

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

EPHESIANS 3:13-21.

Wherefore I ask that ye may not faint at my tribulations for you, which are your glory. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, and that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; to the end that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fullness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever. Amen.

PAUL'S CARE AND PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH

1. Up to this time Paul has been extolling the office of the ministry, which proclaims the Gospel of the New Testament. In lofty and impressive terms he introduces its purpose, power and wisdom – in a word, the great benefits the office effects, since God thereby bestows upon us abundantly all manner of wisdom, strength and blessings, all which things, in heaven or earth, are of his dispensing. The Gospel proclaims to us life from death, righteousness from sin, redemption from hell and all evil, and brings us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God. So sublime is the whole subject, Paul does not venture to compass it with words but in the loftiest of language suggests much.

2. In the first part of the text he shows the depth of his concern that the Ephesians should retain the Gospel preaching received from him, not allowing themselves to be torn away from it. To this end he employs two expedients: first, he consoles and admonishes; second, he prays and desires.

PAUL CONSOLES HIS CONVERTS

“Wherefore I ask that ye may not faint at my tribulations for you, which are your glory.”

3. Having been imprisoned at Rome by order of the emperor, Paul thus consoles his beloved converts at Ephesus, admonishing them to cleave to the doctrine learned from him; not to be frightened from it by beholding his fate, nor permit themselves to be alienated by such comment as this: *“This man Paul in his preaching to you made great pretensions to being commissioned of Christ himself, and to outdoing all the other apostles. And you made your boast in him and relied upon him as if he were the only and all-deserving one. Where is he now? What assistance can he render you? There he lies in Rome, by the Jews condemned to death; more than that, he is in the hands of that cruel tyrant, Emperor Nero. Did we not long ago tell you he would meet such fate? Presumably this puts an end to his boastings over every other man.”*

4. To prevent the offense that threatened, Paul writes from his prison, and his message is, in effect, this: “Dear friends, you see I am imprisoned; the devil and the world have me in their hands. This may perhaps alarm you, and rouse in you the evil suspicion, ‘If his doctrine were all right and if he were the great apostle of Christ he claims to be, God would not permit him to suffer such fate.’” For some of the false apostles thus taunted Paul’s disciples. *“But I entreat and exhort you,”* Paul would say, “not to be offended, or alarmed, not to grow faint, though I am in prison. Whether we be tempted and suffer tribulation, whether we be honored or dishonored, no matter what comes, only cleave to the doctrine I have preached to you – the Gospel, God’s sure Word, as you know.” He reminds them, as before he has done, of that whereunto God has called them, and of what they have received through his preaching.

5. Such admonition is still, and will ever be, necessary in the Christian community. The weak must endure severe conflicts in the tribulations the Gospel inevitably entails. The trial is especially hard when they must lose their leaders and teachers, and in addition hear the shameful, bitter taunts of the calumniators. We in this day have to expect that some will be offended when teachers are assailed. We should therefore be prepared, and when any of our number fall away from our faith to flatter tyrants and the Pope, and to become liars and knaves, we must individually lay hold of the Gospel in a way to enable us to stand and say: *“Not because a certain one has so taught, do I believe. It matters not what becomes of him or what he may be, the doctrine itself is right. This I know, whatever God may permit to befall myself or others because of it.”*

THE CHRISTIAN’S CONFIDENCE MUST BE IN GOD

6. So have I personally had to do, and must still do. Otherwise I would have been terrified and enervated when I saw the Pope, and bishops, emperors, kings and all the world, opposed to the doctrine they ought to sustain. I would have been overwhelmed, thinking, *“They, too, are men and cannot all be followers of the devil.”* How could I comfort myself and stand firm unless I were able to say: *“Though ten other worlds and everything great, lofty, wise and prudent, and all my dear friends and brethren as well, should turn*

from me, the doctrine still remains true. It stands; it will not, like men, totter and fall. I will adhere to the Word of God, stand or fall what may.”

7. The Christian must be discerning enough to strip the individual of his mask – of his great pomp and majesty – and distinguish it from the Word. He who cannot so do, cannot stand under temptation; let one fall, and he will soon follow suit.

