

The Fulness of Christ

John 1: 29-51.

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The glory of Christ is the central truth of the Bible. Anyone could see His humiliation; Pilate and Herod and the unbelieving Jews, the Roman soldiers, all the multitude did. But the sight of His humiliation was nothing without His glory; and when His glory was discerned, it was the humiliation of the Lord Jesus that filled the heart with shame and with abasement. This always deepens in presence of the love which made One so high to stoop so low; and whatever humiliation was seen in the days of our Lord was only the prelude of a deeper humiliation.

"Himself bare our sorrows and took our sicknesses," says the evangelist Matthew, looking on the wondrous grace of His earthly ministry; and it was true. The quotation, which is from Isaiah, does not refer to the atonement, I admit; but His path was one that led straight to the atonement. The bearing of our sorrows and sicknesses is quite a different thing from the bearing of our sins; but it was the same person in grace. Jehovah-Messiah was of course a divine person; but partaking of blood and flesh, He took the place of man in weakness. He drew from God the Father as a dependent man for every need that came before Him. It mattered not what it was; a sick body, a disordered soul, a mind filled with all that Satan can infuse of fear and terror and all that is most hateful to God and man; nay, death itself — nothing stood in His way. Whatever He needed, He drew down from God to meet each case; but He always bore the sorrow on His heart. He never was like those we may see any day who get rid of an importunate beggar with a sixpence. He never did so; but He bent under the weight of every sickness and sorrow He relieved. This is perfection. It was the perfection of His life as a man here below, even in doing miracles. Signs and wonders might be wrought by people that have no communion with God, and no compassion for man. He wrought them in grace peculiar to Himself.

The Lord Jesus was always in an unbroken bond of perfect relationship with God and of perfect compassionate pity towards man. Yet He well knew that all this was but preliminary to the great work that lay before Him. And what was that? His death as the Lamb of God — a work not yet seen in all its effects, and never to be so seen till not only the kingdom — which is a grand display — be established on the earth, but full perfection be reached; the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. No longer will even government be needed — righteousness will dwell in peace, when evil and wretchedness are gone. There will be the full fruit, not only of grace, but of grace reigning through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord, already enjoyed by faith.

Therein is a great ground of confidence for a poor soul that is anxious about its sins. I do not say that the Lord Jesus has taken sin out of the world yet. This may not be quite true; but He is the One who is to do it. There is but One, "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." Without saying that all is done, He is the Person; and if you ask me where is the work through which that infinite result is to be effected, on which it rests, and in virtue of which it will be done, I answer unhesitatingly, It is the cross. Love could not banish sin. Power could not banish sin according to God. Power might act, but where then love and righteousness? Had the Lord Jesus appeared merely to put away all evil from before Him, what must become of us? Where could sinful souls find refuge? If I am to stand and lift up my head in the presence of God, it must be on the ground of His righteousness. And this is exactly what the Lord Jesus provided on the cross. On the one hand, there was God in His love and holy nature, in His righteousness and majesty; on the other, there was man in all his sin and ruin; and the Lord Jesus comes between both. He goes not from man to God; but He comes from God to

man, and God was glorified in His cross about man's sin. "For God so loved the world that he gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The Lord Jesus did not produce one atom of love in the heart of God that was not there before; by the atoning work on the cross He removed all hindrance for every soul that bows down and owns his sins, but for none other. No one will receive the blessing of grace without faith and repentance; and it would be no blessing to man or glory to God without it. There must be the work of the Spirit in our hearts to produce self-judgment with confidence in God through that which the Lord Jesus has borne for the sake of sinners. If the heart be unaffected, if conscience be harder than a millstone, how could such a soul give praise to God in heaven?

God is not merely working for heaven, He is raising a testimony for Christ in human hearts on the earth before they go to heaven. The best robe for the prodigal does not mean only in heaven. When heaven comes, will there be an elder son out in the field? No murmuring is heard there — if possible less insult to the Father. Nobody in heaven will act thus. It is here and now, alas! that it is done. But there is where people very often stop. They think the only thing that is now true in the gospel is the Father coming out to kiss the son, the order to take away his rags — to invest him with the best robe, and to put a ring and shoes on him. Would to God that even this were better known! There are many who would lessen the guilt of sin and wrong Christ still. Men are not ashamed of this, and do not see it is deep dishonour to Christ, defrauding Him of His just reward. That which God delights in is to make men righteously happy now and in this world; and this not in the smallest degree because of any merits on the sinner's part, but entirely as the fruit of divine grace in His own Son and His redemptive work. But then the heart must bow to it; and this not only by the faith that receives it from God, but by the repentance that judges self, not one's evil works only, but the nature.

