

THE PARTING COMMENDATION.

A FAREWELL SERMON

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THE following discourse is published at the earnest request of a number of the ladies of the writer's charge. He is fully sensible that this request was owing, not to any merit in the discourse, but wholly to the circumstances of peculiar interest in which it was delivered. It was prepared in much haste, and when he was unusually pressed by a multiplicity of anxieties and labors. It might therefore have been refused but for his earnest desire to leave nothing undone which might either gratify or profit that beloved flock from which he has parted with profoundest regret. That God may bless it to them, and that He may more and more abundantly bless them and theirs forever, will ever be the writer's earnest prayer.

SERMON.

Acts xx: 32. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.

The early history of the Christian church was written upon the inspired page for our learning. It was placed there, not simply for our *information* concerning the progress of events as they occurred in the establishment of the church, but that we might draw thence *lessons* for our profit. And among other lessons this important one, that the trials then occurring to the people of God were the same substantially as those which meet them now; that scenes of sorrow and separation were then visible as now; and that there were then as now sources of support and consolation and hope unknown to an ungodly world, and diverse from all that terrestrial possessions or expectations could afford. Thus we may safely say that every historic fact recorded in the sacred volume contains within its bosom a historic precept addressed to ourselves.

Looking therefore at the history of the early church as written for our learning, we may behold in the words presented in our text an inspired example

teaching us what feelings ought to possess our bosoms in the peculiar circumstances under which, in the all-wise providence of God, we are to-day placed. I look, my hearers, at Paul, that holy, earnest, affectionate preacher of the Gospel of Christ, and as I see him tearfully and prayerfully bidding adieu to those among whom he had been engaged in preaching the salvation of the cross, I would in humble imitation of that great champion of the faith, not with unmixed despondency and gloom, but with a firm confidence in the great Father of us all, and in the saving power of his word, take up and echo in your hearing these his words, "I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified."

The parting interview of Paul with the representatives of the Ephesian church was one of a most interesting and touching kind. For about the space of three years had Paul labored among the people of that city. The past was both to them and to him full of the tenderest recollections. Many of the Jews had been led by his instrumentality to cast away their incredulity, and to embrace the Gospel, while not a few of the idolatrous Gentiles had also been converted and gathered into the Ephesian church. What wonder, then, if they loved the Gospel he had brought them, that they loved its preacher also. What wonder if, remembering his evangelic works and words among them, the prospect of a final separation led them to fall upon his neck, weeping sore, and kissing him with the gushings of a genuine and irrepressible affection.

And when they turned their eyes from the past to the future, there was much before them to increase their pain at Paul's departure. The little company of Ephesian believers were still surrounded by a mass of the worshippers of Diana from whom they had nothing better to expect than open scorn and bitter persecutions. Neither were most of them so established in the faith, as that there was no longer danger of their being turned aside to worldliness or false doctrines. Paul, looking forward with more than a mere sagacity which knew the signs of the times, and speaking prophetic words under the influences of the Holy Ghost, declared that "after his departing grievous wolves should enter in among them not sparing the flock." Nay, he hesitated not to tell them that out of their own number and from among those who bare the Christian name, should dangers come. "Of your own selves," said he plainly, "shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." He foresaw clearly that not all the care and assiduity with which he had preached the pure gospel of the grace of God, and not all the careful and affectionate guardianship of the Beloved John, who was after this to spend in the same city and church the closing years of his prolonged life, could keep out from their midst pernicious errors and ungodly practices. He foresaw clearly that the inspired epistle of warning to be afterwards addressed by John to this same church in Ephesus would be unheeded, and that although they would hear God saying to them by that venerable Apostle, "I have somewhat against thee,

because thou hast left thy first love, . . . repent therefore, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and remove thy candlestick out of its place," yet there would follow no repentance, and their light should finally go out in darkness. And looking thus to the future, with a mind illuminated by God's Spirit, what unutterable grief of heart, what painful emotions must have agitated the bosom of the heroic apostle to the Gentiles. And on the other hand what wonder, as they heard from his lips these warnings of coming dangers, that they should sorrow bitterly when they heard him declare that "they should see his face no more."

Trying indeed and bitter were the circumstances of that parting scene upon the seaside at Miletus. But was there no consolation for such an hour? Was there no ray of hope or comfort to gild the future? Yes! there was an unfailing support at hand. There was even in that hour of gloom an unclouded glory in the distance. To the eye of sense all was indeed melancholy, dark, and ominous. But Paul had learned to walk by faith and not by sight. His eye of faith was able to pierce the surrounding darkness and to perceive in "God and the word of his grace," a sufficient hope, support, and consolation under every trial.