8. Such is the nature of the Church in its earthly government that human wisdom must stumble thereat; various sects of the offended must rise in opposition to the faith. But God delights to rule, not with the sword or with visible power, but through weakness and in opposition to the devil and the world. Seemingly, he would permit his Church to be utterly overthrown. Guard against and resist offenses as well as we may – and the practice is not without its efficacy – still we must ultimately be driven to say defiantly: *“He who established the Church and has to this time preserved it, will continue to protect it. Man would not rule it wisely, but the living Christ is seated upon the throne whereon God placed him, and we shall see who can pull him down and destroy his Church.”*

PAUL’S SUFFERINGS FOR THE CHURCH’S GOOD

9. When the trying hour arrives, we are able to accomplish about as little against the enemy as Paul when he lay in chains powerless to succor a soul. He was obliged to commit his cause to the Lord. At the same time, as a faithful apostle, he ceased not, though removed from his followers, to admonish and warn to the full extent of his power. Well he knew that many false apostles were ready, so sure as he said a word, to pervert it and to fill the ears of the people with their own empty words and poisonous teaching. He elsewhere complains (2 Timothy 1:15) that by the influence of this class all Asia was turned away from him. He had reference to the nearest neighbors of the Ephesians in Asia.

10. For the sake of affording his converts comfort and strength, Paul proceeds to make his sufferings and tribulations pleasing to them by speaking of these afflictions in unusual and beautiful terms. He presents a view quite opposed to the opinion of the world and the judgment of calumniators. “My sufferings and tribulations,” says Paul, “which to you and the world, viewed in a fleshy way, are most disastrous, really work you no injury nor disadvantage, notwithstanding what the pernicious babblers claim about such trials. Rather, they are beneficial to you and me. Though your enemies seek thus to injure you to the fullest extent, benefits they never foresee will accrue to us. “My sufferings are not for my own sake, but yours. They work your benefit; it is better for you as it is, than for me to be present and preach to you. And how so? Because I suffer only for the sake of the ministry, for that Gospel I delivered you. I risk my life and all I have that you may hold it fast; such is my earnest desire. I contend for and cleave to, at the risk of my life, that which Christ gave me and enjoined upon me. Thus by my chains and bands I honor and establish the Gospel, that you may be strengthened and may cleave more firmly to it.

11. “So we shall joyfully transform the tribulation imposed by the world in an attempt to inflict great evils: God will have to pronounce the sentence: ‘Hear, O world, devil, emperor, tyrant! Thou hast imprisoned my apostle Paul for the sake of my godly Christians. What injury have they done thee? what fault committed? With no wrong on their part, thou persecutest them. It is simply because I gave them my Word; therefore thou art opposing and defying me. What shall I say but that thou hast imprisoned and bound, not Paul, but me? Is it not insupportable that a perishable worm, be he emperor or prince, should presume to apprehend God in heaven? But thinkest thou I will remain silent and unprotesting? Thinkest thou I will not break chains, stocks and bands, and give command: Hold thou, devil and tyrant, and submit! Let me rule, substituting for one Paul, ten; and for one Church at Ephesus establishing thirty, yes, a hundred.’”

12. And as in Paul’s time, so today: when our enemies get hold of an evangelical preacher, either he must secretly be drowned or murdered, or he must publicly be hanged or burned. Why is it? Because of the Christians to whom he has taught his doctrine. For a while God looks on serenely. He says: *“Beloved lords, be not enraged. Know you whom you have apprehended and murdered? It is I, the Divine Majesty. It was not their own word and command but mine which these preachers taught and my Christians believed. You cannot deny the fact. I must, then, consider how to secure myself against your wrath. How shall I do it? Indeed, by way of returning your favors and kindnesses, I must so arrange that where one town had a minister and the Gospel, ten, yes twenty, towns must have their pastor and preachers. I will, O Pope and bishops, invade your own dioceses and you must tolerate and accept the Gospel, whether to your joy or your grief. If you begin to rave, I will give you cause for alarm, for you shall be overthrown, bishops, hats and all.”*

13. Note, when Paul says he suffers for the Ephesians, he means that his suffering is for their profit, to teach them they have nothing to fear in suffering. They, not he, are the subjects of concern in this matter. His pains are not merely those of Paul – upon whom not so much depends – but of an apostle or preacher of the Church of Christ. When the latter name is associated with the suffering, when it is not John or Peter who is cast into prison – that God might tolerate – but a minister of the Church, then the deed is a too gross jesting with the majesty of God; it is tempting him too far, yes apprehending him.