Now the feast is given; the calling of the friends and neighbours together is what follows; but it follows *here* — *not merely* in heaven. When in the heavenly city, there will be the tree of life with its twelve manner of fruits, and every month. But what the parable of the prodigal son shows us is a feast begun on earth — God's joy (for it was not merely the prodigal's joy) in having back His erring son safe and sound.

Beloved reader, what meaning has that to you? Has it none? Are you, first of all, in the delivered condition of the prodigal? and secondly, are you entering into the joy and love of God, which goes out and shares your joy? This is what God looks for now in this world. In heaven no doubt, we shall have it in perfection; but the christian man is called to enter into the love of God and joy of God while on the earth. He is not merely a forgiven man. He is not at all a man who is forborne with: this was the case before the death of Christ on the cross. When God was dealing in Old Testament times with His people, He forbore to press the debt; and they were then, as men are now in their natural state, liable to punishment. But then the work of Christ was not done, and God, looking on to it, would not exact the debt. He passed over the sins. There was a praetermission of sins; now there is a remission of sins. Not only does the Lord not judge the sins — they are completely gone.

You can conceive a wise, indulgent creditor who knew that you were greatly tried, but who thought proper to pity you, whatever might have brought about your straitened circumstances. He was merciful to you, and did not press the debt. But is this all the gospel? The gospel goes farther, and says that your sins on believing it are completely gone. Remember too it is only the first step — the threshold of the gospel; and this is what brings me to the next truth which I wish to present to you.

He that is the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world, the same is He who baptises with the Holy Ghost; and it is of importance to see it all. He has gone up to heaven, but His interest in His

people is none the less; if possible, He is in a better position to show it. All power, all authority, has been given to Him in heaven and on earth. And what is He doing now? Many things, of which one is here singled out by inspiration, His baptising with the Holy Spirit.

What is this? Baptism regularly means closing one condition in which you have been, and introducing you into an entirely different one. Such is the meaning of baptism in every case. It represents a closing of the past, and the introduction into a new position. It may only be a given place, and so only an external one. A man might be baptised, and none the better for it as far as regards his soul. This has been the case with thousands — nay, millions. But when a man is baptised even with water only, a solemn responsibility is placed upon him. A baptised person stands in a new and grave position. He is no longer a mere heathen. He is no longer simply a Jew. He confesses the name of the Lord Jesus. For we are supposing that the man adopts it — that he stands to it — that he does not apostatise openly: I am not at all raising any of the controversial questions of the time. I am only speaking of the thing itself, baptism; and I assert that it is not so small a matter as some people imagine, any more than the regular and indispensable means of life, as so many others dream. Christ gives life, not baptism: so to say is false and superstitious. But it does at any rate change one's status; and the baptised person, by the very fact of being baptised as much as says, I own Him Who died and rose again; I own Him Who is the only Saviour of sinners; I own Him Who has already accomplished redemption.

Now the baptism of the Holy Ghost is the power that brings us into heavenly privilege, and still goes on in its effect. It is not a question of outward profession, of which baptism with water is the sign. The baptism of the Holy Ghost is a new and divine work. But what does it bring to us? Not merely the remission of sins, which baptism with water represents. The baptism of the Holy Spirit associates livingly with Christ at the right hand of God. For this reason the Spirit comes from heaven. Our Lord, even after He rose from the dead, baptised not then with the Holy Ghost. He said before He went up to heaven — "Ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." To whom did He say this? To the disciples. They were not unbelievers: there were only believers then present. But they needed to have wrought another work in them that had not been wrought in one however favoured in the whole world. Never since the world began had there been baptism with the Holy Ghost. It is a work that followed Christ's ascension to heaven, uniting us with Himself and one with another.,

I call your attention to this, because all great vital truths are founded on facts. They are not ideas only. They are not mere reasonings hammered out of the intellect of man. They are the drawing out of the person of Christ the grand truths that follow from all the great facts about the Lord Jesus. Thus, as you have the work of atonement depending upon — His death, and the liberty and brightness of the Christian's life upon His resurrection, so His ascension has to usher in a fresh blessing. I do not say it is the only blessing, but a very great one — that now the Lord Jesus from the right hand of God sends down the Holy Ghost to associate livingly with Himself every soul that believes the gospel. The Son of Man indeed was sealed in His own moral perfectness (John 6: 27), as was meet; we, only in virtue of His redemption, Who is gone on high and has sent down the Holy Spirit to seal us.

