

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

COLOSSIANS 1:3-14.

Col. 1:3-14.

We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, having heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have toward all the saints, because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which is come unto you; even as it is also in all the world bearing fruit and increasing, as it doth in you also, since the day ye heard and knew the grace of God in truth; even as ye learned of Epaphras our beloved fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit. For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray and make request for you, that ye may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.

PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE

1. In this short epistle to the Colossians Paul treats of many things, but particularly of faith, love, patience and gratitude. Upon these topics he is remarkably eloquent, for as God himself declares in Acts 9:15, Paul is a chosen vessel, or instrument, of God his best preacher on earth. He is particularly strong in his discussion of the main principle of the Gospel, faith in Christ. And he exalts Christ supremely, in person and kingdom, making him all in all in his Church God, Lord, Master, Head and Example, and everything mentionable in goodness and divinity.

2. The apostle's first words are praise for the Colossians. He remarks upon the good report he has heard of them, how they have faith in Christ and love for all saints, and hold fast the hope of eternal life reserved for them in heaven: in other words, that they are true Christians, who have not allowed themselves to be led away from the pure Word of God

but who earnestly cling to it, proving their faith by their fruits; for they love the poor Christians, and for Christ's sake have endured much in the hope of the promised salvation. So he exalts them as model Christians, a mirror of the entire Christian life.

3. "*Hearing these things of you,*" Paul would say, "I heartily rejoice in your good beginning." Apparently he was not the one who first preached to them. In the first verse of the second chapter he speaks of his care for them and others who have not seen his face, and he also intimates here that the Colossians learned of Christ and the Gospel from Epaphras, Paul's fellow servant.

4. "And therefore I always pray for you," he writes, "that you may continue in this way; may increase and be steadfast." He is aware of the necessity for such prayer and exhortation in behalf of Christians if they are to abide firm and unchangeable in their new found faith, against the ceaseless assaults of the devil, the wickedness of the world, and the weakness of the flesh in tribulation and affliction. "*That ye may be filled,*" Paul continues, "*with the knowledge of his will.*"

5. This is his chief prayer and desire for them and if it is fulfilled there can be no lack. The words are, "*be filled*"; that is, not only hear and understand God's will, but become rich in the knowledge of it, with ever increasing fullness. "*You have begun well;*" you are promising shoots. But something more than a good beginning is required, and the knowledge of God's will is not to be exhaustively learned immediately on hearing the Word. On the contrary it must be constantly pursued and practiced as long as we live if it is ever to be rounded and perfected in us.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S WILL IMPOSES OBLIGATION

6. "*Knowing the will of God*" means more than simply knowing about God, that he created heaven and earth and gave the Law, and so on, a knowledge even the Jews and Turks possess. For doubtless to them has been revealed that knowledge of God and of his will concerning our conduct which nature the works of creation can teach. Romans 1:20. But if we fail to do God's revealed will, the knowledge of it does not benefit us. Such mere mental consciousness is a vain, empty thing; it does not fulfill God's will in us. In deed, it eventually becomes a condemnatory knowledge of our own eternal destruction. When this point has been reached, further enlightenment is necessary if man is to be saved. He must know the meaning of Christ's words in John 5:40: "This is the will of my Father, that every one that beholdeth the Son, and believeth on him, should have eternal life"; and in Matthew 18:14: "*It is not the will of your Father, that one of these should perish, which believe on me.*"

7. Since we have not done God's will according to the first revelation and must be rejected and condemned by his eternal, unendurable wrath, in his divine wisdom and mercy he has determined, or willed, to permit his only Son to take upon himself our sin and wrath; to give Christ as a sacrifice for our ransom, whereby the unendurable wrath and condemnation might be turned from us; to grant us forgiveness of sins and to send

the Holy Spirit into our hearts, thus enabling us to love God's commandments and delight in them. This determination or will he reveals through the Son, and commands him to declare it to the world. And in Matthew 3:17 he directs us to Christ as the source of all these blessings, saying: *"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him."*

SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE ENJOINED

8. Paul would gladly have a spiritual knowledge of these things increase in us until we are enriched and filled wholly assured of their truth. Sublime and glorious knowledge this, the experience of a human heart which, born in sins, boldly and confidently believes that God, in his unfathomable majesty, in his divine heart, has irrevocably purposed and wills for all men to accept and believe it that he will not impute sin, but will forgive it and be gracious, and grant eternal life, for the sake of his beloved Son.