14. It was necessary that Paul give his converts this admonition: *“Dear children, fear not. Do not be alarmed at my arrest and intended execution. Let our enemies put forth their utmost effort. You shall see how I will rend the cords and burst the prison, humiliating them until they lie in ashes; the place of one resister of the Gospel will be filled by ten who preach it.”*

CHRIST PERSECUTED IN CHRISTIANS

Since Paul’s enemies refuse instruction and will not cease their raging, since they refuse to learn against whom they rage, he must make known to them who is the object of their

persecution. It is neither Paul nor an apostle, but he to whom it was said (Psalm 110:1), “*Sit thou at my right hand.*” It is a perilous thing to take liberties with him. He is now seated where he will brook no suffering. The enemies of the Christians must behold such things as did the Jews who delivered Paul into the Emperor’s hands, and as the Romans witnessed. Soon after Paul’s execution, Jerusalem lay in ashes, and not a great while after, the city of Rome was destroyed. For when Christ was oppressed, when in the person of his apostles and martyrs he was seized and put to death, he had no alternative but to destroy a whole city. And Germany may expect a similar fate.

NO MAN CAN MERIT ETERNAL LIFE FOR ANOTHER

15. It is unnecessary here to reply to those wicked and illiterate dolts, the Papists and Anabaptist factions, who explain Paul’s words, “my tribulations for you,” and similar passages, as teaching that one Christian can by his sufferings merit or aid in the salvation of others. Paul does not say, “My tribulations for you are designed to secure for you forgiveness of sins and salvation.” He clearly declares, as the Scriptures everywhere do, that only Christ’s sufferings are thus effective and for all men. Paul’s thought may well be expressed – and every minister may say the same – in these words: “My preaching and my suffering are for your sake.” Just as a parent may say to a child, “I must do or endure this for you.” True, works wrought and sufferings endured for another’s sake are productive of the good and comfort of that one or of many, but the worker or sufferer does not thereby merit, either for himself or another, God’s grace and eternal life. No, these things demand the offices of a being of another order – Christ. He through his sufferings exterminates your sins, and through his death gives you life. Then again, Paul is addressing those already Christians and having forgiveness of sins and all the requirements of a Christian; yet he suffers for them; that is, for their good – that in proportion as his enemies seek to oppose the Gospel, its influence may be widened and the faith of his followers strengthened.

16. In the effort to comfort and strengthen the Ephesians, Paul yet further glorifies and extols his tribulations in the words “which are your glory.” What unheard of talk is this? Is it not much rather, as reason dictates and as all the world affirms, a disgrace to his followers that he lies there in prison? What greater dishonor can Christians suffer than to have their ministers and pastors – their instructors and consolers – shamefully arrested? So it seems to the world, it is true; but I tell you, in God’s sight and in reality, this trial is a great honor to you, one of which you may proudly boast. This very disgrace and provocation you may turn squarely to your good, saying: “From the very fact of our disgrace, I know the doctrine is true and divine. For it is the lot of the Word of God and of salutary doctrine, together with the supporters of the same, to be defamed and persecuted by the world and the devil.” Such persecution is but glory and honor to Christians. Paul says in Romans 5:3, “We rejoice in our tribulations.” In other words, we regard them as glorious, beneficial, precious, blessed.

CHRISTIANS TO REJOICE IN PERSECUTIONS

17. Christians should not, and cannot, have their glory in the things the world esteems and honors; for the world will not, nor can it, honor even God and his Word. Christ's followers, then, should not be terrified at such treatment as Paul received nor feel disgraced. Let them rather rejoice, deriving comfort and glory therefrom, as did the apostles. We read (Acts 4:13) of their boldness, and (Acts 5:41) that they rejoiced in being "counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name." So it fared with Christ himself, and Christians ought to be grieved if it be otherwise with them and if the world regard them in a kindly way. In proportion as the world persecutes them and heaps upon them its malice, should they rejoice. Let them accept persecution as a good indication, regarding themselves blessed, as Christ teaches in Matthew 5:11. So much for the first part of our text; now follows the second:

PREACHING MUST BE FOLLOWED BY PRACTICE

"For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father [of our Lord Jesus Christ], from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named."

18. Having comforted his followers concerning his tribulations, Paul tells them it is his earnest petition, his longing, that God would grant them power to cleave in firm faith to the Gospel, not forsaking it or growing weary when they have to endure affronts and tribulations, but firmly resisting these. It is not enough merely to accept the Gospel, or even to preach it. Acceptance must be followed by that spiritual power which renders faith firm and manifests steadfastness in conflicts and temptations; for "the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power," as Paul says, Corinthians 4:20. There must be a motive force consisting of the inner belief of the heart and the outward proofs of faith: not mere speaking, but doing: not mere talking, but living. Conditions must be such that the Word does not simply remain on the tongue and in the ears, but becomes operative and accomplishes something. In the Old Testament dispensation, Moses preached much indeed, and the people practiced little; but here Paul desires that much be done and little said. He would not have the Gospel preached in vain, but desires that it accomplish the object of its revelation.

