

Ephesians - Commentaries by Alfred Henry Burton

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CHAP. 5:22. 6.—THE HEAVENLY BRIDE AND THE HEAVENLY WARFARE.

BEFORE speaking of the conflict with the heavenly principalities and authorities into which the saints are brought in their responsibility of faithfulness to Christ, in His place of supremacy, as against the spiritual power of wickedness in the heavenlies, the apostle takes occasion by the relationships of nature, and his exhortations as to these, to develop fully the doctrine of the assembly as the bride of Christ.

As previously remarked, Paul learned, when Saul of Tarsus, the essential principle of Christ's heavenly relationship to the assembly in those striking words, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" the first and last spoken from heaven by Jesus of Nazareth audibly to the ears of men on earth. Those poor trembling sufferers on earth whom Saul was halting to prison were one with that heavenly Man who was his Lord. This was the great substratum underlying all Paul's teaching, though only here and there coming to the surface. Twice already in this epistle it has been introduced — at the end of chapter 1., where Christ in supremacy is head over all things to the assembly, which is His body; and again in chapter 4:16, where the body is seen to derive its nature and constitution from the Head, love and union by the Spirit, and divine-beauty being produced in power by the harmonious working of the members (see vers. 4-12). In the passage now before us (vers. 22-32), while referring again to these two aspects, the apostle in his exhortations to the wives and husbands brings out the third form of that union of Christ and the assembly, namely the union of association, as of a man united to his wife.

The relationship of obedience is first before his mind. For the wives, as for the assembly, submission is the prime essential, since the Head is in supremacy. And if joined to him, as the assembly is to Christ, it is nevertheless in subordination (ver. 24). But the union is one of mutual responsibilities, to be fulfilled on the husband's part in love. In the case of Christ and the assembly, His love has been already absolutely shown in identifying Himself, by sacrifice, with us in all our sinful state, the judgment of which gave occasion to the expression in Him of all that was divinely fragrant and precious to God, as the answer morally in Man to all that He is in Himself. In love He delivered Himself up, but it was in order that He might sanctify the assembly, purifying it by the washing of water by the Word. The thought here is not the putting away of our sins, necessary as this was, but the procuring of that which was in perfect consonance with Himself. The type of this we have in Eve, formed out of a rib taken from Adam's side while in a deep sleep, and brought to him, of whom he said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh."

Accordingly the thought, not now of subordination, but of derivation of nature and constitution from the man is here in view. So the assembly is purified by the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself glorious, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and blameless, in perfect conformity with His own nature and character. This aspect of union to Christ is special to the body of which we are members (ver. 30), thus coming under His peculiar consideration and tender care (vers. 28, 29).

Another form of union, as a moral consequence of the preceding, is now introduced, namely, that of which the bride is the particular figure. The responsibility of the Man, in love and devotedness, is still the question; and the great fundamental principle of marriage, laid down at its original institution (Gen. 2:25), is here insisted on. The man shall leave his primal condition in order to be united to his wife. This is the union of association, not now of subordination or derivation, true as these are. How divinely this has been accomplished in Christ need not be said, emptying Himself of the form of God, yet ever God Himself, to be a servant in manhood for love to His Father, and to possess us in the association of love, as one with Himself! It is the great mystery of Christ and the assembly.

Love on His part and the obedience of loving fear on ours are the morally divine qualities that give present, as well as the eternal, realization of this unique relationship.

Obedience is the unchangeable and divine link with eternity in all the relationships of dependence, such as children and bondmen — obedience found now in a passing scene of time and nature, but continuing uninterruptedly till the new creation, when love, dependence, and obedience will alone abide. To these therefore, now the exhortations of the Spirit chiefly refer. Children in the flesh we are, or have been; and servants have masters now according to the flesh. By-and-by, when parents and masters exist no more, we shall still be children, but in relationship with God alone; and servants we shall remain, of Christ alone. But whether then or now, obedience abides as the one constant, enduring principle of good.

Having thus considered the Christian walk, both in connection with the unity of the Spirit as well as in the relationships of nature, together with the morally divine and heavenly qualities concerned in it, the apostle turns his thoughts finally towards the activities of spiritual evil and the machinations of him who in subtlety opposes the purposes and thoughts of God. His teaching as to this and the warfare involved assumes a heavenly character, as indeed all the doctrine of the apostle does.

