

A Fair Show in the Flesh

Galatians 6: 12.

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(R. L. Allan)

"The truth," or the doctrine of the Son, as the Lord Himself teaches us (John 8: 32-36), sets free all those who receive it. It is the "law of liberty" (James 1, 2); it is "mercy rejoicing over judgment;" for judgment has been duly and fully marked against us as guilty, but through the blood of sprinkling mercy is secured, and by the gospel that mercy is published; so that the truth — the doctrine of the Son, the gospel, or the law of liberty, which are all titles of the same revelation of God — sets the sinner free. In this precious liberty is included freedom from sin, from the law, and from the *flesh*. This is the excellent and wondrous teaching of Romans 6, 7, 8. Sin had been a master. But the believer in Jesus is dead in Jesus; and death being the end or wages of sin, sin is gone. "He that is dead is freed (justified) from sin." Sin has no claim on him. He is no longer to be its servant; for by death the entire connection between him and sin is dissolved. So is the believer freed from the law; for the law addresses itself only to living man. It is the husband only of such, by its energies working on the flesh. But the believer being not a living, but a dead and risen, man — a man in union with the dead and risen Christ — the law is of necessity discharged as an old husband, and the believer is acted upon by the virtues of the risen Christ, the new husband.* So also is the believer out of the flesh. The flesh is the living man, man in his nature, as derived from corrupted Adam. But the believer is not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, and the Spirit of God dwells in him. (Rom. 8) He is in the new man, in the second Adam; he is in Christ, and being one with Him, he is spirit — for he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit. (1 Cor. 6: 17.)

*The law, being good, has not been discharged in the way that sin has. It has been discharged as a *husband* only — as that to which the soul was debtor, and with which it was in union, before the sinner became a dead and risen man. Its holy and good words, as being expressive of God, are still delighted in and allowed.

These are the three blessed characteristics of the believer's liberty, as we are taught in these three glorious chapters. This is the standing of the "man, in Christ." The truth has made him free, the Son has made him free; and this has been accomplished by taking him out of himself, and planting him, through faith, in the dead and risen Christ of God. Sin has no claim to his service, as a lord; the law has no power over him, as a husband; nor is the flesh the condition in which he is.

But this doctrine, which is Christianity, does not suit the, legal, fleshly mind of man. Above all the difficulty which St. Paul had to meet in his care of the churches, that which arose from our disposedness to return to the law, or to "confidence in the flesh," was the most frequent and the greatest.

In Galatia he found this abundantly. The churches there had been eminent for attachment to him, because of the gospel which preached. They had received him as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus, and would have plucked out their eyes for him. They had been in a particularly blessed state of soul; they had begun in the "Spirit," in the doctrine of faith; and this devotedness of heart to the apostle who had brought them that doctrine, was the fruit of it. But they had been "bewitched." They had been drawn back from their place in Christ, and were in bondage again. Instead of being dead to the old husband, they had re-embraced him, and were deriving influence out of him once more. Not that they

had formally renounced Christ, as Jews or Pagans. They still professed Christ, but together with Him, they were insisting on, and trusting in, "days, and months, and times, and years." They were teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. They were re-enacting ordinances; they were turning again to beggarly elements. A life of simple faith in the Son of God, as the one who had loved them and given Himself for them, was defiled; and they were living to the law, putting themselves under observances, as under so many tutors and governors. They were servants and not sons — in bondage, and not in liberty; they had gone back to the school-master, which they could not do without leaving the Father's house.

All this must have been connected with an increasing show of religion among them. This necessarily was the case; for "days and months" were so increasingly observed, the bonds of the law and of carnal ordinances were so multiplied, that to an eye not instructed by the Spirit, they must have had a great "name to live." But Paul speaks of all this as "leaven" threatening to corrupt the whole mass. In his view it was the symptom of death, and not of life. "A fair show" it was; but it was a fair show "in the flesh." Thus, under his eye, it was the garnishing of a sepulchre, and his energy is employed in re-quickening them. He travails in birth again with them, if haply they might be raised out of this sepulchre, or place of death, and brought forth, as Isaac from Sarah's dead womb, by the precious ministry of the truth — that is, the doctrine of the Son taught by the Spirit.

This epistle is a word of solemn admonition. It shows us that the most promising may be beguiled, so that *all* have to watch. We may have the blessed assurance of our holy keeping; but we none of us keep the book of life. Therefore we can only say of one another, "if ye continue *in the faith*, grounded and settled." And this epistle shows that we may be disappointed even in the most promising — in a Galatian — disciple; but it also shows us that the Spirit of God is alive, most sensitively alive, to the least infraction of the truth, or "the law of liberty." He speaks of it as He speaks of some of the foulest moral stains that could defile the garments of the saints: *both* are the leaven that leavens the whole lump (1 Cor. 5: 6; Gal. 5: 9).

