

FIRSTBORN SONS

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“Shimri the chief; for though he was not the firstborn, yet his father made him chief. “—(I Chron. xxvi, 10).

The section of Scripture a sentence of which has been before quoted is another passage which demands the fullest consideration. It reads thus:

“Follow after peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord: looking carefully lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby the many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person as Esau, who for one mess of meat sold his own birthright.

For ye know that even when he afterward desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected (for he found no place of repentance), though he sought it diligently with tears.

For ye are not come unto a mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, and unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard entreated that no word more should be spoken unto them: for they could not endure that which was enjoined, If even a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned; and so fearful was the appearance, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake: but ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels, the general assembly, and to the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better than that of Abel. See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not, when they refused him that warned them on earth, much more shall not we escape, who turn away from him that warneth from heaven: whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more will I make to tremble not the earth only, but also the heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been made, that those things which are not shaken may remain. Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God with reverence and awe: for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:14-29).

It is very plain that this portion of God's word has no reference to the unsaved. Months before they reached Sinai, Israel had experienced the redeeming power of the blood of atonement, and were freed from the authority of the destroying angel in Egypt. They had also left Egypt forever as their sphere of life, and the Red Sea was rolling between them and its scenes of bondage or of pleasure. They are thus a picture of us

who have accepted the eternal deliverance from wrath through the precious blood of Christ, and who have thereupon been cut off from the life of heart-association with the world by the power of the love of Him Whose death on the cross at the hands of the world implies our death with Him to that world. This union with Him is set forth in our immersion in the waters of baptism in His name; and Israel crossing the Sea is declared in the New Testament (I Cor., x, 1), to be an old-time parallel to our baptism.

Thus redeemed, and thus separated to a walk of faith in God, Israel presently drew near to Mount Sinai, there to gain a fuller knowledge of the great Jehovah, the God with Whom they had to do. But how terrible was the aspect in which they there met Him! With what dreadful accompaniments did he present Himself! The exhibition was indeed suited to their condition, for their first need was to know that their God was infinitely greater and grander than all the gods of Egypt or the other nations, so that the dread of these latter might be broken from off their hearts.

They stand, then, beneath the mountain, which towers above them some 7,000 or more feet, and gaze with terror at its cloud-capped, lightning-lit, earthquake-rent summit; and even Moses, the friend of God, says "I exceedingly fear and quake."

But how different is the prospect at which we are called to look. From our present place as pilgrims in a world that affords our hearts naught by which we can profit, we are brought to gaze up to a height of privilege and glory which is as entrancing and encouraging as Sinai seemed to Israel to be forbidding.

"Ye *have come*," says the Scripture: it is a perfect tense that is used. As Israel had come to Sinai, so we "have drawn near" to these higher, because heavenly and eternal, glories. Let us then closely inspect what is spread before and above us.

1. "Ye have come unto the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better than that of Abel."

"Abel's blood for vengeance
Pleaded to the skies;
But the blood of Jesus
For our pardon cries."

No matter what is the privilege now known, or hereafter to be gained, all our standing and hope is based upon the atonement of Calvary. Had not the blood of Jesus put away our sin we had been destroyed in Egypt, and had never drawn near to God, nor had any prospect whatever to which to aspire. And if that same blood does not keep us clean, then will continuous communion be impossible; "but if we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we (God and the saint) have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us (keeps us perpetually and wholly clean) from all sin" (I John i, 7). And to all eternity, and in whatever height of glory we may reign on

Mount Zion, we shall still discover our security to stand in that eternal redemption.

“I stand upon His merit:
I know no other stand,
Not e’en where glory dwelleth
In Immanuel’s land.”

2. “Ye have come unto Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.” This theme is a chief part of the burden of the epistle. The Hebrew believers, cast out of the synagogue, unwelcome at the temple, deprived therefore of the sacrifices and priesthood, seemed to have lost all that made life great and safe for the Israelite. To comfort their heart they are instructed that there are heavenly realities of which Israel’s earthly privileges were but shadows. The covenant made at Sinai gives place to the new covenant of which God had spoken through Jeremiah (xxxix, 31). This covenant has eternal force, being assured by a sacrifice which has eternal value; it carries promises which are far, far better than any limited to the earth could ever be; and it is guaranteed and administered by a Priest Who is none less than God’s Son incarnate and glorified, and whose office does not pass from Himself to another, seeing that He ever liveth in the power of an indissoluble life (Heb. vii, 16).

