THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XVII.

THE PRESENT CHRISTIAN LIFE, ARISEN LIFE.

"If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, *who is* our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with Him be manifested in glory."—COL. iii. 1–4 (Rev. Ver.).

WE have now done with controversy. We hear no more about heretical teachers. The Apostle has cut his way through the tangled thickets of error, and has said his say as to the positive truths with which he would hew them down. For the remainder of the letter, we have principally plain practical exhortations, and a number of interesting personal details.

The paragraph which we have now to consider is the transition from the controversial to the ethical portion of the Epistle. It touches the former by its first words, "If ye then were raised together with Christ," which correspond in form and refer in meaning to the beginning of the previous paragraph, "If ye died with Christ." It touches the latter because it embodies the broad general precept, "Seek the things that are above," of which the following practical directions are but varying applications in different spheres of duty.

In considering these words we must begin by endeavouring to put clearly their connexion and substance. As they flew from Paul's eager lips, motive and precept, symbol and fact, the present and future are blended together. It may conduce to clearness if we try to part these elements.

There are here two similar exhortations, side by side.

"Seek the things that are above," and "Set your mind on the things that are above." The first is *preceded*, and the second is *followed* by its reason. So the two laws of conduct are, as it were, enclosed like a kernel in its shell, or a jewel in a gold setting, by encompassing motives. These considerations, in which the commandments are imbedded, are the double thought of union with Christ in His resurrection, and in His death, and as consequent thereon, participation in His present hidden life, and in His future glorious manifestation. So we have here the present budding life of the Christian in union with the risen, hidden Christ; the future consummate flower of the Christian life in union with the glorious manifested Christ; and the practical aim and direction which alone is consistent with either bud or flower.

I. The present budding life of the Christian in union with the risen, hidden Christ.

Two aspects of this life are set forth in verses 1 and 3—"raised with Christ," and "ye died, and your life is hid with Christ." A still profounder meaning is in the words of verse 4, "Christ *is* our life."

We have seen in former papers that Paul believed that, when a man puts his faith in Jesus Christ, he is joined to Him in such a way that he is separated from his former self and dead to the world. That great change may be considered either with reference to what the man has ceased to be, or with reference to what he becomes. In the one view, it is a death; in the other, it is a resurrection. It depends on the point of view whether a semicircle seems convex or concave. The two thoughts express substantially the same fact. That great change was brought about in these Colossian Christians, at a definite time, as the language shows; and by a definite means—namely, by union with Christ through faith, which grasps His death and resurrection as at once the ground of salvation, the

pattern for life, and the prophecy of glory. So then, the great truths here are these; the impartation of life by union with Christ, which life is truly a resurrection life, and is moreover, hidden with Christ in God.

Union with Christ by faith is the condition of a real communication of life. "In Him was life," says John's Gospel, meaning thereby to assert, in the language of our Epistle, that "in Him were all things created, and in Him all things consist." Life in all its forms is dependent on union in varying manner with the Divine, and upheld only by His continual energy. The creature must touch God or perish. Of that energy the Uncreated Word of God is the channel—"with Thee is the fountain of life." As the life of the body, so the higher self-conscious life of the thinking, feeling, striving soul, is also fed and kept alight by the perpetual operation of a higher Divine energy, imparted in like manner by the Divine Word. Therefore, with deep truth, the psalm just quoted, goes on to say, "In Thy light shall we see light"—and therefore, too, John's Gospel continues: "And the life was the light of men."

But there is a still higher plane on which life may be manifested, and nobler energies which may accompany it. The body may live, and mind and heart be dead. Therefore Scripture speaks of a three-fold life: that of the animal nature, that of the intellectual and emotional nature, and that of the Spirit, which lives when it is conscious of God, and touches Him by aspiration, hope, and love. This is the loftiest life. Without it, a man is dead while he lives. With it, he lives though he dies. And like the others, it depends on union with the Divine life as it is stored in Jesus Christ—a conscious union by faith. If I trust to Him, and am thereby holding firmly by Him, my union with Him is so real, that, in the measure of my faith, His fulness passes over into my emptiness, His righteousness into my sinfulness, His life into my death,

as surely as the electric shock thrills my nerves when I grasp the poles of the battery.

