

The Unveiled Face.

2 Cor. 3, 4.

E. Dennett.

Christian Friend Vol. 3, p. 125.

We have a remarkable series of contrasts in the third chapter of this epistle, designed to exhibit the perfect place of blessing in which we are set in Christ. After speaking of his own special relationship, through his ministry, to the believers at Corinth (vv. 14), the apostle points out the source of his qualification for his work, and the character of his ministry. (vv. 5, 6.) We have then a parenthesis which extends to the close of the 16th verse; so that for the connection we must read the 17th verse after the 6th, though it is evident that the parenthetical passage contributes, by the contrast therein drawn between the "ministry of condemnation" and the "ministry of righteousness," to further the general argument.

Thus the apostle says, "Our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (vv. 5, 6); and then he adds, "Now the Lord is that Spirit" (v. 17); i.e. not the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit of the "New Testament," which he thus identifies with the Lord — the glorified Christ. In other words, he teaches us that the Spirit that runs through and underlies "the letter" is a glorified Christ. But when he says in the next clause, "And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," he speaks of the Holy Ghost because he is now speaking of the power by which Christ glorified is apprehended, and the liberty into which we are consequently brought.

The parenthesis springs out of the contrast between "the letter" and "the spirit;" the former — the law, in fact — being a "ministration of death" and of "condemnation" (vv. 7, 9); the latter of "the Spirit" and of "righteousness." (vv. 8, 9.)

In these terms we have indeed the essential characteristics of the two dispensations contrasted. By the law was the knowledge of sin, and resulting condemnation and death (Rom. 5: 20; Rom. 7.); whereas by the gospel is the knowledge of accomplished righteousness, and of a Christ in glory. Hence, too, we get in this parenthesis, and the 18th verse, a further contrast between the position occupied by Israel under the law, and that occupied by believers under grace; and it is with this position, and its consequences and responsibilities, that we desire in this paper especially to be occupied.

It is summed up for us in the 18th verse: "We all, with open [*i.e.* unveiled] face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord." The words, "as in a glass," interfere with the clearness of the statement, having been added from a misconception of the force of the word employed. What we are taught is, *that believers are now brought into the very presence of the glory of the Lord* — they behold it with unveiled face. This is brought out by a contrast with Israel: "When Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart" (v. 15); but we behold the glory of the Lord without a veil; so

that our position corresponds rather with that of Moses when he went into the tabernacle to speak with Jehovah. (See Ex. 34: 34, 35.)

The knowledge of this position is brought to us by the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God; for, says the apostle, "we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord" (4: 4, 5)-that is, Christ glorified at the right hand of God. Such was the subject of the apostle's ministry, the ministry of the Spirit; for it was performed in the power of that Spirit who came down on the day of Pentecost as the witness of accomplished redemption, and of the glory of Christ. It was also the ministry of righteousness; for instead of requiring righteousness from man, as the law did, it proclaims God's righteousness revealed in the gospel (see Rom. 1: 16, 17; Rom. 3: 21, 22, etc.); for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. (Rom. 10: 4.) And a glorified Christ is the assurance of this; for when He died He bare our sins in His own body on the tree; yea, He was made sin for us (1 Peter 2: 24 ; 2 Cor. 5: 21) ; and hence, if He is now at the right hand of God in the glory, it is the everlasting proof that every question of our sins and sin has been settled; that all the claims of God's holiness have been met and satisfied; that indeed God has been so satisfied (for indeed He was fully glorified in that death), that His response to what was then wrought is seen in the place which He has accorded to Him who died.

It is on this account that He can in righteousness, as well as in grace and love, accord a place in Christ — in the same position of nearness — before Himself to every one who receives this gospel of the glory of Christ. The source of all is in Himself, and hence it is said, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, *hath shined in our hearts.*" (4: 6.) He it was who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all (Rom. 8: 32); who raised Him up from among the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the glory; and He it is who opens our hearts to receive these glad tidings of His grace, so that He might be able to bring us into that place where with unveiled face we can behold the glory of the Lord. Blessed be His name! How precious is His grace!

But let us not forget that this is our position, and that nothing short of this satisfies His own heart of love to us in Christ Jesus. It is therefore not enough for us to know that our sins are forgiven, and that we are the children of God ; but He would have us also know that we are brought to Himself, that there is nothing even now between us and the glory of the Lord; we all with unveiled face behold it. This is our normal place. What a fruitful theme then for application to the heart and conscience! Do we know our place? Are we consciously occupying it? Is the glory of the Lord filling the vision of our souls? Do we know anything of not being "able to see for the glory of that light"? Is it our habit to judge everything about us by the light of that glory? Surely it ought to be the only light for our souls, and our joy to be ever standing with upturned faces, that every ray of the glory might fall upon us with its transforming power.