We find, then, an example in Paul, when, in the first place, *he commended his flock unto God*. For in God alone is perfect safety. We cannot repose with perfect confidence upon ourselves, for every man who is in his right mind knows painfully well that he is fallible. Our own best judgments may in the end

turn out to be but folly; our strongest resolutions be but weakness; our highest purposes be only the fore-runners of disappointment. But amidst all the changes and trials of this changing world, they who, by the teachings of the blessed Spirit have learned the way to their Heavenly Father's feet, can and ought confidently to commend each other unto God.

For, in the first place, *God is with his people every where.* They may be separated from each other, but they cannot be removed from God's immediate presence. Although continents and oceans may often be interposed between them, it is still true that God is "not far from every one of them." They may worship in different assemblies, and in distant cities, yet there is a common promise to them all, "Lo! I am with you." The same God and Saviour who is sustaining and co-operating with your Christian friend and brother in China or in India is also with you when you meet in this house and engage in his worship. The same God who by his providence protects and blesses you at your own fireside, and who orders all things so happily and wisely for yourselves in your own homes, is none the less present with your parent or your child, your brother or your friend, when he goes to spend his days at ever so distant a point, where all your cares and your love can be of no direct advantage to him. And in this omnipresence of God with all his people, there is a bond of union among them all which no earthly mutations can ever sunder. No matter where they are, or what the line of action to which duty calls them; they are still "all one in Christ Jesus."

It should also be the delight of Christians to commend each other unto God, because he is *all-wise*. We are continually apt to fall into mistakes. We are wholly unable to look into the future. Even its probabilities may be miscalculated. We are in constant danger of acting under the influence of prejudice or pride, of passion or ambition. Even when our aims are right we are in danger of attempting to accomplish them by the use of improper means. Oftentimes the things we judge to be hurtful, are the very best things, and that which we suppose to be most desirable, turns out to be the most injurious. But God sees the end from the beginning, in every imaginable case and circumstance of life. Change and chance, mistake and disappointment may befall men, but can never befall God. He knows fully and infallibly every danger that will arise, and every temptation that will beset each one among all his people. He knows the results to which it is most desirable to lead his people, and the best means by which to lead them. He judges infallibly a righteous judgment, and amidst all the seemingly entangled web of uncertainty, and contradiction, and adversity, such is his wisdom that he is able to make "all things work together for good" to them that love him.

But again, God is not only every where present to perceive, and all-wise to discern, he is also *all-powerful* to accomplish what is for the best. We are weak and helpless. We are unable to supply our own

wants. When we undertake we are often unable to accomplish. And especially in the spiritual life, defeat often follows determination, and the spiritual foes which encompass us are more than a match for any arm of flesh. But we are commanded to trust in the Lord Jehovah, because in him there is everlasting strength. He can never be disappointed, for what his wisdom plans, his power can carry out to its complete accomplishment. Whatever he sees to be good for his people, even for the lowliest and the weakest of them, he will infallibly perform. As he made the sun and moon stand still while Joshua and Israel fought against their enemies, in order to give them light, even so would he now arrest the movements of the rolling worlds sooner than allow the least among his children to suffer a real injury. Work although he may *unseen*, work although he may *apparently against* them, he will not suffer a hair to fall from their heads without a wise and benevolent reason. The very things which for the present are not joyous, but most grievous, under his management, shall in the end work out the peaceable fruits of righteousness.

With what hope, with what confidence may the children of God, then, amidst all the mutations of this changeful world commend each other unto such a God, whose power is equal to his wisdom, and whose power and wisdom working hand in hand, and controlled by infinite love, are all pledged for the protection, guidance, and eternal happiness of all who truly put their trust in Him.

But are these glorious attributes thus pledged? Has God given such explicit assurances that sinful men may confidently trust in him at all times? This was a great question with the heathen world. And it is a question which a lingering unbelief often yet starts, even in the mind of a devout believer. Hence Paul commends the Ephesian Christians, not only to God but also to "*the word of his grace.*" Some have supposed that Paul here meant the *incarnate* Word—the Lord Jesus Christ. But there is no instance in which Paul certainly employed the term in this sense, and it is far more analogous to his usual phraseology to regard him as here referring to God's word of gracious promise.

God *has* spoken, and his words are *gracious* words. He has spoken in the covenant of redemption, in which he did not more surely affirm the Redeemer's title to a future and glorious exaltation, than he did bind himself to be the Protector, the Father, the Deliverer and Guide of all who by its ample stipulations were given to the Son that through faith they might become heirs of glory. The Father has given his unalterable pledge to his well beloved Son that his people shall be the objects of his most especial care. He has bound himself to his Son to watch over their temporal comfort and safety; to confer on them all needed grace; to make them conquerors and more than conquerors over every adverse influence and all opposing enemies. What security is here for the believer!