No man can breathe into another's nostrils the breath of life. But Christ can and does, and this true miracle of a communication of spiritual life takes place in every man who humbly trusts himself to Him. So the question comes home to each of us—am I living by my union with Christ? do I draw from Him that better being which He is longing to pour into my withered, dead spirit? It is not enough to live the animal life; the more it is fed, the more are the higher lives starved and dwindled. It is not enough to live the life of intellect and feeling. That may be in brightest, keenest exercise, and yet we—our best selves—may be dead—separated from God in Christ, and therefore dead—and all our activity may be but galvanic twitching of the muscles in a corpse. Is Christ our life, its source, its strength, its aim, its motive? Do we live in Him, by Him, with Him, for Him? If not, we are dead while we live.

This life from Christ is a *resurrection* life. "The power of Christ's resurrection" is threefold—as a seal of His mission and Messiahship, "declared to be the Son of God, by His resurrection from the dead;" as a prophecy and pledge of ours, "now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept;" and as a symbol and pattern of our new life of Christian consecration, "likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be indeed dead unto sin." This last use of the resurrection of Christ is a plain witness of the firm, universal and uncontested belief in the historical fact, throughout the Churches which Paul addressed. The fact must have been long familiar and known as undoubted, before it could have been thus moulded into a symbol. But, passing from that, consider that our union to Christ produces a moral and spiritual change analogous to His resurrection. After all, it is the moral and not

the mystical side which is the main thing in Paul's use of this thought. He would insist, that all true Christianity operates a death to the old self, to sin and to the whole present order of things, and endows a man with new tastes, desires and capacities, like a resurrection to a new being. These heathen converts—picked from the filthy cesspools in which many of them had been living, and set on a pure path, with the astounding light of a Divine love flooding it, and a bright hope painted on the infinite blackness ahead—had surely passed into a new life. Many a man in this day, long familiar with Christian teaching, has found himself made over again in mature life, when his heart has grasped Christ. Drunkards, profligates, outcasts, have found it life from the dead; and even where there has not been such complete visible revolution as in them, there has been such deep-seated central alteration that it is no exaggeration to call it resurrection. The plain fact is that all real Christianity in a man will produce in him a radical moral change. If our religion does not do that in us, it is nothing. Ceremonial and doctrine are all means to an end—making us better men. The highest purpose of Christ's work, for which He both "died and rose and revived" is to change us into the likeness of His own beauty of perfect purity. That risen life is no mere exaggeration of mystical rhetoric, but an imperative demand of the highest mortality, and the plain issue of it is: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body." Do I say that I am a Christian? The test by which my claim must be tried is the likeness of my life here to Him who has died unto sin, and liveth unto God.

But the believing soul is risen with Christ also, inasmuch as our union with Him makes us partakers of His resurrection as our victory over death. The water in the reservoir and in the fountain is the same; the sunbeam in the chamber and in the sky are one. The life which flows into our spirits from Christ is a life that has conquered

death, and makes us victors in that last conflict, even though we have to go down into the darkness. If Christ live in us, we can never die. "It is not possible that *we* should be holden of *it*." The bands which He broke can never be fastened on our limbs. The gates of death have been so warped and the locks so spoiled when He burst them asunder, that they can never be closed again. There are many arguments for a future life beyond the grave, but there is only one proof of it—the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, trusting in Him, and with our souls bound in the bundle of life with our Lord the King, we can cherish quiet thankfulness of heart, and bless the God and Father of our Lord who hath begotten us again into a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

This risen life is a *hidden* life. Its roots are in Him. He has passed in His ascension into the light which is inaccessible, and there is hidden in its blaze, bearing with Him our life, concealed there with Him in God. Faith stands gazing into heaven, as the cloud, the visible manifestation from of old of the Divine presence, hides Him from sight, and turns away feeling that the best part of its true self is gone with Him. So here Paul points his finger upwards to where "Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God," and says—We are here in outward seeming, but our true life is there, if we are His. And what majestic, pregnant words these are! How full, and yet how empty for a prurient curiosity, and how reverently reticent even while they are triumphantly confident! How gently they suggest repose—deep and unbroken, and yet full of active energy! For if the attitude imply rest, the locality—"at the right hand of God"—expresses not only the most intimate approach, but also the wielding of the Divine omnipotence. What is the right hand of God but the activity of His power? and what less can be ascribed to Christ here, than His being enthroned in closest union with the