And what is the result of that? A heavenly character is impressed upon every Christian. "As is the Heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly." We are not earthly men. We were, and indeed worse than that — we were lost men. A Jew at the very best is only an earthly man as such; but a Christian is characteristically not so. He has to learn what is spiritually discerned. He rests upon a Person. Grace to him flows down from that one Man, the head of the new family — the Man Who is in heaven, and Whom all heaven worships; for all the angels of God worship Him. And further, wondrous to say, Christians are not merely born anew and forgiven, not merely justified and children of God, but they

are associated with Christ. They are united to Him at the right hand of God.

Suppose the greatest lord in this land were to select some person in this room to be his wife. What would be the result of that relationship? If a young girl became the object of his affections and were married to him, what would be the consequence of that union? Why, for her at once a total change. She enters into all his dignity, and receives a new name from him. There is a new relationship; and if he has possessions without bound, he shares them, as we know, with her. All that is exactly what is true of the Christian. The union of the Christian with Christ is founded on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus : he is by the power of the Spirit even now united to Christ at the right hand of God.

And so it is that we find the apostle opening out the consequence in chapter 15 of First Corinthians — "As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy; and as is the Heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the Heavenly" (1 Cor. 15: 48, 49). Is it not very striking that the apostle wrote thus to the disorderly Corinthians? Every tyro has a slap at the Corinthians. They were indeed very faulty; but there are few saints now who are not really far below the Corinthians. Yet these were the persons to whom the Holy Ghost addressed these words. Had they been predicated of the choicest saints on earth, one might have said — "Oh, yes, these are heavenly men." It does not, however, rest on personal merit. It is not a question of superior intelligence or of higher endowments spiritually. Of course, there ought to be intelligence, and there ought to be practical spirituality; but we must never forget that the maiden's exaltation to be a duchess, or a princess if you will, does not at all depend upon her deserving it, nor because she had a sweeter character or a prettier face than other people. Perhaps it was not so at all. A far more important thing decides: it depends on the Duke, or Prince; and he was pleased to choose her.

This, I affirm, is what is pre-eminently true of our blessed Saviour. We know that all is accomplished according to the sovereign grace of God, and, that He looks watchfully that they who are called by His grace should comport themselves suitably to it. It is a question of conforming them according to Christ; and if they do not carry themselves according to the Lord Jesus, you know the Lord has His way of dealing with them. Why did some of the Corinthians die? Why were many of them troubled? Why were many sick? They had walked as men, as Greeks. But were they then heavenly? To be sure they were; and this is the very thing that made their conduct so bad. The more we see of the grace of the Lord, the greater ground for self-condemnation, if we behave ourselves unworthily of the Lord Jesus.

But the first thing is, let us leave room for the grace of Christ. Let us without hesitation rest upon the word of God — the word of His grace, inviting us, encouraging us, removing obstacles out of the way, bringing the full tide of blessing into our souls. Then when we have got the blessing, let us sit in judgment upon our souls, the Holy Ghost being in us a spirit of power, of love, and of sobriety, and bringing us into a new association with Christ at the right hand of God, which stamps us as heavenly. As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall bear the image of the Heavenly. How perfect the description! All see that we do not yet bear the image of the Heavenly. We bear the image of Adam still. Who, then, are heavenly? The title is conferred upon us, although we have got very little to show for it in present appearance. But still there it is: Christ has made us heavenly. He has brought us into that relationship of glory, and will ultimately conform us to the image of Himself, when we shall shine in all the beauty and glory of Christ. As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the Heavenly. So declares God's word.

This, then, is the double work of our Lord Jesus — the mighty work He wrought on the cross, and the mighty work He inaugurated from the right hand of God. Indeed His glory is set forth in other

ways, though we are unworthy of all. He is in heaven, but we are on earth, and consequently here exposed to difficulties, dangers, and snares. We require, therefore, a friend on high, and the light of the grace of Christ for all the difficulties. God may employ others; but the true test of any ministry is the bringing of souls to know Christ in a way He was never learnt before. If I get fresh glimpses of Christ with renewed confidence in His love; if I have the truth and the grace of the Lord brought before my soul in a manner which I had not previously realised, my soul receives a strength it never yet possessed.