Thus those who have come unto Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant gain heavenly and eternal privileges; and these they receive for the sake of what He is to God, and not out of regard to any merit of their own; even as God wrought for Israel in Egypt not because of ought that He saw in them, but because of His own unmerited love, and because of His covenant with their fathers, the heads of their family (Deut. vii, 7, 8). Christ is the Head of all the redeemed family of God, the Surety of this better covenant, in which all now share who accept Him as their sacrifice and mediator.

3. Ye have come unto “the spirits of just men made perfect.” We understand this to mean that we have come unto a point of privilege entitling us to anticipate a share in the first resurrection of the just. Man as described in Scripture is a being composed of spirit and soul and body (Gen. ii, 7; I Thess. v, 23, etc). He is therefore not perfect except as his “spirit and soul and body be preserved entire.” Hence the disembodied (unclothed) state the apostle did not desire (II Cor. v, 4), but longed to be “clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven.” Immediately before our chapter (Heb. xi, 40) we have been told that the saints of older days cannot be “made perfect” apart from us of this age, and this in spite of their heavenly attitude (vv. 9-16) and their noble faithfulness and sufferings. All things wait for their perfecting the manifestation of the sons of God (Rom. viii, 19). But when clothed in bodies immortal and mighty and glorious, then the saints will be perfect in the highest and most absolute sense, and this will be at the resurrection and rapture, when called to our Lord’s presence, and in His kingdom for ever. Personality in man attaches to the soul, not to the spirit: “*man* became a living *soul*” (Gen. ii, 7). It is therefore the *spirit* that returns at death to God who gave it (Eccl. xii, 7; Luke xxiii, 46; Ac. vii, 59); but the person, the soul, goes to paradise, the

restful part of Hades, the world of the dead in “the lower parts of the earth”—Thither our Lord and the thief went at death (Lk xxiii, 43; Ac. ii, 27; Eph. iv, 9, 10); there David still was later than the ascension of Christ (Ac. ii, 34). The just therefore are not yet made perfect, nor can be till resurrection. It is a prospect to which we aspire; just as Israel did not reach the summit of Sinai, but gazed up at it.

4. Therefore the next honour named is that we have come unto “God the Judge of all.” From the preceding clauses it will be seen that the force of the words “ye have come” is that we have come to *participate* in the privileges stated, and not merely to view them. Even thus it was open to Israel to share in the benefits of the sacrifices offered at Sinai, and in the advantages of the covenant there enacted. Keeping therefore to this sense, and thus interpreting the clauses with uniformity, the present words will not mean that we have drawn near to God to be judged, but rather to share with Him the honour of the office indicated by the title. As the Judge of all we shall not meet God, for Christ Himself declared this in the plain and memorable words, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth him that sent me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgement, but hath passed out of death into life.” (John v, 24). And as regards the appearing of the saints before the judgment seat of Christ (II Cor. v, 10), that is indeed a solemn prospect to be ceaselessly reckoned upon, but it is not the matter here in question. The saints are to judge the world and even angels (I Cor. vi, 2, 3). The apostles are assured of this office in relation to Israel as a nation (Luke xxii, 28-30). The same thought is suggested by the promise of sitting upon the throne with Christ, the Judge (Rev. iii, 21); that is, by the dignity of kingship being conferred, for of old the king was the chief judge of his people; and by such a promise as that to the saints who overcome that they shall rule the nations (Rev. ii, 27).

In the administration of His mighty kingdom, and in the adjusting and rewarding of the affairs of the ages of human and angelic history, the glorified saints will be associated with the King of glory. Doubtless a large part of our training on earth is directed by our Father to capacitating us for such responsible and honourable office. If then a self-willed child refuses and nullifies the training, how shall he be found fit for the high but delicate position that he might have gained?

5. Being thus included in the company of the “kings and priests” of the future, we have come unto the “church of the firstborn (ones) who are enrolled in heaven.” The law of primogeniture is divinely recognized in both the sphere of the family and in that of the nations, and also in the heavenly regions as well as the earthly. God commanded to Israel that the firstborn son should inherit twice as much of the father’s estate as any other child (Deut. xxi, 17). To this son fell also the right of control in the family, subject to the father; and also, in the older eras at least, the first-born son acted as the family priest. An interesting instance is found in the excuse that David told Jonathan to offer to Saul for David’s intended absence from the king’s table on a festival day, when specially the royal household should have gathered. Jonathan thus expressed himself; “David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem: and he said, Let me go, I pray thee; for

our family hath a sacrifice in the city; and my brother he hath commanded me to be there: and now, if I have found favour in thine eyes, let me get away I pray thee, and see my brethren. Therefore he is not come unto the king's table (I Sam. xx, 28, 29).

