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The Bible Student

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Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.



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CONTINUING

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If we would know how Paul felt about the gospel of the grace of God, by which he was saved, we could not do better than go to "the great thanksgiving" with which he opens the Epistle to the Ephesians. The Epistle to the Ephesians is, of course, not singular in beginning with a thanksgiving to God. That is Paul's customary method of beginning his letters. But it is, perhaps, singular in the marvellous richness and fervor of the thanksgiving with which it begins. And this is perhaps due to what we might have thought an entirely unimportant circumstance. The Apostle was accustomed to draw the theme of his thanksgiving from the special conditions and attainments of those he was addressing. But, unlike his other letters, this was addressed neither to an individual friend and fellow-worker, nor to a separate church with its special circumstances fresh in the Apostle's mind. There was in this case, therefore, no particular subject of thanksgiving, peculiar to the person or church addressed, pressing in on the Apostle's mind and requiring mention. He was thrown back on what was common

to Christians, to thank God for in behalf of his readers. And that is as much as to say he was thrown back on the great fundamental theme of the Gospel. Now Paul's fervor always rises when he is face to face with the first principles of the Gospel.

What Paul returns thanks to God for here is nothing less than the salvation in Christ.

The Trinitarian And with what magnificence of diction as well as depth of feeling and comprehensiveness of view he deals with it! The salvation in Christ involves naturally the saving action of the whole Triune God: and it is easy to make out a Trinitarian distinction in the parts of this long ascription of praise to God for His salvation. Many expositors have, therefore, so divided it. And in any event it is useful to note that there is described to us here the loving activity of God the Father in salvation (in verses 3-6),—of God the Son (in verses 7-12),—and of God the Holy Spirit (in verses 13-14). This successive adduction of the work of the persons of the Trinity in salvation would seem, however, only an inevitable incident of any full description of the process of salvation, for in it

all three Persons of the Trinity are, of course, concerned. And it is more useful to us, therefore, as an indication of the place which the doctrine of the Trinity held in the mind of the Apostle, than as a principle of division of the thanksgiving before us. They gravely err who imagine that the Trinity is only rarely or incidentally alluded to in the New Testament. On the contrary, it forms the underlying presupposition of the entire account of salvation given in the New Testament; and its elements are continually cropping out in the New Testament descriptions of the saving process. It lies in the very nature of the case, therefore, that a Trinitarian suggestion should be visible through this description of the salvation in Christ.

The principle of arrangement in the present instance would seem, however, to be what we may call chronological, rather than economical. We would seem to be following more closely the natural lines of the development of the passage, if we note that Paul traces in it the salvation in Christ for which he blesses God, consecutively, in its preparation, execution, publication and application:—in its preparation (verses 4-5), its execution (verses 6-7), its publication (verses 8-10), and its application (verses 11-16)—both to Jews (verses 11-12) and to Gentiles (verses 13-14). Thus he brings before us the whole ideal history of the salvation in Christ, from eternity to eternity,—from the eternal purpose as it formed itself in the loving heart of the Father, to the eternal consummation when all things in heaven and earth shall be summed up in Christ as under one head, and He shall be ready to restore the now perfected kingdom to the Father that God may again be all in all. So looked upon, this splendid passage

exhibits lucidly its true character as a compressed history of the kingdom of God in the world—an apostolic précis of human history conceived from the point of view of the Divine activity in the establishment and development and consummation of the kingdom.

Let us observe how the contemplation of the unrolling of this great historical process affects the Apostle's own mind and heart.

This is revealed to us in the intense fervor that informs the whole passage—which is not a measured expression of the Apostle's thanks to God, but can be literally described as an inextinguishable burst of praise. Its key-note is struck in the opening word—"Blessed!" Note the reiteration of the term: "*Blessed* be God who hath *blessed* us with every spiritual *blessing!*" It is easy to perceive where Paul's mind and heart were when he was writing down these words. When a man's lips can frame only this one word,—"*Blessing, blessing, blessing!*"—we know what is in his heart. We should not fail to observe the ingenious, and more than ingenious,—for it is the ingenuity of the heart,—correlation of the term "*blessed*" here, as applied to God, with the same term as applied to man. Paul blesses God because God has so highly blessed man: only, God blesses with *deeds* while man can bless Him only with *words*. But the thing to be especially observed is the joyful gratitude, the delighted wonder, the swelling praise that fills the Apostle's heart as he contemplates what man has received in the salvation in Christ. He thinks and speaks of it as summing up in itself every conceivable good. Blessed be God! he cries. Why? Because He hath blessed us! How? With every possible blessing! For

that is what this outburst of praise means. Every conceivable blessing, says Paul, is poured out on us in the salvation in Christ. And the form of the language shows he means this to the uttermost.