This indeed is the second point of the apostle's statement. "We all, with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord." Here then we have the source, condition, and power of our moral transformation-the source, Christ Himself in the glory; the condition, our looking upon the glory-beholding Him with the eye of faith, and the power being the Holy Spirit (for the meaning is the same as to this whether we read "the Spirit of the Lord," or "the Lord the Spirit").

It can never be too earnestly insisted upon that Christ Himself is the source of power, because it thus keeps Him as the object before our souls. Thus in the case of Stephen, how it strengthened him as he beheld "Jesus standing on the right hand of God." It lifted him out of and above his circumstances, and enabled him to tread in the footsteps of his blessed Lord, — he praying for his persecutors, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," even as his Lord had cried, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Acts 7: 55-60; Luke 23: 34.) In like manner, when Paul was buffeted by the messenger of Satan, he was taught to look away from himself to his Lord, as he was reminded, in answer to his thrice repeated prayer, " My grace is sufficient for thee." (2 Cor. 12: 7-9.) But it is in Philippians 3 that we have the effect of beholding Christ in the glory. There we are permitted, as it were, to see the power streaming down into the soul of Paul, and changing him into the same image, from glory to glory.

But if Christ Himself is the source, the condition of the reception of the power is beholding Him — the eye directed to Him. The power is in Christ; but there is no channel through which it can flow into my soul if I am not looking upward to Him by faith. This is remarkably exemplified in the case of Peter. When he was permitted to get out of the ship and walk on the water to go to Jesus, all went well as long as his eye was upon Christ; but the moment he looked off, he began to sink. And so always. As long as Christ is before our souls, we receive power; but if our gaze is intercepted or diverted, we stumble and fall. This is the secret of all interrupted communion, deadness, or backsliding.

But, on the other hand, if Christ fill the vision of our soul, then the Spirit of the Lord, ungrieved and unhindered, can work; and He will in this case never cease to work in transforming power within us. The model is before our eyes; the Spirit works on, fashioning us after the likeness of the model; and we are thus changed from glory to glory. Remark, however, that since it is Christ in glory, who is the model to which we are to be conformed, though there be increasing moral conformity wrought out in us daily, the full result will not be reached until we are like Christ, when we see Him as He is; i.e. when He comes again to receive us unto Himself, that where He is we may be also. Then since we shall be raised from among the dead, or changed, if the Lord should come before we fall asleep, we shall be like Him bodily as well as spiritually; we shall then be altogether conformed to the image of the Son. (Phil. 3: 20, 21; Rom. 8: 29.) In the meantime, while we wait for this full and blessed result, beholding with unveiled face the glory of the Lord, the Spirit is incessantly engaged in working out our moral transformation. There can therefore be no perfection according to God while we are in the body, and consequently no rest in attainment; for the goal is, as we have seen, Christ in the glory, and God has predestinated us to be conformed to Him, that He might be the First-born among many brethren. And what a goal! Well might Paul exclaim as he beheld it, " Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but [this] one thing [I do], forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling (the calling on high) of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3: 13, 14.) May we all be endowed with the same ardent desire; and may we all know in like manner the attracting power of Christ in glory!

But there is another point to be noticed. The word translated "beholding as in a glass" is, as is well known, peculiar, and the words "as in a glass" are sometimes (*e.g.* the New Translation) omitted as unnecessary. There seems indeed to be a double action implied in the verb —

reflecting as well as receiving; the thought thus being, that while we behold we also *reflect* the glory of the Lord. This is undoubtedly true as to doctrine, whatever may be our judgment as to the exact force of the word; for we can never reflect the glory of the Lord — His moral glory — even in the slightest measure, excepting as we are with unveiled face beholding it. These two things cannot be dissevered. The saint whose eye is most steadily and constantly fixed on Christ is he who will most nearly walk as He walked. Sometimes we speak of copying Christ, or of the imitation of Christ; and surely the need of it cannot be too often pressed on our souls. But together with this, the truth is equally urgent that there cannot be any imitation of Christ apart from being occupied with Him, as risen and glorified. I may admire the life of Christ down here; I may be attracted by the beauty of His perfect example; but I have no power to "follow in His steps," unless my eye is upon Him where He now is in the glory. If, on the other hand, I am beholding the glory of the Lord, I shall most certainly reflect it in my walk and conversation.

It is this same truth in another form which is brought before us in the next chapter: "Therefore seeing we have received this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not." Having then described the character of his walk as to it, the apostle proceeds: "But if our gospel be hid [veiled], it is hid [veiled] to them that are lost : in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds [thoughts of them which believe not, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, *for the shining forth* of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (4: 1-6.) The subject, then, of the apostle's ministry was "the gospel of the glory of Christ." To qualify him for service, God had shined in his heart (see Gal. 1: 15, 16); and He had shined in his heart, that in the work of the ministry there might be the *shining forth*, of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; so that (and the importance of the point cannot be overestimated, though it is only incidentally connected with the subject in hand) preaching and reflecting a glorified Christ went on hand in hand. It may be, as indeed it was, that the apostle alludes to the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ in his preaching; but there was also in the apostle's case, and should be in every case, a growing moral conformity to Christ in glory connected with the work of his ministry.

