

Ephesians

An encyclical letter from the heart of CHRIST
through the heart of Paul to the heart of the Church of all time

by

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Moody Colportage #258

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CHAPTER FOUR

"AND YOU"

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, we followed the apostle's eye as he looked in three directions in the spirit of revelation. We followed him first as he looked into the limitless future, and saw all things gathered together in CHRIST. We then looked with him back into the equally limitless past, and saw GOD exercising gracious and sovereign choices **"according to the good pleasure of his will."** And then finally we followed his gaze as he looked upward and saw CHRIST enthroned in the highest heavens.

Let us dwell again briefly on that upward look, for it is the background to what follows in the section which we are to consider now. What is it that he sees? A Man. A Man who has been wounded and is crowned; who was dead but is alive; who was crucified but is glorified. The supreme exaltation of CHRIST. Notice again the language which he employs in defining that exalted state:

"Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come."

It seems evident from a comparison of this with other passages that he is speaking of a superterrestrial sphere; that he conceives of the heavenly intelligences, the inhabitants of the celestial regions - regions of illimitable space, as being organized under forms of government; authorities, powers, lordships; and all of these celestial orders and authorities as being under the rule and sway and headship of CHRIST.

In using these forms of speech, was he accommodating himself to the thought and ideas of his day, or was he endorsing these ideas? If the conceptions were radically wrong, why did he not refute them? Why should he beat the air by insisting that CHRIST is exalted above celestial beings who are the figments of the imagination of men? But what was it that led the Apostle's thought out in this direction?

This Epistle and the letter to the church at Colosse were written at the same time, and sent by the same messenger. The language in the two epistles is in some instances identical, but the letter to

the Colossians was written with a doctrinal purpose: it was a polemic. As we noticed in a previous chapter it emphasized the all-ness of CHRIST. What was the heresy which Paul was seeking to counteract by this insistence and this emphasis?

The Colossian church seems to have been threatened with, or to have been under the spell of, some form of Gnosticism. The Gnostics assumed a superior wisdom, and occupied themselves with philosophical inquiries, chiefly as to the nature of evil and the mystery of creation. One phase of this system of philosophic thought proceeded upon the hypothesis that matter was essentially evil.

Therefore GOD could not have created the material world. They developed therefore the idea of emanations proceeding from the Divine Being in a successively downward scale, sinking lower and lower as they were further removed from their source. These emanations were described by such terms as those which the Apostle employs in the Epistle. The orders were ranked in a descending scale, in three groups of three, thus:

Seraphim
Cherubim
Thrones

Dominions
Virtues
Powers

Principalities
Archangels
Angels

And this hierarchy of heavenly beings called for recognition and reverence; and offered mediation - a graded hierarchy of intermediate semi-deities who were supposed to mediate between GOD and man progressively. If this form of heresy was in the apostle's mind, we can understand why he insists upon the supreme exaltation of CHRIST above all conceivable heavenly rivals. He does not deny the existence of a heavenly hierarchy; he implies rather that orders of heavenly beings do indeed exist, and also ranks of authority. But what he announces in the spirit of revelation is that CHRIST is supremely enthroned above them all.

He declares in the Epistle to the Colossians even more than this. He tells us that all dominions, and principalities and powers were created by Him (Colossians 1:16). He is therefore superior to them by right of creation as well as in virtue of that mighty power by which GOD raised Him from the dead.

But what practical connection was there between this excess of glory, this plenitude of power, and these little groups of people in Roman Asia who had recently emerged from paganism, and were just beginning to apprehend the meaning of the Gospel? The first two words of the second chapter state this with an almost startling abruptness, **and you**. The King James Version adds the words "**hath he quickened**." These three words have been injected into the text.

The apostle Paul's grammatical construction is sometimes difficult to follow. His thoughts follow one another with such velocity that he cannot finish his sentences. The translators have accordingly gone forward into the fifth verse for the verb. But may it not be that we should go back, rather than on, to catch the thought?

He raised Him - and you.
He set Him at his own right hand - and you.
He is in heavenly places - and you.
He is exalted above all conceivable rivals - and you.

You. How wonderful!

Centuries and millenniums had passed, and GOD had seemed to be indifferent to the Gentile world. The privileges of Israel had been prostituted in selfishness; and the world was without hope and without GOD; and suddenly there appears upon the scene a flaming torch, a heavenly herald, proclaiming what the apostle speaks of as "**the gospel of your salvation.**"

These little congregations of saints scattered over the province of Roman Asia are asked to believe that they were marked off from eternity as objects of divine mercy; and that privileges angels might covet are already theirs.

They have been caught up in a covenant of grace. It is not an argument; it is not a philosophy; it is an Announcement.

