

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HERE we have God's remedy for Abraham's failure set before us: **“And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God: walk before me, and be thou perfect.” ***

*** I would here offer a remark as to the word “perfect.” When Abraham was called upon to be “perfect,” it did not mean perfect in himself; for this he never was, and never could be. It simply, meant that he should be perfect as regards the object before his heart,- that his hopes and expectations were to be perfectly and undividedly centered in the “Almighty God.”**

In looking through the New Testament, we find the word “perfect” used in at least four distinct senses. In Matthew 5:48, we read, “Be ye therefore perfect; even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect.” Here we learn from the context that the word “perfect” refers to the principle of our walk. At verse 44, we read, “love your enemies, that ye may be the sons of your Father which is in Heaven; for he maketh the sun to rise upon the evil and the good, and sendeth rain upon the just and the unjust.” Hence to be “perfect” in the sense of Matthew 5:48 is to act on a principle of grace toward all, even toward those who are injurious and hostile. A Christian going to law, and asserting or contending for his rights, is not “perfect as his Father;” for his Father is dealing in grace, whereas he is dealing in righteousness.

The question here is not as to the right or wrong of going to law with worldly people (as to brethren, I Corinthians 6, is conclusive). All I contend for is, that a Christian so doing is acting in a character the direct opposite to that of his Father; for assuredly he is not going to law with the world. He is not now on a judgment-seat, but on a mercy-seat - a throne of grace. He showers his blessings upon those who, were He to go to law with them, should be in hell. Wherefore it is plain that a Christian, when he brings a man before the judgment-seat, is not “perfect as his Father which is in Heaven is perfect.”

At, the close of Matthew 18, we have a parable which teaches us that a man who asserts his rights is ignorant of the true character and proper effect of grace. The servant was not unrighteous in demanding what was due to him; but he was ungracious. He was totally unlike his master.

He had been forgiven ten thousand talents, and yet he could seize his fellow by the throat for a paltry hundred pence. What was the consequence? He was delivered to the tormentors. He lost the happy sense of grace, and was left to reap the bitter fruits of having asserted his right., while being himself a subject of grace. And, observe further, he was called “a wicked servant,” not because of having owed “ten thousand talents,” but because of not having forgiven the “hundred pence.” The master had ample grace to settle the former, but he had not grace to settle the latter. This parable has a solemn voice for all. Christians going to law; for although in the application of it, it is said, “so shall my heavenly Father do to you, if you from your heart, forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses,” yet is the principle of general application, that a man acting in righteousness will lose the sense of grace.

In Hebrews 9, we have another sense of the term “perfect.” Here, too, the context settles the import of the word. It is “perfect, as pertaining to the conscience.” This is a deeply important use of the term. The worshipper under the law never could have a perfect conscience, for the simplest reason possible, because he never had a perfect sacrifice. The blood of a bullock and a goat did well enough for a time, but it could not do forever, and therefore could not give a perfect conscience. Now, however, the weakest believer in Jesus is privileged to have a perfect conscience. Why? Is it because he is a better man than the worshipper under the law? Nay; but because he has gotten a better sacrifice. If Christ’s sacrifice is perfect forever, the believer’s conscience is perfect forever. The two things necessarily go together. For the Christian not to have a perfect conscience is a dishonor to the sacrifice of Christ. It is tantamount to saying that his sacrifice is only temporary, and not eternal in its effect; and what is this but to bring it down to the level of the sacrifices under the Mosaic economy. It is very needful to distinguish between perfection in the flesh and perfection as to conscience. To pretend to the former, is to exalt self, to refuse the latter, is to dishonor Christ. The babe in Christ should have a perfect conscience; whereas Paul had not, nor could have, perfect flesh. The flesh is not presented in the Word as a thing which is to be perfected, but as a thing which has been crucified. This makes a wide difference. The Christian has sin in him, but not on him. Why? Because Christ who had no sin on him, ever, had sin on him when he was nailed to the Cross.

Finally, in Philippians 3, we have two other senses of the word “perfect.” The apostle says, “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect,” and yet a little farther on he says, “Let as many as be perfect be thus minded.” The former refers to the apostle’s full and everlasting conformity to Christ in glory. The latter refers to our having Christ as the all-engrossing object before the heart’s affections.

This is a most comprehensive verse. It is very evident that Abraham had not been walking before the Almighty God when he adopted Sarah’s expedient in reference to Hagar. It is faith alone that can enable a man to walk up and down before an Almighty One. Unbelief will ever be thrusting in something of self, something of circumstances, second causes, and the like, and thus the soul is robbed of the joy and peace, the calm elevation, and holy independence, which flow from leaning upon the arm of One who can do everything.

I believe we deeply need to ponder this.

God is not such an abiding reality to our souls as He ought to be, or as He would be, were we walking in more simple faith and dependence.

“Walk before me.” This is true power. To walk thus, implies our having nothing whatever before our hearts save God himself. If I am founding my expectation upon men and things, I am not walking before God, but before men and things.

It is of the utmost importance to ascertain who or what I have before me as an object.

- To what am I looking?
- On whom or what am I leaning, at this moment?
- Does God entirely fill my future?
- Have men or circumstances aught to do therein?
- Is there any space allotted to the creature?

The only way in which to get above the world is to walk by faith, because faith so completely fills the scene with God, that there is no room for the creature,- no room for the world.

If God fills up my entire range of vision, I can see nothing else; and then I am able to say with the Psalmist, **“My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation: he is my defense, I shall not be moved.”** (Psalm 42:5, 6).