9. This spiritual knowledge or confidence, is not so easily learned as are other things. It is not so readily apprehended as the knowledge of the law written in nature, which when duly recognized by the heart overpowers with the conviction of God's wrath. Indeed, that more than anything else hinders Christians and saints from obtaining the knowledge of God's will in Christ, for it compels heart and conscience to plead guilty in every respect and to confess having merited the wrath of God; therefore the soul naturally fears and flees from God. Then, too, the devil fans the flame of fear and sends his wicked, fiery arrows of dismay into the heart, presenting only frightful pictures and examples of God's anger, filling the heart with this kind of knowledge to the exclusion of every other thought or perception. Thus recognition of God's wrath is learned only too well, for it becomes bitterly hard for man to unlearn it, to forget it in the knowledge of Christ. Again, the wicked world eagerly contributes its share of hindrance, its bitter hatred and venomous outcry against Christians as people of the worst type, outcast, condemned enemies of God. Moreover, by its example it causes the weak to stumble. Our flesh and blood also is a drawback, being waywardly inclined, making much of its own wisdom and holiness and seeking thereby to gain honor and glory or to live in security a life of wealth, pleasure and covetousness. Hence on every side a Christian must be in severe conflict, and fight against the world and the devil, and against himself also, if he is to succeed in preserving the knowledge of God's will.

WE MUST PRAY FOR SPIRITUAL LIGHT

10. Now, since this knowledge of the Gospel is so difficult to attain and so foreign to nature, it is necessary that we pray for it with all earnestness and labor to be increasingly filled with it, and to learn well the will of God. Our own experience testifies that if it be but superficially and improperly learned, when one is overtaken by a trifling misfortune or alarmed by a slight danger or affliction, his heart is easily overwhelmed with the thunderbolts of God's wrath as he reflects: "Woe to me! God is against me and hates me." Why should this miserable "Woe!" enter the heart of a Christian upon the occasion of a little trouble? If he were filled with the knowledge of God as he should be, and as

many secure, self complacent spirits imagine themselves to be, he would not thus fear and make outcry. His agitation and his complaint, “ O Lord God! why dost thou permit me to suffer this?” are evidence that he as yet knows not God’s will, or at least has but a faint conception of it; the woe exceeds the joy. But full knowledge of God’s will brings with it a joy that far overbalances all fear and terror, ay, removes and abolishes them altogether.

11. Therefore let us learn this truth and with Paul pray for what we and all Christians supremely need full knowledge of God’s will, not a mere beginning; for we are not to imagine a beginning will suffice and to stop there as if we had comprehended it all. Everything is not accomplished in the mere planting; watering and cultivation must follow. In this case the watering and cultivating are the Word of God, and prayer against the devil, who day and night labors to suppress spiritual knowledge, to beat down the tender plants wherever he sees them springing up; and also against the world, which promotes only opposition and directs its wisdom and reason to conflicting ends. Did not God protect us and strengthen the knowledge of his will, we would soon see the devil’s power and the extent of our spiritual understanding.

12. We have a verification of this assertion in that poetical work, the book of Job. Satan appears before God, who asks (Job 1:8): “Hast thou considered my servant Job? for there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God.” And Satan answers on this wise: “Yea, thou hast surrounded him with thy protection and kept me at bay; but only withdraw thy hand and I venture I will soon bring him around to curse thee to thy face”; as he afterward did when he afflicted Job with ugly boils and in addition filled him with his fiery arrows terrifying thoughts of God. Further, Christ said to Peter and the other apostles: “*Satan asked to have you, that he might sift you as wheat: but I made supplication for thee, that thy faith fail not.*” Luke 22:31 32. In short, if God hinders him not, Satan dares to overthrow even the greatest and strongest saints.