19. Note how Paul devotes himself to the welfare of the Christian community. He sets an example, to us ministers in particular, of how to effect the good of the people. But we do not rightly heed his example. We imagine it sufficient to hear the Gospel and be able to discourse about it; we stop at the mere knowledge of it; we never avail ourselves of the Gospel's power in the struggles of life. Unquestionably, the trouble is, we do not earnestly pray. We ought constantly to come to God with great longing, entreating him day and night to give the Word power to move men's hearts. David says (Psalm 68:33), *"Lo, he uttereth his voice, a mighty voice."*

20. Not only preachers, but all Christians, should constantly entreat the God who grants knowledge to grant also efficacy; should beseech him that the Word may not pass with

the utterance, but may manifest itself in power. The prevailing complaint at present is that much preaching obtains, but no practice; that the people are shamefully rude, cold and indolent, and less active than ever, while at the same time they enjoy the strong, clear light of revelation concerning all right and wrong in the world. Well may we pray, then, as Paul does here. He says, in effect: *“You are well supplied: the Word is richly proclaimed to you – abundantly poured out upon you. But! bend my knees to God, praying that he may add his blessing to the Word and grant you to behold his honor and praise and to be firmly established, that the Word may grow in you and yield fruit.”*

21. Feelingly does Paul speak of praying for his followers. He seems to say: *“I must lie here imprisoned, not privileged to be with you or to aid you in any way but by bending my knees – that is, entreating and imploring God earnestly and in deep humility – to the end that God may grant you, may effect in you, what neither myself nor any other human being can accomplish – what I could not do even were I free and ever present with you.”*

TRUE PRAYER CONSISTS NOT IN OUTWARD THINGS

22. Observe, the apostle alludes to his prayer by naming its outward expression – bending the knees. But the external posture, if accompanied by nothing else, is sheer hypocrisy. When prayer is genuine, possessing the fire by which it is kindled, prompted by a sincere heart which recognizes its need and likewise the blessings that are ours as proclaimed in the Word, and when faith in God’s Word – in his promise – revives, then the individual will be possessed with a fervor prompting him to fall upon his knees and pray for strength and for the power of the Spirit. When the Spirit of prayer is enkindled and burns within the heart, the body will responsively assume the proper attitude; involuntarily, eyes and hands will be upraised and knees bended. Witness the examples of Moses, David and even Christ himself. When we pray with glowing hearts, external gestures will take care of themselves. They are prompted by the Spirit, and therefore are not to be denounced. If assumed, unbidden of the Spirit, they are hypocritical; as, for instance, when one presumes outwardly to serve God and perform good works while his heart is far away. The prophet says (Isaiah 29:13), “This people draw nigh unto me, and with their mouth and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me?”

23. By the declaration, “I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul establishes the doctrine that no one should presume to speak to God, to entreat him for any favor, unless approaching, as Paul does here, in the name of “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” For Christ is our sole Mediator, and no one need expect to be heard unless he approach the Father in the name of that Mediator and confess him Lord given of God as intercessor for us and ruler of our bodies and souls. Prayer according to these conditions is approved. Strong faith, however is necessary to lay hold of the comforting Word, picturing God in our hearts as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

24. The statement that Christ is our Lord is very comforting, though we have made it terrifying by regarding Christ as a stern and angry judge, But the fact is, he is Lord for the sole purpose of securing us against harsh lords, tyrants, the devil, the world, death, sin and every sort of misfortune. We are his inheritance, and therefore he will espouse our cause, deliver us from violence and oppression of all kinds and better our condition. The name “Lord,” then, is altogether lovable and comforting to us who believe, and gives us confidence of heart. But still more comforting is it to know that our God, our Lord, is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The name “Lord” stands for the complete Godhead, who gives himself to us. Therefore, all we ask in this name must be abundantly bestowed. Naught is here for me but real help and pure grace. For God designs to have me his child in Christ, placed above all things temporal and eternal.