Father, exercising Divine dominion, and putting forth Divine power. No doubt the ascended and glorified bodily manhood of Jesus Christ has a local habitation, but the old psalm might teach us that wherever space is, even there "Thy right hand upholds," and there is our ascended Lord, sitting as in deepest rest, but working all the work of God. And it is just because He is at the right hand of God that He is hid. The light hides. He has been lost to sight in the glory.

He has gone in thither, bearing with Him the true source and root of our lives into the secret place of the Most High. Therefore we no longer belong to this visible order of things in the midst of which we tarry for a while. The true spring that feeds our lives lies deep beneath all the surface waters. These may dry up, but it will flow. These may be muddied with rain, but it will be limpid as ever. The things seen do not go deep enough to touch our real life. They are but as the winds that fret, and the currents that sway the surface and shallower levels of the ocean, while the great depths are still. The circumference is all a whirl; the centre is at rest.

Nor need we leave out of sight, though it be not the main thought here, that the Christian life is hidden inasmuch as here on earth action ever falls short of thought, and the love and faith by which a good man lives can never be fully revealed in his conduct and character. You cannot carry electricity from the generator to the point where it is to work without losing two-thirds of it by the way. Neither word nor deed can adequately set forth a soul; and the profounder and nobler the emotion, the more inadequate are the narrow gates of tongue and hand to give it passage. The deepest love can often only "love and be silent." So, while every man is truly a mystery to his neighbour, a life which is rooted in Christ is more mysterious to the ordinary eye than any other. It is fed

by hidden manna. It is replenished from a hidden source. It is guided by other than the world's motives, and follows unseen aims. "Therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not."

II. We have the future consummate flower of the Christian life in union with the manifested, glorious Christ.

The future personal manifestation of Jesus Christ in visible glory is, in the teaching of all the New Testament writers, the last stage in the series of His Divine human conditions. As surely as the Incarnation led to the cross, and the cross to the empty grave, and the empty grave to the throne, so surely does the throne lead to the coming again in glory. And as with Christ, so with His servants, the manifestation in glory is the certain end of all the preceding, as surely as the flower is of the tiny green leaves that peep above the frost-bound earth in bleak March days. Nothing in that future, however glorious and wonderful, but has its germ and vital beginning in our union with Christ here by humble faith. The great hopes which we may cherish are gathered up here into three words—"We shall be manifested." That is far more than was conveyed by the old translation—"shall appear." The roots of our being shall be disclosed, for He shall come, "and every eye shall see Him." We shall be seen for what we are. The outward life shall correspond to the inward. The faith and love which often struggled in vain for expression and were thwarted by the obstinate flesh, as a sculptor trying to embody his dream might be by a block of marble with many a flaw and speck, shall then be able to reveal themselves completely. Whatever is in the heart shall be fully visible in the life. Stammering words and imperfect deeds shall vex us no more. "His name shall be in their foreheads"—no longer only written in fleshly tables of the heart, and partially visible in the character, but stamped legibly and completely on life and nature. They shall walk

in the light, and so shall be seen of all. Here the truest followers of Christ shine like an intermittent star, seen through mist and driving cloud: "Then shall the righteous *blaze forth* like the sun in the kingdom of My Father."

But this is not all. The manifestation is to be "with Him." The union which was here effected by faith, and marred by many an interposing obstacle of sin and selfishness, of flesh and sense, is to be perfected then. No film of separation is any more to break its completeness. Here we often lose our hold of Him amidst the distractions of work, even when done for His sake; and our life is at best but an imperfect compromise between contemplation and action; but then, according to that great saying, "His servants shall serve Him, and see His face," the utmost activity of consecrated service, though it be far more intense and on a nobler scale than anything here, will not interfere with the fixed gaze on His countenance. We shall serve like Martha, and yet never remove from sitting with Mary, rapt and blessed at His feet.