13. Therefore, although we have become Christians and have made a beginning in the knowledge of God’s will, we ought nevertheless to walk in fear and humility, and not to be presumptuous like the soon wearied, secure spirits, who imagine they exhausted that knowledge in an instant, and know not the measure and limit of their skill. Such people are particularly pleasing to the devil, for he has them completely in his power and makes use of their teaching and example to harm others and make them likewise secure, and unmindful of his presence and of the fact that God may suffer them to be overwhelmed. Verily, there is need of earnest and diligent use of the Word of God and prayer, that Christians may not only learn to know the will of God, but also to be filled with it. Only so can the individual walk always according to God’s will and make constant progress, straining toward the goal of an ever increasing comfort and strength that shall enable him to face fears and terrors and not allow the devil, the world, and flesh and blood to hinder him.

SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE BRINGS INCREASING JOY

14. Such is the nature of this fullness of knowledge that the possessor never becomes satiated with it or tired of it, but it yields him ever increasing pleasure and joy, and he is ever more eager, more thirsty, for it. As the Scriptures declare, *“They that drink me shall yet be thirsty.”* Eccles 24, 21. For even the dear angels in heaven never become sated with fullness of knowledge, but as Peter says, they find an everlasting joy and pleasure in the ability to behold what is revealed and preached to us. Peter 1:12. Therefore, if we have not a constant hunger and thirst after the full and abundant comprehension of God’s will – and certainly we ought to have it in greater degree than the angels – until we, too, shall be able to behold it eternally in the life everlasting, then we have but a taste of that knowledge, a mere empty froth, which can neither refresh nor satisfy us, cannot comfort us nor make us better.

WHY AFFLICTIONS ARE SENT

15. To create and stimulate this hunger and thirst in us, and to bring us to the attainment of full knowledge, God kindly sends upon his Christians temptation, sorrow and affliction. These preserve them from carnal satiety and teach them to seek comfort and help. So God did also in former ages, in the time of the martyrs, when he daily suffered them to be violently seized in person and put to death by sword, fire, blood and wild beasts. In this way he truly led his people to school, where they were obliged to learn to know his will and to be able defiantly to say: *““ No, O tyrant, O world, devil and flesh, though you may injure me bodily, may beat or torment me, banish me or even take my life, you shall not deprive me of my Lord Jesus Christ – of God’s grace and mercy.”* So faith taught them and confirmed to them that such suffering was God’s purpose and immutable will concerning themselves, which, whatever attitude to wards them he might assume, he could not alter, even as he could not in the case of Christ himself. This discipline and experience of faith strengthened the martyrs and soon accustomed them to suffering, enabling them to go to their death with pleasure and joy. Whence came, even to young girls thirteen and fourteen years old, like Agnes and Agatha, the courage and confidence to stand boldly before the Roman judge, and, when led to death, to go as joyfully as to a festivity, whence unless their hearts were filled with a sub lime and steadfast faith, a positive assurance that God was not angry with them, but that all was his gracious and merciful will and for their highest salvation and bliss ?

16. Behold, what noble and enlightened, what strong and courageous, people God produced by the discipline of cross and affliction! We, in contrast, because unwilling to experience such suffering, are weak and enervated. If but a little smoke gets into our eyes, our joy and courage are gone, likewise our perception of God’s will, and we can only raise a loud lamentation and cry of woe. As I said, this is the inevitable condition of a heart to which the experience of affliction is unknown. Just so Christ’s disciples in the ship, when they saw the tempest approach and the waves beat over the vessel, quite forgot, in their trembling and terror, the divine will, although Christ was present with them. They only made anxious lamentation, yet withal cried for help: *“Save, Lord; we*

perish!” Matthew 8:25. So also in the time of the martyrs, many Christians became timid and at first denied Christ from fear of torture or of long confinement in prison.

