature? Is it not that God may be glorified -that the Creator, who is blessed forever, may be seen -not that the creature should rob Him of His glory? This end, indeed, has not, in the case of man, been secured by creation, but it is secured by redemption. He who is redeemed to God acknowledges the glory of God as Creator, just as he who is justified freely by grace acknowledges the integrity, sanctity, and righteousness of the law. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honor, and power, for thou lust created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created (Rev. 4)."

The contrariety between God and man was conspicuously shown when, the Lord Jesus, God manifest in the flesh, walked and conversed with men on this earth. "He was a sign spoken against, that the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed"; and as He furnished the occasion for bringing out the thoughts of the hearts of men, so He took the opportunity of setting over against them the thoughts of God. There was an inveterate thought in the hearts even of His own disciples, with respect to greatness. At one time they asked him plainly, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" At another time, "They disputed among themselves who should be the greatest." On a third occasion, two of them sought of Jesus the honored place of sitting on His right-hand and on his left, in glory (Mark 10:35-45). These several instances furnish the occasion of bringing out the thoughts of God with respect to greatness. The "little child" is set in the midst of the disciples, as the embodiment of the thoughts of God with respect to greatness. The doctrine is taught that "the chiefest among them shall be servant of all." The doctrine is confirmed by the example. "For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." The leading thought of the day is the elevation of man. Whatever may be the fact, the thought is not that of a few leading minds controlling all others, but such an elevation of the common mind as shall control all things. Is this the thought of God? Is this the way of God for the real exaltation of man? Is this the way of God for man to attain happiness? On the contrary, it is the subversion of the way of God; it is antagonism to the thought of God in the Gospel of His grace; it is the prelude to the last grand Anti-Christian confederacy, resulting in visible discomfiture, "by the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God."

As Jesus Himself, in His ministry, was repeatedly contradicting the thought of greatness which His disciples entertained, so the doctrine of the humiliation of the Son of God is presented to us both as the law and example of real greatness. Self-exaltation is the thought of man as to greatness, and the way in which he seeks happiness. "He that descended," is the thought of God; it is through Him "that descended" that the alone way is found to real greatness, even to the highest exaltation to which it is possible for God to elevate a moral and intelligent creature.

"He that descended." "I am the Lord: that is my name, and my glory will I not give to another." This is not less true with respect to the glory due to Him, as "He that descended," than it is with respect to the glory due to Him as the alone object of worship. This glory is singular -it belongs to One alone. The arch-angel cannot trench on this prerogative glory of the Lord Jesus Christ; for He is as essentially separated from Him that created Him as man Himself. The archangel could not stoop to take on him "the form of a servant," because the condition of a servant was the condition of his being. Such a stooping was only in the power of one "in the form of God. " This was His glory -"He that descended. " On this point Jesus largely insists in His teaching; a rich sample of which we find in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel.

The Lord graciously seeks, from the miracle of the loaves, to find a way to their hearts for the reception of that bread which endureth unto eternal life, of which the. manna which sustained their fathers in the wilderness, was a beautiful, yet but faint shadow: "Verily, verily I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven, but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world." Again, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me, and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out, for I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him that sent me." The Jews then murmured at him, because he said: "I am the bread which came down from heaven." They stumbled at the doctrine of the first stage in his humiliation: "He that descended."