GOD OUR FATHER

25. Paul further declares that God is not merely a father, but the true Father, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” Earthly fathers are so called because in a flesh and blood way they have begotten us, or on account of their age and their claim to honor. It is the universal custom to apply the term “father” to an old master. In 2 Kings 5:13, for instance, the servants of Naaman called their lord “father.” Paul’s thought is: *“All fatherhood on earth is but a semblance, a shadow, a painted image, in comparison with the divine Fatherhood of God.”*

26. But reason can never see it so. And only by the Spirit’s work can the heart recognize the fact. Reason may go so far as to regard God an angry and terrible judge, one who makes the world, even hell itself, too narrow for it and leaves it without a foothold. But it is impossible for natural reason to call God a father in sincerity; much less to regard him the divine Father, preeminent over all who bear the name of “father” in heaven or on earth, of whom all other fathers are as mirror reflections.

27. Think of the attitude of an earthly father toward his child, and of the child toward his father. Even where actual parenthood is lacking, the name engenders a confidence affectionate and pleasing enough to kindle the brightest anticipations of great good to be received. Now, if the sincere, loyal designs of earthly fathers for their children are mere pretense compared to the blessed purposes of our heavenly Father, what must we look for from this heavenly Father, this Father above all others Paul would teach us to look at the proportions, and from the confidence we repose in our natural fathers estimate the character of God as a Father and what we may expect from him.

28. He who can put his trust in God, who can confidently rely upon him and sincerely cry, “Thou art my beloved Father!” need not fear to ask anything of God, or that God will at all deny him. His own heart will tell him that his petitions will be granted. Because of the strength of his confidence, he cannot fail to secure his heart’s desires. Thus God himself teaches us to break open heaven and lay him bare before our eyes that we may

see who this Father is. [Thus Paul is confident what he asks is pleasing to God and will be granted. If we did the same we would, doubtless, have a like experience. There are still people who pray. It would be a blessing if there were many more. Then the Gospel would make greater progress and impart to us greater power. It is evident, God be praised, that all who rage against the Gospel must be put to shame. The more they rage, the more the Gospel spreads, and all without our help or counsel, only because God awakens hearts to pray that it may prosper, even without our help. The more fervently we pray, the greater is God's pleasure to hear.]

29. What is the nature of the prayer Paul here presents? It is the same as the Lord's Prayer, being particularly identical with the first, second and third petitions. In words of different sound but implying the very same thing, Paul briefly embraces these petitions – the hallowing of God's name and Word in our midst, and the destruction of the devil's kingdom and all evil – whatever is opposed to the Word and will of God. He says:

GOD LAVISH IN HIS BLESSINGS

“That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power.”

30. Sublime words are these, wrung from a fervent heart. Evidently, in the effort to express himself fully, clearly and in language worthy of his subject, the apostle finds words too weak and rare. The fervor of his heart can be but poorly portrayed. By the phrase, “according to the riches of his glory,” Paul means to say: “Such is the greatness of God's glory, it deserves the title of riches. For it is conducive to God's honor and praise that he gives abundantly.” These words reveal the nature of God, proclaiming him the source whence we may expect all good, and all aid in time of need. He is God of all the world. The reason the world has made many gods, has invoked many saints, is because it looks to them for aid and benefit. The Scriptures term “gods” certain individuals who do good and lend assistance to their fellows. God says to Moses (Exodus 7:1), *“I have made thee as God [a god] to Pharaoh.”*

31. But God, because of the abundance and lavishness of his gifts, is entitled to greater honor and glory. He is the true God, to whom alone belongs all glory; yea, the riches of glory. He pours out his blessings abundantly and above measure; he is the source of all blessings in heaven and on earth. Even his most inferior creatures – water, air, the earth and its products – are so generously bestowed that we can appropriate only an infinitesimal part of them. Yet in our blindness and stupidity we do not see, yea, we utterly ignore the fact that God is the giver of these. Now, how much more generous is God in spiritual blessings! He has freely given himself – poured out himself – for us, and also gifts and blessings of the highest order. He has illumined us with a light bright enough to reveal to us the real character of the world, the devil and the angels. Yes, to show to us God's purposes, present, past and future. Thus we have all wisdom and all

power over sin, the devil and death, being lords of all creatures. In a word, our riches are inexpressibly great.

32. Paul employs forcible words to record his prayer here. He has firm confidence in God that the petition must be efficacious, must penetrate the clouds and open heaven. He does not say that God looks upon our merit and worthiness and for the sake of these grants our requests; but for the sake of the riches of his glory. We are not worthy his favors, but his glory is worthy of our recognition, and we are to honor him because he gratuitously lavishes his blessings upon us, that his name alone may be hallowed. Only with a recognition of these facts may prayer be offered if it is to avail before God. If God were to consider our merit, very small would be the portion due us. But if we are to be richly blessed, it must come about through our recognition of pure grace as the source of our gifts, and our praise of God's exceeding glory.