17. It is God’s will that we, too, should learn to accustom ourselves to these things through temptation and affliction, though these be hard to bear and the heart is prone to become agitated and utter its cry of woe. We can quiet our disturbed hearts, saying: “ *I know what is God’s thought, his counsel and will, in Christ, which he will not alter: he has promised to me through his Son, and confirmed it through my baptism, that he who hears and sees the Son shall be delivered from sin and death, and live eternally.* ”

18. Now, what Paul calls being filled with the knowledge of the divine will in Christ through the faith of the Gospel, means faith in and the comfort of the forgiveness of sins, since we have not in ourselves the ability to fulfill his will in the ten commandments. This knowledge is not a passive consciousness, but a living, active conviction, which will stand before the judgment of God, contend with the devil and prevail over sin, death and life.

19. Now, the heart possessing such knowledge or faith is kindled by the Holy Spirit and acquires a love for and delight in God’s commandments. It becomes obedient to them, patient, chaste, modest, gentle, given to brotherly kindness, and honors God in confession and life. Thus it is increasingly filled with the knowledge of God’s will; it is armed and fortified on all sides to withstand and defeat the flesh and the world, the devil and hell.

“SPIRITUAL WISDOM” DEFINED

20. By way of explanation Paul adds the words, “all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” This is not the wisdom of the world. There is no necessity to strive and to endure persecution for that which concerns itself with other than spiritual matters. Nor is it the wisdom of reason, which indeed presumes to judge of divine things, but yet can never understand them; on the contrary, although it accepts them, it quickly falls away into doubt and despair.

21. “Wisdom” signifies with Paul, when he places it in apposition with “spiritual understanding,” the sublime and secret doctrine of the Gospel of Christ, which teaches us to know the will of God. And a “wise man” is a Christian, who knows himself and can intelligently interpret God’s will toward us and how we perceive his will by faith growing and obediently living in harmony with it. This wisdom is not devised of reason; it has not entered into the heart of man nor is it known to any of the princes of this world, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:8 10. But it is revealed from Heaven by the Holy Spirit to those who believe the Gospel.

22. But there is necessary to the full completion of wisdom something which the apostle calls “understanding”; that is, a careful retention of what has been received. It is possible for one having the spiritual wisdom to be overtaken by the devil through a momentary intellectual inspiration, or through anger and impatience, or even through greed and similar deceitful allurements. Therefore it is necessary here to be cautious, alert and

watchful in an effort to guard against the devil's cunning attacks and always to oppose him with his own spiritual wisdom, that he may not be undeceived. The Pauline and scriptural use of the word "understanding" signifies the ability to make good use of one's wisdom; to make it effective as a test whereby to prove all things, to judge with keen discernment whatever presents itself in the name and appearance of wisdom. Thus armed, the soul defends itself and does not in any case violate its own discretion. To furnish himself with understanding, the Christian must ever have regard to the Word of God, must put it into practice, lest the devil dazzle his mind with some palaver and error and deceive him before he is aware of it. This Satan is well able to do; indeed, he uses every art to accomplish it if a man be not on his guard and seek not counsel in God's Word. Such is the teaching of David's example, who says in Psalm 119:11: "*Thy word have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against thee.*" And again in verse 24: "*Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counselors.*"

23. A man may be familiar with God's Word, yet if he walks in self security, concerned about other matters, or if perhaps being tempted he loses sight of God's Word, it may easily come to pass that he is seduced and deceived by the secret craft and cunning of the devil; or of himself he may become bewildered, losing his wisdom and being unable to find counsel or help even in the most trivial temptations. For the devil and reason, or human wisdom, can dispute and syllogize with extraordinary subtlety in these things until one imagines to be true wisdom that which is not. A wise man soon becomes a fool; men readily err and make false steps; a Christian likewise is prone to stumble; ay, even a good teacher and prophet can easily be deceived by reason's brilliant logic. Essentially, then, Christians must take warning and study, with careful meditation, the Word of God.