Thus on a day of family sacrifice the brother ("my brother"; necessarily suggesting one whom the younger must obey, that is, the then eldest son) is seen both acting as priest and "commanding" the attendance of the rest of the family. And how obligatory obedience was is suggested by it being taken for granted by both David and Jonathan that non-attendance upon the king himself would be, or should be, condoned on such an occasion. This honour is evidently the initial reason for the kingship descending as a rule to the eldest son of a monarch. The honouring of the eldest son is, indeed, founded in nature, and is further enforced by divine sanction. It is still largely acknowledged in the east, as in the case of a young lawyer in Egypt remarking to the writer that his eldest brother had just taken off a book, for, said my friend, he thinks that because he is the eldest he can do as he likes with our things.

In this we may see the explanation of Pharaoh's prompt and dogged resistance to God's call that he should free Israel. Egypt was then the chief of the nations in wisdom, wealth, power, and glory. To the proud sovereign of this haughty people a message comes from a God who claims to be the Lord of heaven and earth, the eternal one, Jehovah. The Egyptians though by that time worshipping many gods, still owned that above all there was the great original Deity. From this overlord of heaven and earth the mandate comes to Pharaoh, "Israel is my son, my *first-born*" (Ex. iv, 22). No wonder if the monarch starts at the words. To him they mean nothing less than that Egypt's supremacy among the nations is to pass to this race of miserable slaves. Greater humiliation could nor be: it was worse than the national foe, the Hittites, wresting this glory from him in fair fight: and the foolish king will dare anything rather than consent.

This word of God remains in force. Israel is still God's firstborn among the peoples of the earth, and must, as we have seen, "possess the gate of his enemies" (Gen. xxii, 17), "and the nation and kingdom that will not serve Israel shall perish" (Isa. lx, 12). Referring to that coming period when this shall be fulfilled, and speaking of Israel's King, "David My Servant," Jehovah has said "I will make him first-born, the most High to the kings of the earth" (Psalm 89, 27. *Variorum Bible*).

Thus our thought enlarges from the family to the state, and must now expand to the entire universe as the whole realm of God's kingdom. Amongst all the various orders of beings that God will have to His praise in eternal ages, one company is to be to the rest what the first-born has been shown to be. This company is the church of God: "ye have come unto," ye have membership in 'the church (*ecclesia*, the selected, the called Out) of the first-born ones [The noun is plural, and cannot refer to Christ personally, as I, further shown by the plural verb following, "who *are* enrolled], who are enrolled in heaven." These will have a double share of the Father's inheritance, that is the glory of the spacious and magnificent heavenly regions and conditions, as

contrasted with the great but limited glory of the earthly section of the kingdom of God. To them will be given with Christ authority over all other beings, creatures, and things ("all *things* are yours" I Cor. iii, 23); and so fully will God dwell in them that they will be intermediaries, "priests," between Him and His universe, "they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him" (Rev. xx, 6). Well may the same scripture exclaim, "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection."

God keeps a full register of all His family, and therein the names of these blessed and holy ones are entered as being the firstborn. The reference is probably to the registers kept at the temple in Jerusalem, and which were of final authority as compared with local or family records. Who in a numerous family was the firstborn son could thus be settled beyond controversy, for each such had to be presented to God in the temple (Ex. xiii, 11; Lk ii, 22). And God has the names of His firstborn duly inserted as such in His heavenly register.

6. The next point in the panorama of privilege is the relationship of the church to the angelic hosts on a day of festivity to which these will come. The English versions do not rightly divide the clauses here. Commenting on this Dean Alford remarks that "it is difficult to see why the coupling of clause to clause by 'and' (*kai*) which prevails through the sentence, should be broken through": and Darby (*New Translation*; note) says, "The words 'and' (*kai*) give the division very clearly here," and he translates thus: "and to myriad' of angels, the universal gathering"; whilst Alford seeks to give the full force of the words by rendering, "and to myriads, the festal hosts of angels." We may therefore read the clause thus, Ye have come unto "myriads of angels, the universal festal gathering."

And what a vista of splendour thus opens to view as the mind conceives as much as possible of the glory of the Son of God, in Whom "dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily," coming in His own glory and in the glory of the Father and that of the holy angels (Luke ix, 26). Such a monarch in such state and with such a retinue will eclipse all that the world ever thought grand and splendid. And in that glory the firstborn are to share, being the "bride, the wife of the Lamb," who with Christ will "be seen coming down out of heaven from Gods having the glory of God" (Rev. xxi, 9-11). To her as to her Lord the angels will be attendants, for already they are "ministering spirits sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation" (Heb. i, 14).