33. But what are the blessings for which Paul's prayer entreats? Something more than continuance of the Word with his followers, though it is a great and good gift even to have the Word thoroughly taught: he prays that the heart may taste the Word and that it may be effectual in the life. Thus the apostle contrasts a knowledge of the Word with the power of the Word. Many have the knowledge, but few the impelling and productive power that the results may be as we teach. Hence they are criticized and not without reason. But our enemies cannot censure and reproach us to greater extent than to say that we preach and accept much good doctrine to no purpose; that no one practices it and profits thereby; that in fact we are morally worse than before we heard the doctrines, and consequently it would have been better had things remained as they were.

WE SHOULD PRAY FOR THE POWER OF THE WORD

34. What answer shall we make? This: In the first place, considering our unsatisfactory condition and the lack of power with the Word, we have great reason to pray with the earnestness Paul's example teaches. And secondly, though our enemies see little improvement and few fruits of the Gospel, it is not theirs to judge. They think we ought to do nothing but work miracles – raising the dead and bordering the Christian's walk with roses, until naught but holiness obtains everywhere. This being the case, where would be the need to pray? We cannot, nor dare we, pray for what we already have, but must thank God for it. But, since Paul and other Scripture authorities command us to pray, a defect somewhere in our strength is indicated. Otherwise why say they so much about it? Thus Paul himself acknowledges the Ephesians were weak. He complains of the same weakness in other Epistles and especially in those to the Corinthians. Everywhere he urges them to do and live as they had been taught. The only reason Paul advocates this is that he saw, as we now see, that everywhere they fail, and things are not as they should be. In spite of the fact that not everyone's conduct is satisfactory, some do mend their ways; and the happy condition obtains that many consciences are assured and many former evils are now avoided. If the two sides of the question were carefully compared, we would see much advantage with us not now noticed. Again, even though we are

somewhat weak, is that any reason for saying all is lost? Further, there is naught else but filth and corruption in the ranks of our enemies, which they would gladly adorn with our weakness even. But they must look upon their way as excellent and ours as odious.

35. Let them go on with their judging. We admit we are not all strong, but it is also true that were there no weakness in our ranks, we would have no need of prayer, perseverance, exhortation and daily preaching. In condemning the Gospel because of our admitted weakness, something we ourselves confess, our enemies are themselves judged before God by their judging us. It is possible for me to be truly in the kingdom of grace and at the same time outwardly weak enough to be regarded of men as a knave. My faith is not apparent to men, but God sees it and I am myself sensible of it. You meantime erroneously judge me by my outward conduct, thus bringing judgment upon yourself. We are aware of, and also lament, our weakness and imperfection. Hence we cry and groan, and pray to God to grant us strength and power.

WORLD SEES NOT INNER MARKS OF CHRISTIANS

36. A third answer to our enemies is: We are certain that wherever the Word of God is proclaimed, the fruits of the same must exist. We have the Word of God, and therefore the Spirit of God must be with us. And where the Spirit is, faith must obtain, however weak it may be. Though visible evidence may be lacking, yet inevitably there must be some among us who daily pray, while we may not be aware of it. It is reasonably to be expected that our enemies should judge erroneously, because they look for outward evidences of Christianity, which are not forthcoming. The Word is too sublime to pass under our judgment; it is the province of the Word to judge us. The world, however, while unwilling to be judged and convicted by us, essays to judge and convict the Word of God. Here God steps in. It would be a pity for the worldly to see a godly Christian, so God blinds them and they miss his kingdom. As Isaiah says (Isaiah 26:10): "In the land of uprightness will he deal wrongfully, and will not behold the majesty of Jehovah." For this reason, few real Christians come under the observation of cavilers; the latter, in general, observe fools and fanatics, at whom they maliciously stumble and take offense. They are unworthy to behold God's honor in a godly Christian upon whom the Lord has poured out himself in fullness of blessing.

37. Let the real Christian come into the presence of the caviler, stand before his very eyes, and the caviler will not see him. Let the fault-finder hear that one leads an irreproachable life and he will say: "Heretics have behaved similarly, but under a good appearance concealed poison." Let one be refractory and reckless, and he must be a knave. Whatever we do, they are not satisfied. If we pipe, they will not dance; if we mourn, they will not lament. Neither sweet nor sour appeals to them. Wisdom must permit her self to be schooled and governed by these cavilers, as Christ says in Matthew 11:19. Thus God confounds and shames the world; while all the time tolerating its judgment of himself, he is ever careful to have the Gospel inculcated, even though the worldly burst with rage. I say these things to teach us to be careful not to join the caviler in judging presumptuously

the work and Word of God. Notwithstanding our weakness, we are yet certain the kingdom of God is in our midst so long as we have his Word and daily pray for its efficacy and for an increase of our faith, as the following words recommend:

THE SPIRIT IMPARTS REAL STRENGTH

“That ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man.”