"You... were dead"

Observe the tense. He is speaking not of a sentence which hangs over them, nor of a state which awaited them, but of a condition which had characterized them. Death has been epitomized as the "sacrament of sin." It confronts us from the first moment of our entrance into the world. It involves our entire being. Although a natural phenomenon, it has a moral basis; and so the sentence continues: "**in trespasses and sins.**" (See *Hebrews* (Moody Press) by the same author. In Chapter 15 of that book this thought is enlarged upon).

"Wherein in time past ye walked"

This is a favorite figure of speech with the apostle Paul. He uses it about thirty times in his epistles. You may often tell a good deal about a man's character by his bearing, by the way he holds himself, by his carriage, by the movements of his limbs. The symbolism is very apt. It implies not only the bearing of the body but an aim and an end; a purpose and a goal; a direction and a destination. (See Psalm 1:1.)

"According to the course of this world"

That is an untranslatable expression. It is literally "the age of this world." But we are assisted in understanding it by the amplifying phrases which follow it: "**the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.**"

It will be observed that whether he is speaking in this Epistle about CHRIST or about men, about evil influences or good influences, the writer's thought is superterrestrial; and what he is declaring here is that the course of this world is being intelligently directed by superterrestrial powers.

What is the course of this world? What is the superterrestrial power? What is the spirit of whom he speaks attempting to do? What is his objective? It may help us to answer these questions if we remember that Satan always counterfeits the operations of GOD, and of the Spirit of GOD. What then is the Spirit of GOD seeking to do in man? He is seeking to produce characteristics, to bring about conformity to an ideal - a conformity of transformation.

Satan also has patterns and molds; and there are certain characteristics which he is seeking to develop in the man of the world.

How does the Spirit of GOD carry out His purpose? By illuminating the mind. How does Satan carry out his purpose? By darkening the understanding and blinding the eyes.

There is no doubt that, directly or indirectly, Satan has access to human hearts.

"Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others."

What a confession, what a concession, for a Pharisee! We must remember that the word "**lust**" in its basic sense did not mean a sinful desire: it just meant "*desire*." He says that Jews and Gentiles alike were just natural men, doing the things and thinking the thoughts which their fallen natures disposed them to do and to think. And our fallen natures lead us away from GOD; and thus we become children of wrath.

"But God."

It is the connection in which they stand that make these two words so amazing. He has just said that we are "**children of wrath**," and that wrath is the wrath of GOD. But mercy rejoices against judgment, and GOD is "**rich**" in mercy and "**great**" in love. And the death of CHRIST has liberated the mercy without compromising with the sin.

And observe that the words which follow are the rounding out of the thought with which the first chapter closes, and the second chapter begins. GOD raised CHRIST from the dead; He exalted Him above all principalities and powers; He put all things under His feet. "**And you**." But how?

This wonder of identification he declares as the work of GOD, who, "**when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (By grace ye are saved)**"; and not only so, but "**raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus**."

And then the Apostle takes a long look into the illimitable future; into those "**ages**" which are in GOD's secret counsels, and in which He is to display the "**exceeding riches of his grace**" in ways as yet unrevealed.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."

"**Not of works.**" Let us see if we can discern the spiritual significance of the deprecation of works as a means of securing the favor of GOD. The very first disclosure which the Scriptures give us of GOD is of a GOD who is at work. And when GOD had finished the work of creation, He rested. It was not the rest of indolence, however, but the rest of complacency. But His rest was soon disturbed by human sin, and He began the work of redemption. Now as soon as man becomes conscious of sin, in any deep and serious way, one of his natural dispositions is to seek to adjust himself to GOD by giving himself to some form of work. It may be the work of penance, or the work of charity, or the work of prayer; but instinctively man seems to realize that to please GOD, to be like GOD, he must be at work. The instinct may be a true one.

Now GOD has engaged in two kinds of work: the work of His hands and the work of His heart. Sometimes man seeks to adjust himself to GOD, and to satisfy his own conscience, by the works of his hands; but he finds that the need of his soul goes deeper than that. Sometimes man seeks his recovery by the works of his heart, by self-improvement; but the heart is sinful and it cannot be done. It must be the work of GOD. "**Not of works,**" and yet in order to work.

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

When we think behind those words, what deep mysteries are involved!

We cannot approach the subject of good works without being at once confronted with the enigma of evil and the problem of pain; for good works would be denuded of nearly all their spiritual quality were the universe purged of suffering and of sin.

This is territory that we must tread with reverent feet: there are divine dispositions that could never find their free and full expression but for the challenge of distress. Grace has been defined as "stooping love"; but how can love stoop unless there be that which has fallen and is waiting to be raised? And the fullest love can only manifest itself in the presence of the deepest need.

Thus in the economy of grace, suffering has been the challenge to sympathy; tears have been allowed to flow that love might dry them; degradation and loathsomeness have called out the compassions of GOD in the hearts of the saints; the exceeding sinfulness of sin has made possible the exceeding riches of His grace. And all of this, in the sovereign purpose of GOD, has been both the matrix and the pattern of those good works which GOD eternally ordained.

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