In the same way God has caused the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ to shine into the hearts of all believers. This indeed was the first act of God's grace which brought us into the position of beholding the glory of the Lord, in which, as we have seen, we are changed from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." (2 Cor. 4: 7.) The *treasure*, then, is the light which God has caused to shine in our hearts — the knowledge of a glorified Christ — Christ indeed in us; the *earthen vessels* are our bodies. The question then is, How is the light to shine through? how, in other words, is the glory to be reflected?

It may be observed, first of all, that the very nature of the *earthen* vessel is calculated to obscure the light. Dense and opaque it obstructs the shining forth of the light within. So with the bodies of believers. Organs for the expression of the old, or Adam-life, they are hindrances as such, being what they now are, to the manifestation of "the life of Jesus" (v. 10); and hence if the light is to shine forth, just as in the case of Gideon and his men, to whom there is here perhaps a

tacit reference, *the vessels must be broken*; and this is precisely what we get in this chapter. How then are they to be broken I or rather, How were they broken in the case of Paul and his companions in labour? "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; *always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus*, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh." (vv. 8-11.) We thus gather that God used the circumstances—the trials, difficulties, and persecutions of His servants to break their "earthen vessels;" *i.e.* to repress and annihilate what was of mere nature or flesh, to bring death in upon all that might obscure the shining forth of the light, and to enable them, through the Spirit, to mortify their members which were upon the earth, to keep the old man in the place of death, in order that the light—the life of Jesus—cleared from obstruction, might be made manifest in their body.

Such then is God's method of breaking our earthen vessels; viz, the application to us of the cross. But it is just this from which we shrink; and on this very account God in His tenderness and love often leads us into circumstances similar to those described here to do for us what we are unwilling to do for ourselves. Our shrinking from the cross would be less if we remembered the words — *for Jesus' sake*. If our hearts were more occupied with Him, so that we desired to have Him alone as our gain — if we were more constantly occupying our place, and beholding with unveiled face the glory of the Lord, we should long for the application of the cross to all and everything that was unsuited to Him, and hindered our manifestation of the life of Jesus. As it is, too frequently it is the case that God has to bring death in upon us and our associations, in the way of discipline, to discover to us our failure, to wean us from "the things which are seen," and to attract our hearts to Christ. This is a very different thing from being delivered to death for Jesus' sake. Then we can esteem it a privilege that it is given unto us in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Phil. 1: 29) ; yea, we can rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer shame for His name (Acts 5: 41); and the very persecutions which are thus endured become the bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus for the clearer manifestation of His life in our body. The word "always" should also be observed in verse 11. We cannot be delivered to death in this way once for all, but there must be the constant application of the cross. Our Lord thus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9: 23.) The apostle was enabled to say, "I die daily." (1 Cor. 15: 31.) It must be so, from the fact that the flesh, though judicially gone from God's sight, is irremediable and unchangeable; and hence the need of incessant watchfulness, and unsparing fidelity in the application of the cross; for nothing that belongs to it, not even the Agag of its fairest forms, must be excepted, if the life of Jesus is to be made manifest.

But where, it may be asked, is the power for such a task? In the answer to this question lies the connection between the third and fourth chapters; for it is only as we are constantly beholding by faith the glory of the Lord that we shall be enabled to bear about in our body the dying of the Lord Jesus. Thus, if our eyes are fixed on a glorified Christ, if He fill the vision of our souls, the cross will be applied to self, and to everything connected with self; it will be our ardent desire and joy to know Him and the fellowship of His sufferings. Knowing and being occupied with (beholding with unveiled face) Christ in glory is thus the secret of all practical power — of power for the application of the cross, for reckoning ourselves dead, for moral

transformation through the Spirit- yea, in a word, the secret of all power for the expression of the life of Jesus.

How blessedly simple! Through the unspeakable grace of our God, He has caused to shine in our hearts the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. By it He has brought us out of our distance, sin, and death, and set us down in His own presence, in the light as He is in the light, in all the acceptance of Christ Himself; and there we are permitted with unveiled face to behold the glory of the Lord (expression of our perfect nearness, and of our wondrous place); and while we behold that glory, the Spirit of the Lord transforms us morally into the image of Him on whom we gaze, causes Christ in us (who is thus formed within us) to shine forth in what we are and do; and, showing us the worthlessness of everything around us in the light of that ineffable glory, strengthens us to bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. Blessed be His name! E. D.