38. The apostle here speaks with varied expression. He leaves little honor and glory, as it were, for free-will, but desires for his followers the heavenly power imparted through the Holy Spirit. There is also a power of the world, and a spirit – the devil, the prince of the world, who blinds and hardens men’s hearts. He boasts of himself and imparts to men a spirit of daring in his purpose to suppress and exterminate Christian doctrine. But while worldlings are courageous and daring, so are Christians, and the latter are greater and far more powerful through the Holy Spirit, and are undaunted by the world, the devil, death and all kinds of misfortune. This is real spiritual strength. The Hebrew word *“spirit”* *might well be rendered “bold, undaunted courage.”* Spiritual strength is not the strength of muscle and bone; it is true courage – boldness of heart. Weakness, on the contrary, is faint-heartedness, timidity, lack of courage.

39. Paul’s meaning, then, is: “I desire for you, and pray God to grant you, that bold, dauntless courage and that strong, cheerful spirit which will not be terrified by poverty, shame, sin, the devil or death, but is confident that nothing can harm us and we will never be in need.” The courage of the world – the spirit of the world – holds out only until exhaustion of the stores whereon it relies. As the saying is, “Wealth gives temporal boldness, but the soul must rely on God alone.” The boldness resulting from riches and worldly power is haughty and makes its boast in earthly things. But the soul has no hoarded treasure. In God alone it braves every evil; it has a courage and heart very different from that of the world. This is the strength for which Paul prays on behalf of his converts, a strength not inherent in flesh and blood. The possessor thereof does not rely and build on his own powers and riches, nor upon any human help and support. This strength dwells in the inner man. It is the trust of the dauntless, cheerful heart in God’s grace and assistance, and in these alone. The heart which so trusts has no fear. It possesses by faith abundance of riches and pleasures – God himself with all his blessings. At the same time, to human sight only want, weakness and terror may be apparent.

“That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

40. The Holy Spirit brings Christ into the heart and teaches it to know him. He imparts warmth and courage through faith in Christ. Paul everywhere intimates that no man should presume to approach God otherwise than through Christ, the one Mediator. Now, if Christ dwells in my heart and regulates my entire life, it matters not though my faith be weak. Christ is not mere bone but also flesh. Yes, he has blisters and boils and sins of which he is not ashamed, notwithstanding the eminent saints may hold their noses

thereat. And where he dwells all fullness is, let the individual be weak or strong as God permits.

CHRIST EMBRACED ONLY BY THE HEART

41. For Christ to dwell in the heart is simply for the heart to know him; in other words, to understand who he is and what we are to expect from him – that he is our Savior, through whom we may call God our Father and may receive the Spirit who imparts courage to brave all trials. It is thus that Christ dwells with us, in our hearts. Only so can he be embraced; for he is not an inanimate thing, but the living God. How does man lay hold of the Savior in the heart? Not by embracing him intellectually. It is accomplished only by living faith. Christ will not permit himself to be received by works, nor to be apprehended with mental vision; he will consent only to be embraced by the heart. If your faith be true and on a firm foundation, you have and feel Christ in your heart and are aware of all he thinks and does in heaven and on earth – how he rules through his Word and his Spirit, and the attitude of those who have Christ and those who have him not.

42. Paul desires Christ to be efficacious in the hearts of his followers unto the full realization of the promises of the Word – liberation from sin and death, and assurance of grace and eternal life. It is impossible for the heart having such experience to be other than firm and courageous to oppose the terrors of the devil and the world. But the heart which has not yet arrived at this point is here advised what course to take, namely, to pray God for such faith and strength, and to avail himself of the prayers of others to the same end. So much in regard to faith; now follows the mention of love.

LOVE, THE EXPRESSION OF FAITH

“That ye, being rooted and grounded in love.”