But this clause fixes the exact occasion when the church shall enter upon these supreme honours. For this gathering of angels is both "universal," that is, all the holy hosts will be present at once, and it is also "festal," that is, the gathering is on an occasion of joy and triumph. The Word of God elsewhere speaks of only one such day, and that the day of Messiah's appearing in Jerusalem to establish His kingdom on earth. Zechariah foresaw that event, and cried rapturously, "Jehovah my God shall come, and *all the holy ones* with Thee" (xiv, 5); and Christ Himself gathered up this and some other prophecies into the thrilling declaration, "when the Son of man shall come in

His glory, and *all the angels* with Him, then shall He sit on the throne of His glory” (Matt. xxv, 31). Thus shall be fulfilled the promise of God summarized through the angel that announced His birth: “the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke i, 32, 33): and then shall come to pass the word concerning the church, “When Christ, our life, shall be manifested (to men on earth), then shall ye also with Him be manifested in glory” (Col. iii, 4).

“Let that day come, O Lord,
And other days pass by;
Night is far spent, and dawning tells
That Thou art drawing nigh.”

“Hasten Thy coming, Lord!
Dawn, O Thou glorious day!
Then shall the fairest days of earth
Pass into shade away.”

7. But great as are the things thus enlarged upon, there are greater and higher glories unto which we have drawn near. Ye have come unto “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” During the reign of Christ on earth, Jerusalem, the “city of the great King,” will be His earthly metropolis, and the world’s center. But in the heavenly regions there will be another “city,” of which that on earth is but a reflection. In that upper realm where the substance of being is spirit, God will have a spiritual metropolis, Himself being the architect that designed and the builder that erected it (Heb. xi, 10). And the persons of the church of the firstborn, perfected spirits inhabiting incorruptible spiritual bodies, will form that dwelling place of God.

During the panorama of the Revelation, John had heard a great multitude in heaven rejoicing that the hour had come for the long expected marriage of the Lamb, but he had not yet seen the bride. And it may be that as the mighty visions progressed, and the millennial age passed into the eternal state, he inwardly wondered at this omission. But after all else had been shown to him the Bride was unveiled to his enraptured gaze, for, he says (Rev. xxi, 9, 10): “And there came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, who were laden with “the seven last plagues; and he spake with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and shewed me,” shewed me—what? A bride? No, a city, “the holy city, new Jerusalem.” So, then, the “city” is the “bride,” and the latter being a figure of a company of persons so must the former be. The assertion that the “city” is an *interpretation* of the figure of speech “bride” is not founded on the passage. The angel did not say to John, I will interpret, or explain, to thee the metaphor “bride,” but he said, “I will *shew* thee the bride,” that is, give thee a vision of her. Thus the “city,” is a second vision in symbol of the same company of which the “bride” was the former symbol. Such oriental duplicating of metaphors is

common in Scripture. The figure of the bride was no longer adequate to reveal the glory of the church, nor her most exalted office as the dwelling-place of God in a reconciled universe, from which all the wicked had been banished. Therefore the city comes into view; and nature and art and language are exhausted to portray her splendour.

In interpreting this vision one error is particularly common, namely, to speak of the city as a region into which the members of the church of God will enter and be blessed. This notion effectually forbids any right understanding of the matter. The bride, that is, the glorified heavenly church of the first-born ones, is the city. Others of the saved enter its gates: these compose it.

It may be hard to assign an exact meaning to each of the details given, but the main features described readily yield their teaching.

i. In the persons of His heavenly saints God will dwell so personally and be so actually present, that they will be to Him what a capital city is to a monarch—a place of residence, a scene for the display of His majesty, a spot to which His subjects may come to have dealings with Him, and a center of government around which the corporate life of the empire may revolve.

ii. “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (xxi, 14). To members of the church this was not a new thought, for it had been before taught that they, as a body corporate, were “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. ii, 20). Historically it is the preaching, teaching, labours, and sufferings of the apostles upon which the church is founded; and of their teaching Christ Jesus Himself was the all-prominent theme (the “chief corner-stone”), binding together the foundation, and affording unity and stability to the building.

iii. “The nations shall walk by the light thereof; and the kings of the earth do bring their glory into it” (xxi, 24). It will be under the beneficent guidance of the heavenly saints that the nations, so long “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them” (Eph. iv, 18), will learn to walk in His fear; and they in return will honour those who are thus the occasion of their eternal blessing.