Now, in this way it is that the Spirit of God shows us the immensity of Christ, and that the whole practical power of Christianity lies in His person and work. Every one admits that the great subject in the scripture is Christ, and that the object of faith is Christ; but it is not so generally seen that Christ is all." I have endeavoured to illustrate that in deed and truth Christ is all. When we are delivered from the burden of our sins; when we are brought into association with Christ by the power of the Holy Ghost, we want a centre for our hearts. Man cannot be without a centre. Only God is self-sufficient; we are not except in sin; and even where we pretend to be self-sufficient, we always sink low down. Now, man was made to look up, not to look down. A brute looks down, but man does not. Often, however, he only looks up as far as the stars and the sun, and worships them. You must look above them all up to God — not to the sun or to any other objects man has always been ready to deify.

We need a centre for our hearts. There is an energy in the heart of man, which otherwise denies God or deifies the creature. Man was made by God to rule; an angel was not. You never hear of an angel sitting on the throne or governing. On the contrary, the saints are to judge the angels. So that nothing can be more certain than that man was made to rule. For that reason, with others, we in our weakness require a centre to work to: for want of this people injure themselves or dishonour God. If a man has a consciousness of being unfit for it, he sets up another man and trusts to him. It is the same amongst scholars. They set up schools of opinion, of philosophy, of sciences, of languages, according to their tastes or their habits, and they make the school of their choice the practical centre, to which they are gathering. All their energies, their labours, are for the promotion of that central aim towards which they work. We also require one — the simplest Christian as much as the greatest; the greatest because he might otherwise set himself up, and the simplest because he feels the want of it. God gives us one, and this is taught in a very remarkable way here.

The first man we read of who officially had disciples was John the Baptist: I do not at all mean that he was wrong. Far from it; but still he is the only mere man in the New Testament, whose disciples God distinctly sanctioned. John had his disciples, and it is evident that he was a man singularly honoured (Matt. 11: 10, 11). "Again, the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples [having testified to the Lord the day before]; and looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! and the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus." Surely this is very striking. Now there was a Divine centre on earth; and John the Baptist, who had disciples strongly attached, so speaks of Jesus that his own disciples leave him to follow Jesus. How rarely we find that. It is not what men like. Even the good are too often jealous if men leave them, but John the Baptist showed the power of God. He manifested a simplicity of faith most seasonable.

No wonder the people took John for a prophet; for God was before Him. What is it that marks the prophet? The man that sees God's mind and makes it known. Other people may make known the truth, may preach the gospel; but the man that puts your conscience in the presence of God is the prophet. So the woman of Samaria, when her conscience was awakened to her sin, said, "Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet." It is the consciousness of God given to the soul that is the true test of a prophet. And so it was here. John the Baptist so speaks of our Lord that his own disciples turn from him to Jesus. He was right, and they were right. He was right to bear his heart's testimony to the Lord Jesus; and it is

remarkable enough that it was not a long effusion that he spoke, but a few words that told. "Behold the Lamb of God!" In the delight of his soul John rendered that testimony to Christ, and the moment that his disciples heard it, they followed Jesus. They heard John, they followed Jesus, and the Lord invited them to remain with Him that day.

Now there is exactly where you find the needed centre. One of the two that heard John and followed Jesus was Andrew, who first goes and finds his brother Simon Peter, and tells him, "We have found the Messiah," and he brought him to Jesus. Jesus is the true centre for men on earth. Not merely a Saviour is meant, but also a centre to work to. What am I doing, now that I am washed in the blood of Christ, and, what is more, associated with Him in heaven? Am I serving the world? I do not question the duty of carrying on my occupation in a Christian manner. This is all right, and in its own place most important. It is a bad job for any man who has not something to do: such a one is generally in the way. But the Christian that has an occupation by which he lives is called to stick to it, and do it thoroughly. It is my opinion, a Christian man ought to do his work a great deal better than any other; nay, it would be a real shame to him if he did not, because his carelessness could not but bring a stigma on the name of Jesus. Only senseless men run down a man for cleaving to his honest occupation. Let us heed the apostle Paul, that if a man will not work, he ought not to eat.