God could not suffer the very meanest of the Redeemer's flock to suffer real injury, without inflicting injury upon his own beloved Son. He could not suffer one of those whom he has given to the Redeemer to perish, without a violation of that sure covenant, the condition of which Christ fulfilled in agony upon the cross. And when we hear the eternal Father saying of the Lamb who was to make his soul a sacrifice for sin, "Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he hath poured out his soul unto death, and he was numbered with the transgressors, and he bare the sin of many"—these words are words of precious grace to the believer, for they teach that his present welfare and his final salvation are pledged to Jesus as a part of the reward for the travail of his soul. And in commending his Ephesian brethren "to God and the word of his grace," he commended them to the sure mercies of a covenant dependent, as to their reception of its final blessings, not on external or favorable circumstances merely, nor on the motions of their own wayward and deceitful hearts alone, but dependent on its own eternal stipulations established by the sovereign and almighty grace of God.

But God's "word of grace," has been uttered not only to the Redeemer for his people, it has also come down direct and full unto themselves. We have many "*exceeding great and precious promises.*" They are all based upon the merits of the Lord Jesus: they

are all comprehended in this brief epitome, "he that believeth shall be saved." Starting from this grand promise as inclusive of them all, we can find words of grace on every page of Holy Writ. We may hear God addressing them to us in every circumstance of life, to sustain us amidst all its trials and tribulations; to encourage us in the performance of every difficult and self-denying duty; to comfort us under the bereavements and sorrows of this life. We can see them on every page pointing us beyond this world to a remaining rest; to a heavenly home; to a celestial Jerusalem; resplendent in the distance before the eye of faith. And in this word of grace, contained in the promises of the gospel, is an exceeding freeness which encourages us to commend all men to it for safety and support. It requires and expects to find no deservingness on the part of those who embrace these promises. They are suited to the downward, sinful, self-destroying tendencies of our fallen humanity; as well as to the misery and misfortunes of our ruined situation. Hence whatever anxious bodings may crowd into our minds either respecting ourselves or others, we shall do well now and evermore to commend both each other and ourselves "unto God and the word of his grace."

Our text informs us *why* we shall do well to do this. The word of grace contemplated, relied upon, and cherished in the heart, is able to produce a powerful effect on the believer. There is nothing besides God's

word of grace which is able to “*build up*” believers. This apostle felt the importance of this truth when he declared, “I am determined to know nothing among you save Christ, and him crucified.” Novelties may amuse and please. Philosophy and learning may instruct. Metaphysics and abstrusities may have their value and their place. Moral disquisitions may subserve important ends. But the word of God’s grace alone can *edify*. It is by feeding on the promises of God; it is by the contemplation of the *gracious* aspect of his revelation; it is, by viewing Jesus set forth as he is as our Covenant, Substitute, Head and Surety; it is thus and thus alone that believers are to be built up in knowledge, love, and holiness.

It is the word of grace, moreover, which *through this building up* is to give to the believer “*an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.*” And the more *grace* we apprehend in the truth and promises of God, the more clearly shall we be able to view that blessed portion with an eye of faith, and the more firmly to lay hold upon it with the grasp of faith in eager anticipations of delight. It is when, forgetful that God’s word to us is now a word of *grace*, we look back to the covenant of *works*, that we become distrustful of God. It is then that the heavenly inheritance seems placed forever beyond our reach. It is then, that in despair of something better, or else in a partial forgetfulness of what appears so distant, we are ready to grasp eagerly at the bubbles and phan-

toms of this world, and to feel dejected and forlorn if we find them to be nothing else than air and vanity.

God's word of grace not only proposes but *gives* us something better than all this world has to offer. The communion and fellowship of saints is not a dream, the idle dream of an enthusiast. It is on the contrary more than aught else on earth, real, substantial, and permanent. It is forever to increase. Is there not *reality* in that flow of gentle, heartfelt sympathy, too seldom, yet sometimes found on earth among the servants of Christ? Is there not heaven-born rapture ever experienced here when they sing together the praises of the Lamb? Is there not something of the happiness of heaven itself where hearts melt down and flow together at the throne of grace or around the memorials of our dying Lord? The Psalmist felt that even in this imperfect communion of saints, he had a goodly heritage. But what, my brethren, what is this but a poor foretaste of that rich and abundant feast which the word of grace invites us to contemplate and to possess? Here we have but glimpses, there we shall have an inheritance. Here we have but a cluster or two of the luscious fruits of the land of promise, then we shall possess Canaan itself with all its abundance.