iv. But as it will be by recognizing Israel as the chief nation on earth by God’s will, that the Gentiles will own God’s sovereignty, therefore through Israel mediately it is that they will enjoy the blessings dispensed through the church; and hence on the portals of the city are written the names of the tribes of Israel. For the Gentiles the means of access into heavenly blessings will be by honouring Israel (Isa xiv, 2; xlix, 22, 23); lx, 12; lxvi, 20; Zeph. iii, 10, marg.; Zech. viii, 20-23). It would be as unreasonable to “spiritualize” the literal Israel out of this picture (ver. 12) as to “spiritualize” out of it the twelve apostles of the Lamb who are next mentioned (ver. 14).

v. The Holy Spirit of God will thus flow out through the church for the quickening of all, as pictured by the river of the water of life; and it will be in response to obedience that the peoples will have the benefit of the River, for this proceeds out of the *throne* of God and of the Lamb.

Further into such fascinating details we may not give time to go; but it is unto no less privileged service and glories that we have come. Such is the ravishing prospect unto which the saints of this age are called, for “God hath called us into His own kingdom and glory” (I Thess. ii, 12).

8. But we have anticipated the highest feature of all: “ye have come unto Mount Zion.” In the earthly Jerusalem two mounts have been prominent, Mount Moriah and Mount Zion. The former was presently crowned with Solomon’s temple; but in the heavenly Jerusalem there is no temple seen (21, 22), for God no longer dwells hidden behind a veil, for Calvary has made possible His manifest dwelling with men (xxi, 3). But Mount Zion is found in His eternal realm. On that hill in the earthly city David’s palace stood (II Sam. v, 7-9), and it was the Supreme Court of justice for the kingdom, for “there were set thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David” (Ps. cxxii, 5). Not a throne, but thrones, are mentioned. How accurate a prophetic picture of the heavenly things yet to be; for Christ, the Son of David, will associate with Himself in His kingly office those who have been counted worthy of their calling, and who have reached this pinnacle of honour to reign with Him for ever and ever (Rev. xxii, 5). And as many dwelt in Jerusalem, and but few comparatively on Mount Zion, is there not here again the suggestion that many more may reach the blessedness of the “city” than will reach the crowning honour, and reign on a throne on Mount Zion? “One star,” though truly a star, that is, a heavenly being, “differeth from another star in glory” (I Cor. xv, 41).

Only one man, Moses, was permitted to climb to the top of Sinai; the rest of God’s people could but look from afar to that height of glory, and in truth they had little enough desire to draw near to those devouring fires. But many are the sons now being brought unto glory in Christ Jesus, and such as walk in the power of His fellowship may approach unto that same God with boldness. Let us therefore “abide in Christ; that if He shall be manifested, we may have boldness, and not be ashamed from Him at His presence” (I John ii, 28). Let us look to ourselves that we lose not the things that we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward (II John 8).

Of that supremely and eternally glorious state a sevenfold perfection is declared (Rev. xxii, 3-5). “There shall be no curse any more”—perfect sinlessness and blessedness: “and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein”—perfect government: “and His servants shall do Him service”—perfect service: “and they shall see His face”—perfect communion: “and His name shall be in their foreheads” perfect resemblance and identification: “and there shall be night no more —perfect knowledge and strength: “and they shall reign unto the ages of the ages”—perfect glory.

“Oh, what a bright and blessed world
This groaning earth of ours will be,
When from its throne the tempter hurled
Shall leave it all, O Lord, to Thee.

“But brighter far that world above
Where we as we are known shall know;
And, in the sweet embrace of Love,
Reign o’er the ransomed earth below.”

Truly is it said of the unspiritual that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love Him. But unto those who, by faith in Christ, have received the Spirit of the Lord, God hath revealed these things so vast and deep and high, for “we received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us by God” (I Cor. ii, 9-12). And therefore, both the knowledge of and the attaining to these things are possible through the Spirit.

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But that same Revealer has very solemnly intimated that these heavenly glories are forfeitable on certain conditions. Let us turn back to examine closely the opening sentences of this great passage.