24. We read of St. Martin how he would not undertake to dispute with heretics for the simple reason that he was unwilling to fall into wrangling, to rationalize with them or to attempt to defeat them by the weapon of reason, the sole means whereby they pointed and adorned all their arguments, as the world always does when opposing the Word of God. The shrewd Papists today pretend, as they think, very acutely to confirm and support all their anti Christian abominations by the name of the Church, making the idiotic claim that one must not effect nor suffer any change in the religious teaching commonly accepted by Christendom. They say we must believe the Christian Church is always guided by the Holy Spirit and therefore demands our obedience. Notice here the name of the Church, concerning which your spiritual wisdom teaches according to the article: "I believe in a holy Christian Church. But that name is distorted to confirm the lies and idolatry of the Papacy, just as is true of the name of God. So there is need of understanding, of careful, keen discernment, that wisdom be not perverted and falsified, and man be deceived with its counterfeit.

25. By close examination and comparison with God's Word, the standard and test, you may clearly prove the Papacy to be not the Church of Christ, but a sect of Satan; it is filled with open idolatry, lies and murder, which its adherents fain would defend. These things the Church of Christ does not endorse, and to tax it with resolving, appointing,

ordering and demanding obedience to that which is at variance with the Word of God, is to do the Church wrong and violence.

CHURCH NOT TO COMPROMISE WITH PAPISTS

26. The world at the present time is sagaciously discussing how to quell the controversy and strife over doctrine and faith, and how to effect a compromise between the Church and the Papacy. Let the learned, the wise, it is said, bishops, emperor and princes, arbitrate. Each side can easily yield something, and it is better to concede some things which can be construed according to individual interpretation, than that so much persecution, bloodshed, war, and terrible, endless dissension and destruction be permitted. Here is lack of understanding, for understanding proves by the Word that such patchwork is not according to God's will, but that doctrine, faith and worship must be preserved pure and unadulterated; there must be no mingling with human nonsense, human opinions or wisdom. The Scriptures give us this rule: "*We must obey God rather than men.*" Acts 5:29.

27. We must not, then, regard nor follow the counsels of human wisdom, but must keep ever before us God's will as revealed by his Word; we are to abide by that for death or life, for evil or good. If war or other calamity results complain to him who wills and commands us to teach and believe our doctrine. The calamity is not of our effecting; we have not originated it. And we are not required to prove by argument whether or no God's will is right and to be obeyed. If he wills to permit persecution and other evils to arise in consequence of our teaching, for the trial and experience of true Christians and for the punishment of the ungrateful, let them come; and if not, his hand is doubtless strong enough to defend and preserve his cause from destruction, that man may know the events to be of his ordering. And so, praise his name, he has done in our case. He has supported us against the strong desires of our adversaries. Had we yielded and obeyed them, we would have been drawn into their falsehood and destruction. And God will still support us if we deal uprightly and faithfully in these requirements, if we further and honor the Word of God, and be not unthankful nor seek things that counterfeit God's Word.

28. So much by way of explaining what Paul means by wisdom and understanding to know the will of God, and by way of teaching the necessity of having both wisdom and understanding. For not only must the doctrine where by wisdom is imparted be inculcated in Christendom, but there is also need for admonition and exhortation concerning that understanding necessary to preserve wisdom, and [or defense in strife and conflict. Were not these principles exercised and inculcated in us, we would be deceived by false wisdom and vain imaginations, and would accept their gloss and glitter for pure gold, as many in the Church have ever done.

29. The Galatians had received from Paul the wisdom of justification before God by faith in Christ alone. Nevertheless, inspite of that knowledge, they were deceived and would have lost their wisdom altogether through the claim of the false prophets that the God

given Law must be observed, had not Paul aroused their understanding at this point and brought them back from error. The Corinthians were taught by their spiritual wisdom the article of Christian liberty; they knew that sacrifices to idols are nothing. But they failed in this respect: they proceeded without understanding, and made carnal use of their liberty, contrary to wisdom and offending others. Therefore Paul had to remind them of their departure from his doctrine and wisdom.