But in this case, where Christ and the soul are concerned, it is another thing altogether. Have I now a divine centre that fills my heart? What I want is not to make money or a name, nor yet that I should accomplish this purpose or that. Farther, it is not the mere service of my country or of my sovereign, or anything of the kind (although, of course, I am bound to honour the Queen); but there is made known, another centre to which we work, infinitely higher and more commanding, which does not really end when you have done your work, but which abides beyond all time. The one thing, that God wants is, that whatever you do should be to Christ, with a happy heart; no murmuring here, no complaining, nor striking for more wages. The one who helps you to meet and overcome all these aberrations, who puts your heart at rest, is Jesus. There was a time, no doubt, when men set up what they called a city for Jesus — a commonwealth for His name. But this was a kind of religious monomania, for after all the city was only for themselves. There was no reality in it for Christ. It was a mere outburst of fanatical folly. But I am speaking now of simplicity and assiduity in the sight of God, of guidance by His word and Spirit.

Faith is not just to be limited to believing in Jesus for salvation, or subjection to Him as to this duty or that duty. It is more. It is a cleaving to a Living Person as a centre that commands my soul in all the work I am set to do. The disciples went to Jesus, and one of them goes and finds another and brings him to Jesus. How was this? Had Christ been only a man, they never would have left John the Baptist. Why should they? They were John the Baptist's disciples, and of all men born of women there had not been a greater than John. Why did they leave him? Because they found the Messiah — One surely to be preferred before him — the Eternal One.

Are you conscious that in all your religious life you refer to the Lord Jesus — that He is really and truly your centre? Most people you know go by where they were born or bred, christened or converted, by their country, by their connection, or something of that sort. But these disciples did not. They for the first time in their lives recognised a Man of divine glory and authority Who had absolute claims on their affection and allegiance. I leave that to work in every breast here. Be sure whatever you do, more particularly in religious things, that you have no superior authority to Jesus. Look alone to Him then, whatever dark questions may perplex you, and He will give you light.

That is not all. We are going through a wilderness. We have to pass through a world where there

are manifold and subtle snares. We want, therefore, not only a centre to work to, but a path to follow. Where shall we find the true path for our souls? Not surely when we get to heaven. There we shall need no way, because all is good and bright there. But where all is wrong, when you are surrounded by enemies of every kind, you want an unerring way. Where shall such a path be found? I answer, in the Saviour. The Lord, therefore, in the next place brings out that truth. "The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me." He Himself is the path, the only true way for the Christian. Whatever comes — whatever difficulties or trials — search and see what the will of the Lord is; and the moment you are subject to His will, you follow Him. He was always doing the will of God, as He reveals the will of God in His word. To obey His word in faith is to follow Himself.

There is another blessing. We are in a world where there are false paths of all kinds, and men are ensnared by them. Some have their tastes here, some have there their predilections or their prejudices. One requires, therefore, to have an object before the soul to keep it right; and what do we find to be the declared object in the end of the chapter? The Son of Man. Remark that He is not spoken of as the Son of God. Just before He is. But He Who is the Son of God is also the Son of Man, and it is as Son of Man that He is brought before us here. "Hereafter (rather, henceforth) ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Thus the highest angels of God waited upon the humbled Man — the One who came down so low that, while all saints follow Him, none really approaches. Such is the object for the Christian, no matter what he does. If I look at the foundation of my soul, the Lamb of God is this. If I think of the power that lifts to heaven, the Spirit He gives is the power. If I seek for a centre to work to, Christ is that centre. If I want a path to follow through the intricacies of the world, He and He alone is the One to follow. If I look for an object for my soul, He is the only one God gives me.

Do not treat even Scripture poetry as mere poetry. I grant that even from the poetic point of view nothing is like it, and that all Shakespeare or Milton ever wrote so grandly is poor indeed compared with what is therein. Take even Milton, who had the benefit of using Scripture expressly. He puts all wrong where, if I listen to him, the devil is reigning in a very fine palace. What a vain dream! Satan has never reigned in hell. The devil will be the most miserable object in hell through all eternity. This is not reigning. So evident is it that the effect of the Miltonic picture is to disorder men's minds about the truth. The devil is reigning in this world now and here, not in hell. What is still more important is the erroneous impressions he gives of God and especially of His Son. For Christ is ever the test whether one is taught of God, or only glories in man. I press this for the purpose of securing the truth to settle our souls — to give us true objects as seen in the light of God — to make us firm and constant in His grace and truth, His light shining down upon our every step through this wilderness world. May God in His rich mercy grant that these remarks may help to lead some weary wayfarer out of the darkness of the enemy into the marvellous light of God. Amen.