As the Apostle goes on to describe the blessings received in the salvation in Christ, it would almost seem as if his pen had run away with him. Only it is not a matter of the pen, but of the heart: it is not a question of words here, but of the feelings. But it must needs be confessed that the Apostle has so accumulated phrases at this point in the fervor of his emotions of gratitude and praise, that it is very difficult to follow him in his heaped-up epithets. He is not content to say that in the salvation in Christ, God has blessed us with "every kind of blessing." He adds two further characterisations which seem to pile Pelion on Ossa and which distress us as we unavailingly strive to rise to the height of the great argument. "Blessed be God," he cries, "who hath blessed us—in every kind of spiritual blessing,—in the heavenlies—in Christ." What are we to make of this chain of a three-fold enhancement?

No wonder the commentators are divided as to how the successive clauses are to be related to one another. When the heart speaks, there is such fulness of meaning that the analyzing understanding stands sometimes aghast at the task set it. Are we, it asks, to take these clauses in one continuous string—each qualifying the immediately preceding? Or, are we to take them as parallel to one another, each further explaining, in the light of the preceding, the one matter of the nature of the blessing adverted to? In other words, is this what Paul praises God for,—“that He has blessed us in the salvation in

Christ, with every kind of Spirit-, given blessing that is in the heavenly places in Christ:” so that he affirms that all the blessings that heaven contains are poured out on us by the Spirit,—nay, that all the blessings deposited in Christ, Christ the exalted Conqueror of sin and death, seated now in heaven, clothed with all power in heaven and earth in behalf of His people, His body, His church, are lavished on us by His Spirit sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation? Or is it rather this that the Apostle praises God for—“that He has blessed us with every possible kind of blessing that is given by the Spirit of God,—that is to say with specifically heavenly things, supernatural things, those precious heaven-born gifts which are so much greater and more to be desired than any earthly things—that is to say, rather, with Christ himself, in whom are hidden not only all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom, but of blessing as well, and who is Himself so much greater than all His gifts that in Him are summed up all and more than all that we can mean by ‘every kind of blessing?’” One or the other of these things is what Paul seems to have meant. It is hard to say which: and it is probable that expositors will always differ as to which.

It does not seem to be of much importance, to be sure, after which

fashion we analyze this great utterance of a full heart. For in either case, has

not Paul said everything that could be said, to declare the blessing that has come to men in the salvation in Christ the supremest blessing man can conceive;—nay, as “what eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, and what hath entered not into the heart of man,—what God hath prepared for them that love him?” As he per-

mits what God has prepared for them that love him to display itself before his astonished eyes, Paul is overwhelmed with a sense of the blessing it brings to sin-laden men. What wonder if we are overwhelmed with his description of what he saw! What God has prepared for them that love him! Ah! here is the key-note of the passage. It is all of God. It is not of our deserving: it is not of our doing. It is all of God. It is therefore that Paul blesses God for it all with such fervor of language. Were it of man, in any of its items, so far the voice of his praise would be stilled. And it is therefore that he simply sows his expressions of grateful praise with asseverations of the origin of all our blessings in Christ in God's gracious purpose, and with acclamations of praise to him alone for its gift. The fundamental note in all Paul's praise is the note of *solī Deo gloria*. All that comes to man in this salvation is of the grace of God alone, a grace prepared of God in eternity-past, poured out on us now in the sovereign work of the Spirit, and to abide on us to the eternities to come in accordance with His gracious purpose—all to the praise of the glory of His grace. It is for this cause, says the Apostle, that when he heard that his readers now believed in Christ, he turned his eyes in thanksgiving to God—because to believe in Christ is of God, and he that believes in Christ is in the hands of this unutterable grace. It is obviously only another way of saying that "if God be for us, there is none who can be against us." And it is this thought that moves the Apostle with the deepest emotion of praise.

B. B. W.

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A false issue never tends to a sane conclusion. Hence it is with regret

that we find a writer in an esteemed contemporary (*Biblical World*, April, 1900, p. 314,) saying—"It should not be considered strange if men prefer to receive their Christianity directly from Christ rather than at second-hand through Paul. Why is it that some people object to giving Jesus the supreme place in Christianity, and Paul a secondary place?" It would be proper to ask who are "the some people" here referred to? Perhaps the writer from whom we have quoted would find himself puzzled to answer this question. From the days of Paul to the present, no such persons can be found. There have been, and are, doubtless, those who are disposed to give themselves the precedence both of Paul and Christ; but we know of no one who either avowedly or implicitly has sought to give Paul precedence over his Master. It is, of course, very admirable for one to be jealous for the honor of Christ: still, if disastrous results are to be avoided, such jealousy ought to be according to knowledge.

It will be well for us to notice the occasion of the confusion that has led the writer, above quoted, into his misleading statement. We say the occasion, because the matter to which we shall call attention is not the cause of such confusion as his—that lies much deeper, but merely its occasion. Doubtless this is to be found in the fact that many people insist upon putting the teaching of Paul upon a perfect parity in the matter of authority with that of Christ himself. This is an offence to some. They insist that to do so is to derogate from the honor of Christ.

Now, however much we admire their jealousy for Christ, his honor,