As "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ," the people of God shall then possess "an inheritance *among all them that are sanctified.*" Blessed society! Here on earth believers are at best encompassed with

infirmities. Defects are visible in the brightest Christian characters. None of them are as yet wholly sanctified. Hence must arise imperfections, disquietudes, and interruptions in their fellowship. They are apt to misunderstand each other. They are apt to judge harshly one of another. There is oftentimes too much of a worldly spirit; too much of a selfish, uncharitable, unforgiving spirit manifested. Rarely indeed is one Christian heart laid warm against another, to beat along with it in lasting and vigorous accord. Rarely indeed is the command even approximately obeyed "to love one another with a pure heart fervently." But how different my hearers, will it be in that heavenly inheritance. There every saint will be a *perfect* saint. There the last stain of sin will be removed from the redeemed soul, and it will appear radiant in robes made white in the blood of the Lamb. There worldliness and pride, and sensuality and passion can never enter to mar the intimacy and harmony of their blest fellowship. *There*, there will be nothing to hinder the sweet and perpetual flow of the affections from each to all. There all hearts will be full of holy love, and all will beat in perfect unison of feeling for ever and for ever.

Let us now look a little farther, and we shall see the special object for which more directly Paul commended to God and the word of his grace the Christian friends from whom he was about to separate. The inheritance which that word of grace bestows

was not prepared for the saints of Ephesus alone, or for those of *any* portion of the church of Christ alone. It was an inheritance "among *all* them which are sanctified." They might remain in Ephesus to live and to die there, while Paul "bound in the Spirit" might go to Jerusalem "not knowing the things that should befall him there." But wherever they lived or died; whatever befell them living; or whensoever they left the earth, there was *one certainty* of pre-eminent importance, to which Paul would direct their thoughts. It was that all who were redeemed by the blood of Christ, and sanctified by his indwelling Spirit, however diverse their paths might seem to be, were travelling towards the very same point, and would one day share the same inheritance in glory. The hearts which bled at that separation as they accompanied Paul to the seaside at Miletus and saw his ship spread sail and glide away, have long centuries ago been healed by a re-union in the city of God above, where tears and trials are unknown. And now as we look back over the waste of eighteen centuries, how brief seems to have been their separation, and how lasting has been their subsequent companionship. And so, my hearers, could we transport ourselves forward over eighteen centuries to come, and much more could we place ourselves somewhere in the depths of that waiting and approaching *eternity*, where centuries cannot be counted, and thence look back on the changes and the trials of these passing

lives, how slight and transient would their griefs seem to be. The regret with which those parted who had been accustomed to enjoy each other's friendly greetings and Christian offices of kindness will have been long forgotten in the flight of time. Even the unutterable pang with which a surviving Christian has laid in the earth the beloved form from which the spirit had gone up to Heaven, will have been effaced by the renewal of a purer, more lasting, and more blissful companionship than was ever enjoyed on earth. In that far-off retrospect, the great question will not be, what was *agreeable*, or what was *painful* here on earth, but—was that done in our lifetime, by which God was most largely glorified—by which the kingdom of Jesus Christ was best promoted? For on this, my hearers, will depend the extent and excellence of that inheritance which each believer will possess on high forever.

You have been able, I trust, from what has been already said, to perceive why I should this day with a peculiar earnestness become an humble imitator of the great apostle to the Gentiles, in commending you unto God and the word of his grace. May he in infinite mercy grant that through it you may every one be built up, and obtain an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.

It is this day precisely four years, since, in obedience to your call, I began to labour among you as your minister. I was not wholly a stranger to the

difficulties and to the responsibilities of the charge I had assumed, and "I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling." In the sight of God, I feel most painfully this day, that all my labours have been defective and mixed with evil. Yet you have borne most kindly with my deficiencies, and co-operated when your help was needed in every good work. We all have reason to praise God for the uncommon measure of concord and fraternal love which has prevailed throughout the church within these years. But now, in the providence of God, I stand before you for the last time, as your pastor and your minister. The same call of duty which brought me hither, seems now to take me elsewhere. And in these solemn circumstances, a host of thoughts arise, which I would gladly utter. Fain would I take you each one by the hand, and give to each a personal and earnest word of serious advice. But as this is impossible, let me close as briefly as I can, with a few words of a more general nature.