But it is to be observed still further, as to the nature of this leaven that was working in Galatia, that it was not the revival of a hope, under what is termed the *moral law* of the ten commandments, as though by strict moral obedience, a righteousness could be produced. This was not the gross thought of the disciples there; but they were returning to *observances* and *ordinances*. It was a more refined and religious confidence in the flesh, but still it was confidence in the flesh. They had begun in the Spirit, with Christ's sufficiency; but now they were looking for perfection from and in the flesh. It was a departure from the liberty in which Christ, by His death and resurrection, had put them; and the apostle clearly treats them as a people whose condition made him to stand in doubt of them, and to feel towards them as though he must begin his toil among them afresh, and travail in birth again till Christ be formed in them, till all fleshly confidence should depart from their hearts, and Christ and His liberty — Christ and the virtue of His death and resurrection, Christ and His completeness for the poor sinner — be welcomed, and received there alone.

All at Galatia was as death while the flesh, and its observances, and its righteousness, were thus confided in. A sepulchre it was, garnished by much religious drapery; but the apostle was not to be deceived by such fair show; he lays it bare; he takes off the trappings to exhibit the corruption that was under them: for it was the flesh that was under them, and the flesh is a dead thing. They might ornament the flesh, but it is all uncleanness; and deck it out as we may, it is the flesh still, in which there dwelleth "no good thing." The days, the months, and times, and years, religiously enforced as they were, and fitted to give their votaries a name to live with those who judge after the flesh, were but a painted sepulchre to the eye of St. Paul.

Indeed God is not truly known where such things are trusted. If the living, blessed God be really before the soul, He is known as one who quickens the dead; but confidence in the flesh, such as existed among the Galatians, gives up God. Thus the apostle has to say, "howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service to them which by nature are no gods; but now after that ye have known God (or rather are known of God), how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, wherein ye desire again to be in bondage?" For, indeed, as we may infer from what he says in Gal. 2: 19, the only way to be alive to God is to be dead to the law. Truly blessed this is. As long as the soul is alive to the law — as long as it derives the motions and sanctions which influence it from the law, it is dead to God. For self is its end and object: to take care of one's self, of one's own interest and safety is its purpose. God is not lived for; His glory and service are not the aim of the soul; that cannot be because the law is set up, and the law puts us upon caring for ourselves — upon the anxious, uneasy, servile question of our own interest and safety. This is shown in the person of the unprofitable servant. He was under the law. All that he cared about was to come off well in the day of reckoning. He treated the Lord as an austere man who must be satisfied. He feared him, not having learned that way of "perfect love" which is His, and which casts our fear; and thus he was alive to the law, but dead to God. Paul, however, stood in another mind. "I," he says, "through the law, am dead to the law, that I might live unto God." But from this life the Galatians had now been "bewitched." They had begun it, but they were now deserting it, and no time was to be lost, if haply the apostle might now call them back to Christ, or to that "faith" which works by love, setting the heart and conscience at liberty before God, so that He may be loved. They had to be taught again that nothing availed but "a new creature" (Gal. 6); that before God the flesh is gone, sin judged, and the law taken out of the way; that the old master of Rom. 6 is no longer in power, and that we are become dead to the old husband of Rom. 7; but that by faith in a dead and risen Christ, we have escaped from these bonds and penalties, to find our liberty in the fulness of Christ.

But if the standing in the "righteousness by faith be given up, and "confidence in the flesh" be adopted, then there is both a fall from grace, and debtorship to do the whole law (Gal. 5: 1-5). Christ will not share the confidence of our souls with the law. He is a jealous husband, even as God is a jealous God. And we may bless Him that He is; we may bless Him that He will have us as a chaste virgin, with mind kept uncorrupted in His simplicity. If we return to the law, whether ceremonial or moral, we are debtors to the whole of it. We *are* to glory in the cross of Christ, whereby the world is crucified unto us, and we unto the world (Gal. 6: 14). We are *not*, by subjection to ordinances, to manifest that we are still living in the world (Col. 2: 20). The cross has met, everything for us. It has honoured the rights and demands of God. It has answered and silenced the malice of the enemy. And in spirit we have been carried on high, in and with Jesus, beyond the voice of the law; for that spoke for God on *earth* and we are *above the earth, in the heavens*, with the ascended Christ (Eph. 2: 6). This being so, we are called to leave the world, and all thoughts of sanctification in the flesh, remembering that it is with nothing else than with the "increase of God" that we are nourished (Col. 2: 19). What words! but not too great; for our life is hid in God, and therefore partakes of its proper, divine nourishment. It is not we that live, but Christ that lives in us. All this truth was so precious to Paul, that the teaching of those who were reviving the law, or bondage to ordinances, was especially his sorrow; and as such had leavened the churches in Galatia more than any other, his most aggrieved letter is to them. It was the jealous care of the apostle to keep the doctrines of unsullied Christianity in full purity, and to spread the savour of them through the hearts of the elect. And this doctrine of Christ tells us that man is utterly worthless — that he has been touched again and again by the finger of God, and been found to be an instrument entirely out of tune, having no music for Him at all. Man is, accordingly, in the boundlessness of divine grace, laid aside, and Christ is taken up, risen from the dead, as the head of a new creation. Believers are God's workmanship in Christ Jesus. Christ is formed in them. They are