30. The Scriptures record many instances of failure in this matter of understanding. A notable one is found in the thirteenth chapter of First Kings. A man of God from the kingdom of Judah, who had in the presence of King Jeroboam openly denounced the idolatry instituted by the king, and had confirmed his preaching and prophecy by a miracle, was commanded by God not under any circumstances to abide in the place whither he had gone to prophesy, nor to eat and drink there. He was to go straight home by another way than the route he had come. Yet on the way homeward he allowed himself to be persuaded by another prophet, one who falsely claimed to have a revelation from God, by an angel, commanding him to take the man of God to his home and give him to eat and drink. While they sat together at the table the Word of the Lord came to the inviting prophet and under its inspiration he told the other that he should not reach home alive. The latter, departing on his journey, was killed on the way by a lion, which remained standing by the body and the ass the man of God had ridden, not touching them further, until the old prophet came and found them. He brought the body home on the ass and buried it, commanding that after his own death he should be laid in the same grave. Such was God's punishment of the prophet who allowed himself to be deceived and obeyed not God's express command. However, his soul suffered not harm, as God testified by the fact the lion did not devour his body but defended it. Now, in what was the prophet lacking? Not in wisdom, for he had the Word of God. He lacked in understanding, allowing himself to be deceived when the other man declared himself a prophet whom the angel of the Lord had instructed. The man of God should have abided by the word given to him, and have said to the other: *"You may be a prophet, indeed, but God has commanded me to do this thing. Of that I am certain and I will be governed by it. I will regard no conflicting order, be it in the name of an angel or of God."*

NEITHER REASON NOR FEELINGS A RIGHT JUDGE

31. So it is often with man today, not only in doctrinal controversy but in private affairs and in official capacity. He is prone to stumble and to fail in understanding when not watchful of his purposes and motives, to see how they accord with the wisdom of God's Word. Particularly is his understanding unreliable when the devil moves him to wrath, impatience, dejection, melancholy, or when he is otherwise tempted. Often they who have been well exercised with trials become bewildered in small temptations and uncertain what course to take. Here must one be watchful and not go by his reason or his feelings, but remember God's Word or ascertain if he does not know what it is – and be guided thereby. When tempted man cannot judge aright by the dictates of reason. Therefore he ought not to follow his own natural intelligence nor to act from hasty conclusions. Let him be suspicious of all his reasoning and beware the cunning of the

devil, who seeks either to allure or to intimidate us by his specious arguments. First of all let man call upon the understanding born of his wisdom in the Gospel, what his faith, love, hope and patience counsel, in fact, what God's will eloquently teaches everywhere and in all circumstances if only one strive, labor and pray to be filled with such knowledge.

32. Paul uses the expression, "spiritual wisdom and understanding," because it represents that which makes us wise and prudent to oppose the devil and his assaults and temptations, or wiles as Paul calls them in Ephesians 6:11; which governs and guides, shepherds and leads, teaches and keeps us, and enables us to fare well spiritually in faith and a good conscience toward God and also in the temporal affairs of life when reason fails as a counselor or teacher. Paul further says: *"To walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work; and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."*

33. What is meant by "walking worthily of the Lord" we have heard in other epistles, namely to believe, and to confess the faith by doctrine and life, as people worthy of the Lord and of whom the Lord can triumphantly say: *"These are my people Christians who live and abide in what they have been taught by the Word, who know my will and obediently do and suffer for it."*

34. Our wisdom and understanding of the knowledge of God should serve to make us characters that are an honor and praise to God, in whom he may be glorified, and who live to God unto all pleasing, that is, please him in every way, according to his Word. And because of such wisdom and knowledge, we should, in our lives, in our stations and appointed work, not be unfruitful nor harmful hypocrites and unbelievers, as false Christians are, but doers of much good, useful characters to the honor of God's kingdom. All the time we are to make constant growth and progress in the knowledge of God, that we may not be seduced or driven from it by the cunning of the devil, who at all times and in all places assails Christians and strenuously seeks to effect their fall from the Word and from God's will, even as in the beginning he did with Adam and Eve in paradise.

ONLY GOD'S POWER CAN OVERCOME THE DEVIL

35. The apostle continues: "strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory." Here is preparation to sustain the conflict against the devil, the world and the flesh, and to overcome. Not our own power, nor the combined power of all mankind, can effect it. Only God's own divine, glorious power and might can overcome the devil and win honor and praise in the contest with the gates of hell. Christ in himself proved such efficacy of the divine strength when he overcame all the devil's superlative assaults.