This word **“only”** is deeply searching. Nature cannot say this. Not that it will, save when under the direct influence of a daring and blasphemous skepticism, formally shut out God altogether; but it, assuredly, cannot say, **“He only.”**

Now, it is well to see that, as in the matter of salvation, so in all the details of actual life, from day to day, God will not share his glory with the creature. From first to last, it must be **“he only;”** and this, too, in reality. It will not do to have the language of dependence upon God on our lips, while our hearts are really leaning on some creature resource. God will make all this fully manifest; he will test the heart; he will put faith into the furnace.

“Walk before me, and be thou perfect.”

Thus it is we reach the proper point When the soul is enabled, by grace, to get rid of all its fondly-cherished creature expectations, then, and only then, it is prepared to let God act; and when he acts all must be well. He will not leave anything undone He will perfectly settle everything on behalf of those who simply put their trust in him. When unerring wisdom, omnipotent power, and infinite love combine, the confiding heart may enjoy unruffled repose.

Unless we can find some circumstance too big or too little for **“the Almighty God,”** we have no proper base on which to found a single anxious thought. This is an amazing truth, and one eminently calculated to put all who believe it into the blessed position in which we find Abraham in this chapter.

When God had, in effect, said to him, “*Leave all to me* and I will settle it for you, beyond your utmost desires and expectations; the seed and the inheritance, and everything pertaining thereto, will be fully and everlastingly settled, according to the covenant of the Almighty God,” - then - **“Abram fell on his face.”**

Truly blessed attitude! the only proper one for a thoroughly empty, feeble, and unprofitable sinner to occupy in the presence of the living God, the Creator of Heaven and earth, the possessor of all things, **“the Almighty God.”**

“And God talked with him.”

It is when man is in the dust that God can talk to him in grace.

Abraham’s posture here is the beautiful expression of heart prostration, in the presence of God, in the sense of utter weakness and nothingness. And this, be it observed, is the sure precursor of God’s revelation of himself.

It is when the creature is laid low that God can show Himself in the unclouded effulgence of what He is. He will not give his glory to another. He can reveal himself, and allow man to worship in view of that revelation; but until the sinner takes his proper place, there can be no unfolding of the divine character.

How different is Abraham’s attitude in this and the preceding chapter!

- There, he had nature before him; here he has the Almighty God.
- There, he was an actor, here, he is a worshipper.
- There, he was betaking himself to his own and Sarah’s contrivance; here, he leaves himself and his circumstances, his present and his future, in God’s hands, and allows him to act in him, for him, and through him.

Hence, God can say, **“I will make” - “I will establish” - “I will give” - “I will bless.”**

In a word, it is all God and his actings; and this is real rest for the poor heart that has learnt anything of itself.

The Covenant of circumcision is now introduced.

Every member of the household of faith must bear in his body the seal of that covenant.

There must be no exception. **“He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: und my covenant shall be in your flesh, for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man-child, whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people: he hath broken my covenant.”**

We are taught in Romans 4, that circumcision was **“a seal of the righteousness of faith.”**

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him as righteousness.”

Being thus counted righteous, God set his **“seal”** upon him.

The seal with which the believer is now sealed is not a mark in the flesh, but **“that Holy Spirit of promise, whereby he is sealed unto the day of redemption.”**

This is founded upon his everlasting connection with Christ, and his perfect identification with him, in death and resurrection; as we read, in Colossians, **“And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power. In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ; buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him, through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.”**

This is a most glorious passage, unfolding to us the true idea of what circumcision was meant to typify.

Every believer belongs to **“the circumcision”** in virtue of his living association with him who, by his Cross, has forever abolished everything that stood in the way of his church’s perfect justification. There was not a speck of sin on the conscience, nor a principle of sin in the nature of his people, for which Christ was not judged on the Cross; and they are now looked upon as having died with Christ, lain in the grave with Christ, been raised with Christ, perfectly accepted in him,- their sins, their iniquities, their transgressions, their enmity, their uncircumcision, having been entirely put away by the Cross.

The sentence of death has been written on the flesh; but the believer is in possession of a new life, in union with his risen Head in glory.

The apostle in the above passage teaches that the Church was quickened out of the grave of Christ; and moreover, that the forgiveness of all her trespasses is as complete, and as entirely the work of God, as was the raising of Christ from the dead; and this latter we know, was the result of **“God’s mighty power,”** or as it may be paraphrased, **“according to the energy of the might of his power”** (Ephesians 1:19),- a truly wonderful expression, calculated to set forth the magnitude and glory of redemption, as well as the solid basis on which it rests.

What rest - perfect rest - for the heart and conscience is here!

What full relief for the burdened spirit!

All our sins buried in the grave of Christ,- not one - even the smallest - left out! God did this for us! All that his searching eye could detect in us, he laid on the head of Christ when he hung upon the Cross! He judged him there and then, instead of judging us, in hell forever! Precious fruit, this, of the admirable, the profound, the eternal counsels of redeeming love! And we are

“**sealed,**” not with a certain mark cut in our flesh, but with the Holy Ghost.

The entire household of faith is sealed thus.

Such is the dignity, the value, the changeless efficacy of the Blood of Christ, that the Holy Ghost - the Third Person of the eternal Trinity - can take up his abode in all those who have put their trust therein.

And now, what remains for those who know these things, save to “**be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.**”

Thus may it be, O Lord, through the grace of thy Holy Spirit!

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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