“Follow after peace with all men.” Our God is the “God of peace” (Heb. xiii, 20). Strife of every sort is not of His promotion. Therefore they who aspire to deep and rich communion with Him must “seek peace and pursue it” (I Peter iii, 11). “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the sons of God” (Matt. v, 9). They must at *every personal* cost promote peace. God has made peace possible between man and Himself, and this at the highest cost to Himself, the gift of His own Son. Christ “made peace,” and this at the greatest cost to Himself, the shedding of His own blood on the cross. Such as are of His Spirit will exercise their right to forego their rights rather than provoke dissention by insistence upon these. They will endure to the last extent, and will “as much as in them lies”—that is, not merely to the utmost of their powers of endurance, but rather that they, on their side of the matter, “will be at peace with all men” seeing to it that the cause and the continuance of the difficulty is on the other party wholly (Rom. xii, 18).

But this, in its practical out-working in such a world as the present, is necessarily a life of difficulty and of almost certain loss; for the wicked will readily take advantage of the meek. Thus this opening exhortation calls for high attainment in daily life. But we are steadily to pursue this path, for such a course of life is quite indispensable to attaining to “the sanctification without which no one shall see the Lord” (Heb. xiii, 14).

And who is the “Lord” in the sense of the term in this place? And what is “the sanctification” without which no one shall see Him? The answer to the first of these questions is that it is certainly not Christ who is intended. It is distinctly declared that “every eye shall see Him” and that so far from an advanced state of holiness being requisite for this, His enemies that pierced Him will see Him (Rev. i, 7). For God has declared upon His oath that to Jesus every knee shall bow, and that every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. ii, 10, ii), which last clause must include even the finally lost. The Father has committed all judgment unto the Son (John v, 22), and before His judgment seat, at one or other of its sessions, every person must be made manifest.

It is therefore to some face to face vision of God the Father that our clause refers. We ought not to conceive of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as formless. The Son of God speaks of Him as having form—“ye have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form” (John v, 37). He said also that the angels of the little children “do always behold the face of My Father Who is in the heavens” (Matt, xviii, 10), and at that time the Son was absent from the heavens, so that it was not in the person of the Son that the Father was thus visible. It is certain that His voice is actual, for it has been heard three times by men on earth (Matt. iii, 17; xvii, 5; II Pet. i, 17; John xii, 28). So that the voice, form, and face are literal, and the two latter are visible. This seems to be involved distinctly in the Lord’s further words: “Not that any man hath seen the Father, save He Who is from God, He hath seen the Father” (Jo. vi, 46). Christ Himself has “sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. i, 3, 13; x, 12). And forasmuch as angels are distinct and localized beings, and that the exalted Christ also is the same, it is evident that some localized, defined, and personal presence of the Father is here indicated. To the same effect speaks the great doxology that closes Jude’s brief but pregnant letter. We there read of “the only God our Saviour” being “able to guard us from stumbling and to set us before the presence of His glory without blemish in exceeding joy”; and “God our Saviour” is here plainly the Father, for it is “through Jesus Christ our Lord” that the glory is ascribed to Him.

But this “blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Who only hath immortality,” “dwelleth in light unapproachable,” and “no man hath seen nor can see” Him (I Tim. vi, 15, 16), not even though it be such a man as Moses the friend of God (Ex. xxxiii, 18-23). For man on earth is in nowise capacitated for bearing the blaze of the glory of that light. But man in Christ Jesus is “made capable” (Alford) for sharing the “inheritance of the saints in *the light*” (Col. i, 12); and this capacity of inward nature will be extended to the body itself at the “appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (Tit. ii, 13), “Who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of His glory” (Phil. iii, 21). “It is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that if He shall be manifested we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him even as He is” (I John iii, 2).

The initial condition upon which man may aspire to this beatific vision is the atoning work of the Redeemer. "Christ also suffered for sins once for all that He might *conduct us to God*" (I Peter iii, 18). But the final condition for realizing in fact that, which the atonement has made possible, is set before us in the clause under consideration; "pursue the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord." And what is this but are-statement of Christ's searching beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God"? (Matt. v, 8). How many are satisfied with attaining to external propriety of life whilst the heart continues to be complacently engaged with things that are not of God. Good is Tauler's definition: "A pure heart is one to which all that is not of God is strange and jarring." A heart that has no desires but for the glory of God, whose affections all center in Him, whose delight is in His good and well-pleasing and perfect will, such an one, by the power of the Spirit of grace, will make due progress in holiness—though perhaps unconsciously to himself—and will reach the sanctification which will warrant the bestowing of the fullest and highest bliss possible through the precious blood of Jesus, even this supernal vision of the face and presence of Him Who before was personally inaccessible to man.

[It is remarkable that whereas the enjoyments of the Moslem Paradise as pictured in the Koran are grossly sensual and abominable, yet Mohammed had somewhere caught this conception of the seeing of God being the supreme delight. Lane (*Manners and customs of the Modern Egyptians* ch. iii), dealing with this aspect of the doctrines of Islam, says, "But all these enjoyments will be lightly esteemed by those more blessed persons who are to be admitted to the highest of all honors—that spiritual pleasure of beholding, morning and evening, the face of God."]