Here it is not grace and gift (cf. 2 Tim. 1:6, 2:1), as in chap. 4., and every foe annihilated by another, but we are to' be strong in the Lord and in the might of His strength. It is a warfare in which no grace can be shown, and no peace made with the enemy; and the panoply of God is needed to resist him. The struggle is in respect of his artifices, yet not with him as the serpent and his deceits, nor the adversary, Satan, and his practices (as the dragon he has not yet appeared). We have to meet him in the heavenly places and under the eye of God, as the accuser in whose person is centered all the activity of spiritual wickedness in the heavenlies, set in dignity as they are, and exercising authority. As zealous for righteousness, and exposing, as a heavenly luminary, the character of what comes under his cognizance, he seeks by artifice, bringing accusation against those who are before God on behalf of the interests of Christ in His saints, to discomfit and baffle them, occupying them with their own state necessarily, as failing men, instead of with the service and glory of Christ. In a word, his aim is to prove

them fit only for the confessional, but inefficient for the fight. Therefore the need for the panoply of God, for it is an evil day. Till its close, we are responsible for the glory of Christ, and are placed at the source of all power in God to maintain it.

But on our part, as warriors on the side of the divine and heavenly Man, we must be invulnerable to the enemy's attacks. No chance of alleging inconsistency with our heavenly character must be given. The loins must be girt about with truth — all our motives and purposes kept within the compass of what suits an ascended Christ if not, our state of soul would falsify our prayers for His glory in the saints. How quick to note it would the accuser be; and quick the answer of the throne! Confession, then, and not conflict, would become us.

The breastplate of righteousness must also be put on. This is the practical answer in walk to our place in Christ; for if this were lacking, the enemy would surely bring a charge to our discomfiture. Not less so if our feet were not shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. For how could we consistently be engaged in the concerns of Christ if not perfectly at peace as to all that concerns ourselves, and in our ways with others?

Moreover, as necessary to give effect to all the rest, there is the shield of faith — that perfect confidence in God in regard to His counsels for the glory of Christ and His saints. Without this, how could the Christian warrior stand unmoved amidst all the havoc wrought by satanic mischief in the assembly? The saint knows God's purposes cannot fail; and however thick and fast the inflamed darts of the wicked one may fall, and great apparently his success, the certainty of Christ's triumph already known to faith nullifies the foe's attack, quenches his darts, and enables the heart to rest confidently in God, and continue in unceasing intercession for His saints. For himself the helmet of salvation roves all fear; and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's Word applied to govern his heart and ways, protects him, while it discovers and defeats the wicked one. The Word of God being the revelation of grace in Christ, detects the artifices of the enemy in his pretentious zeal for righteousness, as an angel of light. It is, moreover, a guard to us in leading the obedient heart by a divine path wherein the wicked one toucheth us not.

Thus equipped and armed, the warfare is waged in praying at all seasons with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit. For if in answer to our prayers God intervene, the saints prevail; but if the devil's accusations are made good, then he prevails. And as Christ's glory is linked with all His saints, supplication must be made for all with perseverance, and watchfulness so as to apprehend their needs. Moreover in our prayers the preaching servant, as Paul was, must have a special place, that utterance with boldness in the mystery of the gospel may be given him, for Christ's interests are bound up with the affairs and state of such.

But no conflict can disturb or touch our relations with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, from whom there is ever the uninterrupted outflow of peace to the brethren, and love with faith — a grace which is with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

Secure in all things Godward, protected in all points against the devil — the spiritual power of wickedness in the heavenlies — the brethren can withstand in the evil day, bearing onward in prayer for all saints the glory of Christ until the end. W. T. W.

Christian's Library: Volume 5, "He Came and Preached Peace." (2:11-17)

EPH. 2:11-17.

HOW blessed and full is the preaching of peace by Jesus Christ! He it is who by His cross has made peace, breaking down the enmity existing between Jew and Gentile, and making of twain one new man. He it is who, by that same cross, has for believers slain the enmity that existed in Jew and Gentile alike against God, reconciling "both unto God in one body."

Further, He, who has wrought so wondrously in His death, is now, as the risen and glorified One, our Peace.

Now He who has made peace, has Himself preached peace; and if we turn to the twentieth of John, we get in His own blessed words a threefold presentation of peace for the present and eternal rest of our souls.

Before, however, we look at this, let us notice, for it is of paramount importance to do so, that Jesus had risen from the dead and declared to His brethren: "I ascend unto My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (ver. 17). Only on resurrection ground could such a message of peace, and such a revelation of the Father, be made; for "if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17).

But, blessed be God, He has raised Him up from among the dead, and on the first day of the week — the resurrection day — when His disciples were met together with shut doors for fear of the Jews, Jesus Himself comes into their midst and says, "Peace be unto you" (ver. 19), and then He showed unto them His hands and His side. There were the marks of His atoning sacrifice of Himself for them, in the nail-prints in His hands and the spear-thrust in His side.