My Christian hearers, I can only reiterate to you the word of exhortation which has been already so often given. In the first place let me say to you—*stand fast by the cross of Christ*. In Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." He is made of God unto us, wisdom, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. He is the source of all spiritual life. He is the Author and Finisher of our faith. Amidst all the cares and temptations, the jar-

rings and changes of this mortal state, ever, oh ever, cleave close unto a Saviour crucified and glorified for your redemption.

In the second place, let me say, permit nothing to hinder the daily maintenance of communion between God and your soul. God is the overflowing spring. Devout meditation and daily prayer are the channel through which the outpoured abundance of his mercy is to reach your soul. Suffer not your domestic anxieties or your public duties, the cares of this world or the deceitfulness of riches, ever to hinder you from maintaining your communion with your Heavenly Father. They and they only shall mount up on wings as eagles, who wait constantly on God.

In the third place, let your hearts be set on promoting the prosperity of Zion. When you look back from eternity on time, nothing among all you have done or can do here on earth will afford you so much delight in the review as the cares and toils and self-denials you shall have endured for Christ's cause and kingdom. And permit me in view of your present circumstances to say—study the things which make for peace. In all the future arrangements you may propose, and in all the future plans you may adopt, let a spirit of kindly concession and fraternal love be cherished. Above all, “*pray* for the peace of Jerusalem, for they shall prosper that love her.”

Once more, “be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

Noble men and noble women; burning and shining lights; eminent servants of God in their day and generation, have occupied these seats and worshipped in this sanctuary. Among them you can remember respected neighbors, the venerated friends of your childhood, and many of your own beloved parents. They have gone up to join the great cloud of witnesses that are now bending from on high to watch *your* progress. How many, how many such have gone within these last four years. Beloved Christian hearers, when you come to receive an inheritance among all those sanctified ones, may you not have cause to be ashamed of the dimness of your crown; of the insignificance of your reward.

To those of you who have been added to this church by a profession of faith during my ministry among you, I feel bound by a tie of peculiar strength and tenderness. Paul himself felt the power of this tie. Writing to the Thessalonian converts, he exclaims, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy." Gladly would I say many things to such, but they must all be summed up in these few words. Dear hearers, let nothing tempt you to turn back to the vain and perishing world that you have left. Remember Lot's wife. Fight the good fight of faith. *Lay hold* upon eternal life. Give no place to the devil. Keep your eye fixed upon a heavenly crown. And

above all, day by day, lean for all needed help and strength upon the grace that is in Christ your Lord. Fail not ye, *fail not ye* to be found at the last great day on the right hand of Christ your judge, that with him and all his saints you may enter into glory.

But there is yet, alas! a large and important portion of this congregation who are not comprehended in either of the classes yet addressed. My impenitent hearers, young and old, if there has been aught which might have been done to win you unto Christ and Heaven, which has been left undone, I pray you to forgive it. Yet it has been my heart's desire and prayer, that you might be saved. At early morning, and in midnight hours when you were wrapped in sleep, I have toiled to gather arguments and frame appeals which might win you to embrace the offer of salvation. We may unite this day in praising God, for the rich and undeserved blessings which he has bestowed upon those efforts. Yet many of you, oh how many! have madly rushed onward through all the barriers of prayers and sermons, and spiritual influences, and are yet found to-day travelling the road towards everlasting woe. For four years have I been made God's mouthpiece in warning you, my impenitent hearer, of the coming wrath, and in inviting you to accept of free salvation through the blood of Christ. And with what effect? There are youth among you who are rushing into worldliness, and sensuality, and some even into vice, as the horse rusheth to the battle.

There are middle-aged persons among you, who are gliding towards eternity with their hearts yet madly set upon this world, and the influence of a procrastinating spirit paralysing every effort put forth for their good. There are even aged persons among you whose silvered hairs betoken that they will soon go down into the darkness of the grave, while they are giving not the first reasonable evidence that they are striving to gain heaven. And for the fulfilment of what wise purpose of God towards such as you, O fellow sinner, have I been sent to minister these four years past? Was it that your heart, like steel, might be only hardened by the fire that should have melted it? Was it that as a vessel of God's awful wrath you might only become more thoroughly fitted to destruction? Was it only in order that, amidst the fearful scenes of the judgment-day, when God shall say to you in thunder-tones, "I have called and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand and ye regarded not, now will I mock when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind,"—was it only that I should be there summoned as a witness against you, to testify that God *did* call often and loudly to you, and that his hand *was* stretched out in rich mercy and with great long-suffering towards you?

My impenitent hearer, this is my last, my farewell entreaty with you as your pastor. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." And this is my parting and solemn declaration as the ambassador of Christ to you, "It is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—yes, *to save just such as you.*