Thus the condition of the glorified saint is indefinitely superior to that of Adam even in innocence; and thus is revealed the manifold wisdom of God in His power to make the very fall of man the occasion, through Christ's mediation, of the elevation of man to the absolutely highest degree of bliss and glory that God Himself can ever offer to any of His creatures; for He purposes to exalt the "Bride" to sit *with* Christ, and He cannot put her *above* Him. "In Him the sons of Adam boast more blessings than their father lost."

And therefore how strenuous should be our watchful and trustful endeavors to progress in personal sanctification. Natural indeed was the deep paternal zeal of the apostles for the growth in holiness of their children in the faith, for they knew how great things were at stake. Natural too is the vigorous exhortation that follows, bidding us to be at all seasons "looking carefully lest there be any one that falleth short of the grace of God," that is, lest any, by carelessly neglecting to live in the power of the available grace of God, fail to reach that highest felicity to which grace would have brought them.

In that case, peace not being diligently pursued, it may be expected that contention will result, and some root of bitterness latent in the carnal nature, or some

specific impulse to bitterness of spirit planted in the heart by our ever watchful spirit foes, will spring into activity, and a general state of strife result in the community of believers in question, by which means the more part of them may become defiled. These will thus be far other than sanctified, and will be risking becoming disqualified for that supreme vision of the Father. How serious therefore is the responsibility of the one through whom occasions of stumbling enter a circle of God's people. As Achan troubled the whole nation, so may a Christian cause present injury, and final and most serious loss, to fellow-believers, a loss only less great than that of eternal life. And as Achan bore a due penalty, so shall a Christian not pass unvisited. It was into the eyes of His chosen and beloved disciples that our Master and Judge looked as He uttered these terrible words: "Whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea" (Matt. xviii, 6). What is the impending chastisement that shall result from stumbling a fellow saint, and what is the severity thereof, that an untimely and violent death was much to be preferred thereto? Good therefore it is for each to give most earnest and constant heed to this exhortation, offered in view of "the day of redemption": and "grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, in whom ye were sealed unto the day of "redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and railing, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ forgave you." (Eph. iv, 30-32). A heart that loves peace will guard against harboring a single bitter feeling. By the power of the love of God, it will cast forth at its first uprising any such emotion; and thus will be prevented the defilement of others, and thus will be promoted the purity of that heart itself, and its preparation for seeing the Lord will be advanced.

The Word now turns *from* such inward dangers to physical and open wickedness, of which fornication is specified, and then we are exhorted to be full of care "lest there be any profane person as Esau, who for one mess of meat sold his rights of the firstborn."

The story of Esau is found in Genesis xxv, 27-34, and ch. 27. It is pregnant with most solemn instruction, and no line of exposition, which does not give due, and full weight to its most powerful lessons can be correct. And yet we confess that after forty-five years of constant contact with Bible-loving Christians and teachers, we have never once heard even an attempt to apply this passage in the Hebrews to any persons, believers or otherwise!

The points of his case to be noticed are: --

1. Esau, being the firstborn son, held by right of birth the privileges before described as belonging to the firstborn. *He did not have to win or buy* these rights; they attached to him by birth according to the will of God. Yet it was incumbent upon him to retain them.

2. But he held them in such small esteem that he readily bartered them away in exchange for a passing gratification of the palate. It was not that other food could not easily have been obtained, for he had come into the encampment. The fact is, as recorded by God, that he “despised his birthright.”

3. And though later in life he regretted his folly, he found it not possible to reverse his own act and deed, or to change his father’s mind, so as to secure the richer blessing which followed the possession of the birthright.

[The question of the exact construction of the clause “he found no place of repentance” is not vital to the main argument of the passage, and I do not enter upon it. It is theological rather than practical. That the results of his act were irreversible is the point of the matter. But I believe the meaning to be that the prophetic utterance of his father could not be altered.]

We submit that it is simply impossible that Esau is here offered as a warning to a false professor of the faith who is not really in Christ Jesus. For (1) Esau was Isaac’s legitimate son, not a bastard nor an alien. (2) He legally held the rights of the firstborn, and was not a false claimant thereto. (3) Even after his forfeiture of those rights, his father blessed him as fully as was possible, though he could not restore to him the priority he had thrown away. (4) He did not lose those things which would have made him a type possibly of one finally lost, namely, his life or his sonship, but he did lose his superior dignity and privileges.