43. This is an unusual way of speaking. Is it not in faith that we are to be rooted, engrafted and grounded? Why, then, does Paul here substitute “love?” I reply: Faith, it is true, is the essential thing, but love shows whether or no faith is real and the heart confident and courageous in God. Where one has an unquestioning confidence that God is his Father, necessarily, be his faith never so weak, that faith must find expression in word and deed. He will serve his neighbor in teaching and in extending to him a helping hand. This is what Paul calls being rooted and grounded in love – having the conscious experience of possessing true faith. Love is the test that determines the reality of faith. Peter says (2 Peter 1:10), “Give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure.” That is, proceed to good works that others may see and you experience that you have true faith. Until you do, you will always be uncertain, vacillating, superficial in heart, not rooted and grounded. So by these two clauses Paul teaches, first, that we should have in our hearts genuine faith toward God; and second, that faith should find expression in loving service to one’s neighbor.

TRUE CHRISTIANS FIND CHRIST EVERYWHERE

“May be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth.”

44. These words represent another feature of the apostle’s desire for his Christians to be established and comforted in God through faith, and rooted and grounded in love toward their neighbors. *“When you are thus strengthened,”* he would say, *“and are perseveringly pressing forward, you will be able to grasp with all saints the four parts, to increase therein and to appreciate them more and more.”* Faith alone effects this apprehension. Love is not the moving force here, but it contributes by making faith manifest.

45. Some teachers would make these words reflect and measure the holy cross. But Paul does not say a word about the cross. He simply says, in effect: “That you may apprehend all things; may see the length and breadth, the height and depth, of Christ’s kingdom.” This condition obtains when my heart has reached the point where Christ cannot make the spiritual life too long or too wide for me to follow, nor high enough or deep enough to cause my fall from him or his Word; the point where I may be satisfied that wherever I go he is, and that he rules in all places, however long or broad, deep or high, the situation from either a temporal or eternal point of view. No matter how long or wide I measure, I find him everywhere. David says (Psalm 139:7-8): “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there.” Christ rules eternally. His length and breadth, his depth and height, are unlimited. If I descend into hell, my heart and my faith tell me he is there.

46. The sum of the matter is this: Depressed or exalted, circumscribed in whatsoever way, dragged hither or thither, I still find Christ. For he holds in his hands everything in heaven or on earth, and all are subject to him – angels, the devil, the world, sin, death and hell. Therefore, so long as he dwells in my heart, I have courage, wherever I go, I cannot be lost. I dwell where Christ my Lord dwells. This, however, is a situation impossible to reason. Should reason ascend a yard above the earth or descend a yard below, or be deprived of the tangible things of the present, it would have to despair. We Christians are, through Christ, better fortified. We are assured that he dwells everywhere, be it in honor or dishonor, hunger, sorrow, illness, imprisonment, death or life, blessing or affliction. It is Paul’s desire for the Ephesians that God give them grace and strength to have such heart-apprehension of his kingdom. He concludes the details of his prayer in these words:

“And to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fullness of God.”

47. He means: “I desire you, in addition to having faith and apprehending the four proportions of Christ’s kingdom, to know the love of Christ we should have – the love Christ bears toward us, and the love we owe our neighbor. This knowledge transcends all

other, even familiarity with the Gospel; for, know as much as you may, your knowledge will avail little or nothing without love.

48. Paul's desire, briefly summed up, is that the faith of Christians malt be strengthened unto efficacy, and that love may be warm and fervent, and the heart filled with the fullness of God. "Filled unto all the fullness of God" means, if we follow the Hebrew, filled with everything God's bounty supplies, full of God, adorned with his grace and the gifts of his Spirit – the Spirit who gives us steadfastness, illuminates us with his light, lives within us his life, saves us with his salvation, and with his love enkindles love in us; in short, it means having God himself and all his blessings dwelling in us in fullness and being effective to make us wholly divine – not so that we possess merely something of God, but all his fullness.

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

49. Much has been written about the way we are to become godlike. Some have constructed ladders whereby we are to ascend to heaven, and others similar things. But this is all patchwork. In this passage is designated the truest way to attain godlikeness. It is to become filled to the utmost with God, lacking in no particular; to be completely permeated with him until every word, thought and deed, the whole life in fact, be utterly godly.

50. But let none imagine such fullness can be attained in this life. We may indeed desire it and pray for it, like Paul here, but we will not find a man thus perfect. We stand, however, upon the fact that we desire such perfection and groan after it. So long as we live in the flesh, we are filled with the fullness of Adam. Hence it is necessary for us continually to pray God to replace our weakness with courage, and to put into our hearts his Spirit to fill us with grace and strength and rule and work in us absolutely. We ought all to desire this state for one another. To this end may God grant us grace. Amen.