They thought they knew as much of His birth and bringing up as they did of Moses. They could not see the glory of his humiliation; "There was no beauty in Him that they should desire him." The doctrine is dismissed by the thought: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven." But Jesus leads them on in His doctrine to another stage in His humiliation; its crowning glory; reiterating the doctrine that "He descended," but connecting it with eating His flesh and drinking his blood, which led not only the Jews to strive, but to the turning back of some of His own followers. "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread he shall live forever, and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." But in teaching this other step in His descent, He connects it with His ascent. "When Jesus knew in himself, that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them: Doth this offend you? What, and if ye shall see the Son of Man ascend up where He was before." "He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all heavens, that He might fill all things." It was at the moment Judas went out, and the cross was vividly before Him, that Jesus said: "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him." He was about to enter on a glory counseled and settled in eternity, but manifested in a moment of time; a glory only discernible by the persons of the Godhead till it was actually accomplished, and then only seen by those taught of the Holy Ghost, the glorifier of Jesus. This glory Jesus cannot give to another, neither dare any other take it to himself. It is only regarded as a disgrace rather than a glory, till the Spirit reveals its truth to the soul. But it is a glory which of necessity implies His own proper underived personal glory. Who but the Son of the living God, one essentially divine, could say, "and the bread which I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world"? Apart from the divinity of His person, it was only reasonable for the Jews to say: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Again, who but one truly divine could say: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No one taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself; I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father?" It was the glory of Jesus having life in Himself, and able to impart it to others; to descend under the power of death, that He might rescue others from its power, and show that it was impossible for Him to be held by death. Nor is this all, He laid down His life in obedience to the will of His Father, and there was in the death of Jesus that singular and distinctive glory, that independence and obedience met together in it. "I lay it down of myself." "This commandment have I received of my Father." "Angels that excel in strength, do the commandment of the Lord, hearkening unto the voice of His word." This indeed is their glory. But angels are not independent beings; they are upheld as creatures, and obedience is necessary to their condition. But obedience is that into which the Son humbled Himself. It was His glory to do so, and God was glorified in Him. It is the glory of His humiliation which reached its utmost limit in the cross, which brings forth in such prominence the name of Jesus, "the only name under heaven given among men wherein there is salvation," and at the same time "the name above every name in heaven," the honor of which all must eventually acknowledge, if not in salvation, assuredly in judgment. It is as the only Savior, that Jesus says: "For mine own sake, even for mine own sake will I do it: for how should my name be polluted! and I will not give my glory to another." The Holy Ghost glorifies Jesus in testifying to His sufferings and the glories which followed them. The true doctrine of the cross is inseparably connected with the essential glory of the Person of the Son; but it is very possible to maintain a true confession of His Person, apart from the true doctrine of the cross. It is to this doctrine the Spirit testifies, and invests the familiar fact of the crucifixion of Christ with such a meaning and interest, that it may justly be said of it, "what eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into man's heart to conceive, God has revealed to us by His Spirit." The acknowledgment of the fact of the cross apart from the doctrine of the cross, is as truly a subversion of the gospel, as the denial of the true divinity of the Lord Jesus. He will not receive the acknowledgment of the glory of His Person, save to exercise judgment, where the glory of His humiliation is not acknowledged. The preaching of the cross not only sets forth the only way by which a sinner may find remission of sins, peace with God and access to God, but is so essentially connected with the glory of Jesus, that contempt of it is treated as trampling under foot the Son of God. The doctrine of the cross is the special test of our standing before God -to they religious after the Jewish caste, it is "a stumbling-block"; to the philosophical, after the Grecian school, it is "foolishness," but "to the called, it is the power of God, and wisdom of God."

"The heavens declare the glory of God"; they set forth to our senses the power of God and the wisdom of God; and were it not for sin, which has alienated the mind from God, they would carry universally the demonstration of God's eternal power and Godhead. But man, as a sinner, needs another kind of demonstration, even "the demonstration of the Spirit," who shows to an awakened conscience, "the power and the wisdom of God" in the humiliation of Jesus. Until there be such demonstration of the Spirit, however clearly it may be supposed that God is read in His works, He is not known as the Creator, "blessed forever."

The difference between the apostle's determination to know nothing but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, and the popular creed that Christ was crucified, is an essential difference. In the last, credit is given to a well-attested historical fact, but the apostle's expression comprises the wide range of the thoughts and ways of God. And when these thoughts and ways are brought out in their great results, it is in the triumph of "Him that descended"; it is in the victory of the Lamb slain. "Thou art worthy, for Thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood."

When once the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, as "He that descended," is perceived, it follows, as a necessary consequence, that there must be a new thought, a new way, and a new order of greatness, corresponding with the glory of the humiliation of Jesus. The human order of greatness is an ascending order. It is the development of the power of mind over matter, so that men themselves are startled at the greatness of their achievements. Every step in advance only makes way for further progress. Men think, speak, and act, as though impossibility was to be blotted out of their vocabulary; but their thoughts and ways are in direct antagonism to the thoughts and ways of God. They are "laboring in the fire, and wearying themselves for very vanity, for the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." It is not the glory of man, but the glory of God, which is to prevail. In vain are men contending against the purpose and counsel of God; for "the Lord of hosts hath purposed to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honorable of the earth."