None of these conditions is fulfilled in an unregenerate person, however plausible and long continued be his profession of Christianity. Such an one is (1) not God’s child at all; (2) has no rights that he can be warned not to forfeit; (3) and in the issue will be utterly unblessed and reprobate, not having, or ever having had, eternal life, but being “a child/ of wrath even as the rest.” The two cases are utterly dissimilar; but Esau’s example does most accurately correspond to the case of us to whom it is here applied. “Take heed,” says the Scripture, “lest there be any profane person as Esau, who for one mess of meat sold his rights of the firstborn”; and then, in a paragraph directly connected by a particle with that warning, there is immediately added the statement “For ye (ye who are thus warned) have come unto the assembly of the firstborn ones.” Thus it is to those who hold the analogous rights in the heavenly realm and family that the warning is held up, and to such only *can* it have any force. To warn one against losing what he does not possess is a futility that we dare not attribute to the Spirit of the Lord.

But real believers, being born of God and being called to His kingdom and glory, fulfil the facts of Esau’s case. Such persons are (1) really children of God by faith in Christ Jesus; and (2) they are the firstborn of His family, and hold the rights of primogeniture. These rights they do not have to earn, or buy, or win: they are wholly a

birthright by the sovereign grace of God. But *they do have to value and to keep them*, and are warned against forfeiting these privileges. Their sonship is inalienable, and their eternal life is unforfeitable, not being deposited in them and held by them at their own risk, but being "with Christ in God" (Col. iii, 3); but these higher personal dignities and glories are forfeitable, and by as much as they are worth retaining by so much is found in this teaching a salutary and sanctifying power. Let the believer be assured that all, all is secure, and great is the danger of inducing a subtle carelessness of heart; but with the retention of the highest privileges left conditional upon our walk, strong is the inducement to press on unto perfection.

The forfeitability of the birthright is further indicated and emphasized in the case of Reuben. Being Jacob's eldest son this honour was his; but because of his yielding to an unnatural sensual craving, it was taken from him (I Chron. v, 1), and was given, as to the territory, to the sons of Joseph, the latter thus, in his children, receiving the double portion; and as to sovereignty, to the tribe of Judah, in the person of David and his sons, including Messiah; and as to the priesthood, to Levi. Was this in the writer's mind when he specified in our passage the sin of fornication?

Yet Reuben remained of the family, and was blessed in measure; but as showing that the rights in question if once lost cannot be regained, it is to be remembered that in the days of the future kingdom the status created by Reuben's misconduct will still abide: the King will be of the house of Judah, the priesthood in Israel will be in the family of Zadok the Levite (Ezek. xlviii, 11), and Ephraim and Manasseh will hold their double portion. These things Reuben has lost forever, though forever remaining of the house of Israel, and sharing a portion, though this of ordinary and not special degree. All this is seen by comparing the final and prophetic announcements of Jacob (Gen. xlix, 1-4) and Moses (Deut. xxxiii, 6); for Jacob declared that the dignity of the firstborn with its pre-eminence and power belonged to Reuben, yet should not be his, not even in the latter days; yet Moses guaranteed *life* to the tribe, but nothing more: "Let Reuben live, and not die; yet let his men be few."

The transferability of the birthright is also shown in I Chron. xxvi, 10, quoted at the head of this chapter; and the solitary circumstance given, that it occurred in a Levitical family, carries its lesson for us who are called to heavenly service, typified by the tabernacle service.

The chief theme of this passage in Hebrews, and indeed of the whole letter, is crystallized in the words of verse 28, which speak of receiving a kingdom." This is the subject under discussion, *not* the question of securing salvation from eternal perdition. The epistle presupposes this latter benefit to have been secured, for it starts with the thought that the persons addressed are already "holy brethren, partakers of a *heavenly*," calling (iii, 1). Its call therefore is, that being thus privileged by God's grace in Christ, we should not "turn away from Him that warneth from heaven;" that is, who warns us by pointing to such a case as that of Esau, and of others of whom we shall

proceed to write. For there is at hand a final shaking and removing of all things movable, so that only the immovable and therefore eternal may remain. It is to the glory of reigning in that kingdom, beginning in the millennial days and continuing eternally, that we are called. Let us therefore, by the grace of God, serve acceptably the God of grace, attending upon Him and doing all His will, and this not in carnal complacency, as if it mattered little how we live and serve, but “with reverence and awe, for *our* God is a consuming fire,” as not a few of *His own people* have found.

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