born of God, and His seed remains in them — that incorruptible seed of the word of the gospel. They are a new creation, of which Christ is both the head and the character. He is in them, and they are in Him. It is not they who live, but Christ liveth in them. They are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, as has been before said, but to write again these precious truths is safe and pleasant. The believer is in Christ, and not in himself, and thus he has done with condemnation as much as Christ has. Christ was once condemned; He died unto sin once; but now He dieth no more, death has no more dominion over Him. And so with the believer who is in Him: "There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."

All this is for the effectual relief of the conscience, to give it perfect rest. But in the doctrine of Christ there is much more. It may be expressed thus, in *mind*, *body*, and *ESTATE*, believers are one with Jesus. How divine the love that could take such a counsel! The poor soul that believes is one with Christ in spirit now, and is to be one with Him in body and in inheritance by and bye. He that is joined to the Lord is already "one spirit" with Him; and the present vile body is to be hereafter changed into the likeness of "his glorious body;" and further still, we are "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ;" for in Him and with Him we have obtained an inheritance. Thus are believers "conformed to the image of the Son." In mind, body, and estate they are one with Him. Great features of the precious mystery of Christ these are; and, shall I say, still more marvellous is it, that the same love which rests on the Son rests on them (John 17: 23).

Thoughts quite beyond any but the mind of the Spirit open to us in all this. But while tracing the mystic oneness of Christ, we are to remember the teaching of Scripture, that Jesus is the Sanctifier, and believers but the sanctified (Heb. 2). And this shows that notwithstanding the existence of this oneness, yet the proper personal distance between Him and us originally was as great as light from darkness, as heaven from hell, as God Himself from sin. And we are also to remember that by His blood alone are we called into this condition. The blood is our only title, though the things to which it entitles us are thus immeasurable. Now all this glorious mystery is soiled and clouded by those who taught circumcision or the law of commandments contained in ordinances. No wonder, then, that our apostle so withstood them; for such doctrine revives the flesh — revives man in himself; and that is destructive of the first element in pure, unmixed Christianity. It builds again that which has been destroyed; it rakes among old ruins; it seeks the living among the dead; it busies itself in clothing a carcass; it is not in any wise a fellow-labourer with the Spirit, for it is dealing with man and not with Christ; it is of the world; for the apostle, in the strong language already conferred to in Col. 11: 20, challenges subjection to ordinances as a living in the world, and as unsuited to one that is dead and risen with Christ.

No wonder, then, that the apostle sets himself so zealously to the service of teaching the saints the great mystery, so bright and full as it is of the glory of God; and also to the service of gainsaying the leaven of the "teachers of the law," so destructive is it of glory. If he prized the grace of God in its purity and fulness, if he prized the liberty of the souls of the saints, if he valued the blood and work of Jesus, he must set himself to these services; he must withstand the pretensions of the flesh, wherever he met them, and spread among the saints the light and savour of this mystery of Christ. And so we find he did according to the working of God which wrought in him effectually. It was his jealousy lest that doctrine should be tainted; it was his delight and desire that that doctrine should be known. For the flesh, with all that it had, and all it could glory in, — whether its wisdom, strength, or religion, he had left to perish in its own corruption.

And in closing, let us ask, what will commonly be found in this enacting of days, and months, and times, and years — in this reviving of ordinances, and of the rudiments of the world? In those who impose them, there has been of old the design of fastening their own bonds round the hearts of their votaries; in those who adopt them, there is generally the blindness of the mere natural mind: but at

times these things are the fruit of growing worldliness in professors. This "doing, doing," in religious observances is the miserable substitute for the walk of faith and communion with God in the Spirit. The world that crucified Jesus is not heartily renounced, nor is Jesus Himself heartily embraced. The sweet savour of His name is departing, the freshness of His presence is fading, and the conscience, unsettled by this, seeks relief in the increased religiousness of the fleshly mind. The dark, cold heart, as it recedes from Christ, loses the vigorous, happy, genial sense, and puts on ornaments to hide from itself the growing feebleness of old age. It is well if they do not prove the very funeral trappings of a dead body. The heart knows its own wretched ways and deceits too well not to be able to speak of these things. Would that we were more simple concerning such evil. But Christ in His sufficiency is only the more prized and the more clung to as either one's soul is tempted this way, or as one's eye and ear understand that this way is growing in a generation of large and corrupted profession.