It is a fearful thing to be found striving against God. We may have marveled at the stout-heartedness of Pharaoh in refusing to humble himself before God. But when men refuse to submit to the righteousness of God, by going about to establish their own righteousness, it is only another form of stout-heartedness and of insubjection to God. And if God has declared, "Every good and perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning," and men are seeking good and perfection by exalting themselves, the issue of such a conflict between God and man, must be as terrible as it is certain. It is to such an issue that all things are now rapidly tending.

There is a wisdom, "earthly" in its origin, and a wisdom "that descendeth from above." The earthly wisdom "has sought out many inventions," but nothing "perfect" results from it. It does not satisfy the craving of man, as a creature; it cannot pacify the conscience of man, as a sinner

It is "the good and perfect gift, that cometh down from above," which alone effects these ends. It is Jesus Himself, the unspeakable gift of God, comprehending in Himself, and in that which He has wrought, that which satisfies the soul, gives peace to the conscience, and access with confidence into the presence of God. It is He who testified, "I am from above, ye are from beneath," who alone could say, "He that cometh to me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." This is the divine order -the perfect one coming from above -this is the alone order of exaltation. According to this order, "he that exalteth himself shall be abased." He that exalts himself is traversing the divine order; he is spurning the good and perfect gift; he stands before God as a sinner, under the increased condemnation of "sitting in the seat of the scornful. " He is still attempting to attain blessedness by the ascending line, when the coming down of the Son from heaven, and His further humiliation in the death of the cross, declares that it can only be attained in the descending line. The peril of the a e is that men are turning upside down the gospel of Christ, in order to exalt themselves.

One feature of corruption noticed by the Apostle Jude is that "in those things which men know naturally as brute beasts, they corrupt themselves." Such a natural knowledge, even of the leading truths of the gospel, is found among professing Christians. There is a natural knowledge of the mercy of God, a natural knowledge of Christ dying for sinners, which men only use to corrupt themselves, by assuming, on the very ground of it, a more proud and independent standing before God than those who are without such knowledge. Such is the fearful aspect before our eyes -man exalting himself by means of the very light which should humble him and lead him to magnify the Lord, Surely "the light is become darkness, and how great is that darkness?"

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Infidelity and superstition are spreading, and God's hand lifted up in judgment, and yet men "will not see." This is, indeed, alarming. But this is not all; the most alarming feature is that of man advancing himself into independence of God, by means of the very light which sets forth "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." This, it is to be feared, is the true character of vaunted Christian civilization.

There is nothing so dark in the picture of "the perilous days," portrayed by the apostle Paul, as to alarm our fears. He does not present us with desolating wars, appalling famine, or ravaging pestilence, but with selfishness, gain and pleasure, under the form of godliness. If this peril is not perceived, if even real Christians have thought that, by mingling with the world, they could elevate and improve it, and by the attempt have lost their own savor -("wherewithal shall it be salted?") Christians themselves are not the only sufferers. "A woe is come on the world," because of the offenses of Christians. Christians have failed to glory only in the cross of Christ; and thus, instead of "holding forth the word of life in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation," they have helped on the delusion of the world. The Christian of this favored land, although a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem, may well weep over the actual condition of his country. He sees before him the antagonism of selfishness, capital arrayed against labor, and labor against capital, and the efforts of the wisest powerless to adjust these conflicting claims. He sees gain and godliness almost become convertible terms; and national legislation, and even religion itself, made to bow to the low principle of human convenience. But it belongs not to the Christian to speculate on the decline of nations, except so far as to show the church the magnitude of its sin. "Judgment must begin at the house of God." Such is the divine order. Let Christians then judge from their own selves what is right. And, if they have helped on human selfishness by failing to exhibit the glory of the humiliation of Jesus, let them at once stand forth in the confession of His name before men, not only for their own souls' blessing, but for the good of others. We cannot correct selfishness by counter-selfishness, but by testifying to the unselfish love of Jesus, taking up the cross and following Him. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

Presbutes

The Present Testimony 7:157-165 (1855).

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