Truly, "the chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed." He had been into death itself, to make peace with God for them; and the fact of His presence among them as alive from the dead, was God's proof to them of His perfect satisfaction with, and acceptance of, the atoning sacrifice He offered. Consequently, the Holy Spirit declares to us that "Jesus our Lord... was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification. Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 4:24-5:1).

This first presentation of peace, then, by our blessed Saviour, was that of peace with God on the ground of an atonement made and accepted.

But in verse 21, the Lord again goes on to speak words of peace to His own, on sending them out for Himself into a world full of unrest and turmoil, a scene of Satan's power and opposition to all that is of God. "Peace be unto you: as My Father bath sent Me: even so send I you."

He, the Sent One of the Father, trod the pathway through this world, meeting in its fullness all the opposing forces of man and the devil, touched by the weary restlessness and sorrow that sin had brought in, turning the fair handiwork of God into a groaning creation. Yet through it all, and in spite of his having to all appearance "spent His strength for naught and in vain," what perfect peace of soul was His! ever in communion with His Father and able to thank Him (see Matt. 11:20-26).

Now He was departing out of this world and returning to the Father, and so He leaves them here for Himself, but makes known to them His Father as their Father, so that in communion with their Father they, too, might have that peace which was His. "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you" (John 14:27). No, indeed! the world knows not that peace. When things go smoothly with it — well; but when circumstances are dark and sorrowful it has no peace.

This peace that Jesus gives, depends not on changing circumstances, but is often known and enjoyed most when all around is darkest and exceedingly sorrowful — when perhaps some service the Lord has given to be done for Him, seems to have failed in its results, or when personal surroundings are painful and grievous. Then, as Jesus had, we have our resource and stay in God. "In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-17).

This second announcement of peace, then, would be that of the peace of God, known and enjoyed so perfectly by the One who has left us an example to follow His steps, sending us forth in service to God, even as He Himself was sent forth in service by His Father.

These first two announcements of peace, were made on the first day of the week, the third (ver. 26) was on the eighth day, another Lord's Day, likewise bringing before us the thought of resurrection; but here, I believe, not only the Lord's resurrection (that the first day does), but carrying us on to the time when His own will be also raised and taken to be with Him for eternity. "Christ the first-fruits, afterward they that are Christ's at His coming" (1 Cor. 15:23).

Here, then, the Lord salutes His loved ones with "Peace be unto you" — peace, perfect and unbroken for eternity.

Now "Thomas was with them." Poor doubting Thomas, who would not believe till he had seen, had consequently during that time between the first day and the eighth day missed the joy of known peace, though the value of Christ's work for him in God's sight was just as great as for the other disciples, and though it was as true that God was his Father as theirs.¹ Now in the presence of his risen Saviour there could be no more doubts or fears, but perfect peace.

So with believers at the present time, how many are tortured with doubts and fears, not knowing settled peace with God (to say nothing of the peace of God), though it may be known as a present reality on the authority of God's own word already quoted in Romans 5.

Thank God that in the glory there will be no doubting ones — all then will be brought into the full realization of unruffled peace forever.

But why should there be even now the unhappiness of peace not known, when Jesus Himself points to His hands and side in token of the sufferings of death that He endured to secure that peace for us, and God has raised Him from the dead, thus proving His perfect satisfaction with the work accomplished for the believer? Look again at those simple yet wonderful verses in Romans. Christ Jesus "was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification." Now when faith rests simply on Christ as the once crucified One, and now risen One, what is the blessed result? "Justified," and being justified, "peace with God." Further still, the apostle then unfolds to us our present standing in the grace or favor of God, while we look forward — not doubting in fear and trembling, but with joy — to the "glory of God."

Just one other point. See how much Thomas missed through not being "with them when Jesus came" (ver. 24). What a striking illustration of the need for the exhortation in Hebrews 10:25, "Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is." Alas! that it should be the manner of some.

May God stir up our hearts increasingly as the day approaches, to make every effort to be found where the two or three are gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus, not letting any trifle be a sufficient excuse to stop away. Do we really consider that just as really as "Jesus came" to those disciples assembled together with closed doors, and preached peace to them with His own loved voice, so really is Jesus always "in the midst" of those gathered in His name? (Matt. 18:20). But so it is; and just as really will He speak to our hearts by His written word made good to us by the Holy Spirit which He has given to us.

Let us then, beloved brethren, make the most of the privileges given to us on Lord's Days and week days, counting on our blessed Lord Himself to minister to our souls, thus filling them with peace and joy, causing them to overflow in praise and worship, and enabling us to walk worthy of Him to His own praise and glory! W. H. S. F.