36. By this power and might of God must we be strengthened in faith. We must strive after such divine agency and by the help of the Word persevere and pray, that there may

be not only a beginning, but a continuation and a victorious end. So shall we become ever stronger and stronger in God's might. Whatever we do, it must not be undertaken in and by our own strength. We must not boast as if we had our selves accomplished it, but must rely upon God, upon his strength and support. Certainly it is not due to our ability but to his own omnipotent agency if one remains a Christian, steadfast in the knowledge of God and not deceived nor conquered by the devil.

PATIENCE ESSENTIAL TO ENDURANCE

37. But, the writer tells us, the attainment of strength and victory calls for "all patience." We must have patience to endure the persistent persecution of the devil, the world and the flesh. Not only patience is required here, but "long suffering." The apostle makes a distinction between the two words, regarding the latter as something more heroic. It is the devil's way, when he fails to defeat by affliction and trouble, to try the heart with endurance. He makes the ordeal unbearably hard and long to patience, even apparently without end. His scheme is to accomplish by unceasing persistence what he cannot attain by the severity and multitude of his temptations; he aims to wear out one's patience and to discourage his hope of conquering. To meet these conditions there is necessary, in addition to patience, long suffering, which holds out firmly and steadfastly in suffering, with the determination: "Indeed, you cannot try me too severely or too long, even though the trial continue to the end of the world." True, knightly, Christian strength is that which in conflict and suffering is able to endure not only severe and manifold assaults of the devil, but to hold out indefinitely. More than anything else do we need to be strengthened, through prayer, with the power of God, that we may not succumb in such grievous warfare, but achieve the end.

CHRISTIANS SHOULD REJOICE AND BE THANKFUL

38. And your patience and long suffering, Paul says, must be exercised "with joy." In these severe, multiplied and long temptations you must not allow yourselves to be filled with sad and depressing thoughts. You are to be hopeful and joyous, despising the devil and the troubles and tumults of the world and himself. Rejoice because you have on your side the knowledge of the divine will in Christ, and his power and glorious might, and doubt not that his omnipotence will help you through.

39. Finally the apostle enjoins us to give thanks, or to be thankful. Forget not, he would say, the unspeakable benefits and gifts God has bestowed upon you above all men on earth. He has richly blessed you, and liberated you from the power and might of sin, death, hell and the devil, wherein you would, for all you could help yourselves, have had to remain eternally captive; he has appointed you for eternal glory, making you co heirs with the saints elected for his eternal kingdom; and he has made you partakers of all eternal, divine, heavenly blessings. In your sufferings and conflicts, remember these glories ordained for and given to you, and remembering rejoice the more and willingly fight and suffer to obtain possession, to enjoy the fruition, of what is certainly appropriated to you in the Word and in faith.

40. The writer of the epistle calls it “the inheritance of the saints in light,” or of the “light” saints, that is, the true saints. Thus he distinguishes from false saints, intimating that there are two classes of saints. To one class belong the many in the world who have only their own claim to sainthood: the Jews, for instance, with their holiness of the Law; and the world generally, the philosophers, jurists and their kind, with their self righteousness. These are not saints of light; they are saints of darkness, unclean, even defiled. In Philippians 3:8 Paul counts such righteousness loss and refuse. To this class belong also many false, hypocritical saints in the company of Christians who have the Gospel; they, too, hear the Gospel and attend upon the Holy Supper, but they remain in darkness, without the least experience of the wisdom and understanding that knows the divine will. But they who exercise themselves in these spiritual graces by faith, love and patience in temptation, and perceive the wonderful grace and blessing God imparts through the Gospel these honorably may be called the saints, destined, even appointed, to eternal light and joy in God’s kingdom. *“Who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.”*

41. Paul now expatiates on the things that call for our gratitude to God the Father. He sums up the whole teaching of the Gospel, showing us what is ours in Christ and giving a glorious and comforting description of his person and the blessing he brings. But first, he says, we ought, above all, to thank God unceasingly for the knowledge of his revealed Gospel. In it we have no small treasure. Rather, it is a possession with which all the gold, silver and other riches of this world, all the earthly joy and comfort of this life, are not to be compared. For it means redemption from eternal, irreparable loss and ruin under God’s eternal, unbearable wrath and condemnation. And this wretchedness was the result of our sin. We were committed to sin and without help, without deliverance, ay, we were captive in such blindness and darkness that we did not recognize our misery; much less could we devise and effect our escape. Now, in place of this misery, we have, without any merit on our part, any preparation, any deed or design, ay, without even a thought, assuredly received, through God’s unfathomable grace and mercy, redemption, or the forgiveness of sins.

GOD’S GRACE INCOMPREHENSIBLE

42. The measure of such graciousness and blessing no tongue can express; indeed, in this life no man can understand it. In hell the wicked shall become sensible of it by the realization of their condemnation and the never ending wrath of the eternal, divine Majesty and of all creatures. No created thing shall they be able to behold with joy, because in these ever shall be reflected the condemned one’s own unceasing, lamentable sorrow, terror and despair. Nor, on the other hand, can the creature behold the condemned with pleasure, but must abhor them; it must be an object of further terror and condemnation to the damned. However, in this life God in his unspeakable goodness has subjected the creature to vanity, as Paul says in Romans 8:20, and to the service of the wicked. Yet it serves against its will, travailing as a woman in pain, with the supreme desire to be liberated from this service of the wicked, condemned world. It must,

however, have patience in its hope of redemption, for the sake of those children of God yet to come to Christ and finally to be brought to glory; otherwise it is as hostile to sin as God himself.

43. But because an eternal, unchangeable sentence of condemnation has passed upon sin for God cannot and will not regard sin with favor, but his wrath abides upon it eternally and irrevocably redemption was not possible without a ransom of such precious worth as to atone for sin, to assume the guilt, pay the price of wrath and thus abolish sin.

44. This no creature was able to do. There was no remedy except for God's only Son to step into our distress and himself become man, to take upon himself the load of awful and eternal wrath and make his own body and blood a sacrifice for the sin. And so he did, out of his immeasurably great mercy and love towards us, giving himself up and bearing the sentence of unending wrath and death.

45. So infinitely precious to God is this sacrifice and atonement of his only beloved Son who is one with him in divinity and majesty, that God is reconciled thereby and receives into grace and forgiveness of sins all who believe in this Son. Only by believing may we enjoy the precious atonement of Christ, the forgiveness obtained for us and given us out of profound, inexpressible love. We have nothing to boast of for ourselves, but must ever joy fully thank and praise him who at such priceless cost redeemed us condemned and lost sinners.

46. The essential feature of redemption forgiveness of sins being once obtained, everything belonging to its completion immediately follows. Eternal death, the wages of sin, is abolished, and eternal righteousness and life are given; as Paul says in Romans 6:23, the grace, or gift, of God is eternal life. And now that we are reconciled to God and washed in the blood of Christ, everything in heaven and earth, as Paul again declares (Ephesians 1:10), is in turn reconciled to us. The creatures are no longer opposed, but at peace with us and friendly; they smile upon us and we have only joy and life in God and his creation.

47. Such is the doctrine of the Gospel, and so is it to be declared. It shows us sin and forgiveness, wrath and grace, death and life; how we were in darkness and how we are redeemed from it. It does not, like the Law, make us sinners, nor is its mission to teach us how to merit and earn grace. But it declares how we, condemned and under the power of sin, death and the devil, as we are, receive by faith the freely given redemption and in return show our gratitude.

48. Paul also explains who it is that has shed his blood for us. He would have us understand the priceless cost of our redemption, namely, the blood of the Son of God, who is the image of the invisible God. The apostle declares that he existed before creation, and by him were all things created, and that therefore he is true, eternal God with the Father. Hence, Paul says, the shed blood truly is God's own blood. And so the writer of this epistle clearly and mightily establishes the article of the divinity of Christ. But this requires a special and separate sermon.