This is the one thought of that solemn future worth cherishing. Other hopes may feed sentiment, and be precious sometimes to aching hearts. A reverent longing, or an irreverent curiosity, may seek to discern something more in the far-off light. But it is enough for the heart to know that "we shall be ever with the Lord"; and the more we have that one hope in its solitary grandeur, the better. We shall be with Him "in glory." That is the climax of all that Paul would have us hope. "Glory" is the splendour and light of the self-revealing God. In the heart of the blaze stands Christ; the bright cloud enwraps Him, as it did on the mountain of transfiguration, and into the dazzling radiance His disciples will pass as His companions did then, nor "fear as they enter into the cloud." They walk unconcerned in that beneficent fire, because with them is one like unto a Son of man, through whom

they dwell, as in their home, amidst "the everlasting burning," which shall not destroy them, but kindle them into the likeness of its own flashing glory.

Then shall the life which here was but in bud, often unkindly nipt and struggling, burst into the consummate beauty of the perfect flower "which fadeth not away."

III. We have the practical aim and direction which alone is consistent with either stage of the Christian life.

Two injunctions are based upon these considerations—"seek," and "set your mind upon," the things that are above. The one points to the outward life of effort and aim; the other to the inward life of thought and longing. Let the things above, then, be the constant mark at which you aim. There is a vast realm of real existence of which your risen Lord is the centre and the life. Make it the point to which you strive. That will not lead to despising earth and nearer objects. These, so far as they are really good and worthy, stand right in the line of direction which our efforts will take if we are seeking the things that are above, and may all be stages on our journey Christwards. The lower objects are best secured by those who live for the higher. No man is so well able to do the smallest duties here, or to bear the passing troubles of this world of illusion and change, or to wring the last drop of sweetness out of swiftly fleeting joys, as he to whom everything on earth is dwarfed by the eternity beyond, as some hut beside a palace, and is great because it is like a little window a foot square through which infinite depths of sky with all its stars shine in upon him. The true meaning and greatness of the present is that it is the vestibule of the august future. The staircase leading to the presence chamber of the king may be of poor deal, narrow, crooked, and stowed away in a dark turret, but it has dignity by reason of that to which it gives access. So let our aims pass through the earthly and find in them helps to the things that are above.

We should not fire all our bullets at the short range. Seek ye first the kingdom of God—the things which are above.

"Set your mind on" these things, says the Apostle further. Let them occupy mind and heart—and this in order that we may seek them. The direction of the aims will follow the set and current of the thoughts. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." How can we be shaping our efforts to reach a good which we have not clearly before our imaginations as desirable? How should the life of so many professing Christians be other than a lame creeping along the low levels of earth, seeing that so seldom do they look up to "see the King in His beauty and the land that is very far off"? John Bunyan's "man with the muck-rake" grubbed away so eagerly among the rubbish, because he never lifted his eyes to the crown that hung above his head. In many a silent, solitary hour of contemplation, with the world shut out and Christ brought very near, we must find the counterpoise to the pressure of earthly aims, or our efforts after the things that are above will be feeble and broken. Life goes at such a pace to-day, and the present is so exacting with most of us, that quiet meditation is, I fear me, almost out of fashion with Christian people. We must become more familiar with the secret place of the most High, and more often enter into our chamber and shut our doors about us, if in the bustle of our busy days we are to aim truly and strongly at the only object which saves life from being a waste and a sin, a madness and a misery—"the things which are above, where Christ is."

"Where Christ is." Yes, that is the only thought which gives definiteness and solidity to that else vague and nebulous unseen universe; the only thought which draws our affections thither. Without Him, there is no footing for us there. Rolling mists of doubt and dim hopes warring with fears, strangeness and terrors wrap it all. But if He be

there, it becomes a home for our hearts. "I go to prepare a place for you"—a place where desire and thought may walk unterrified and undoubting even now, and where we ourselves may abide when our time comes, nor shrink from the light nor be oppressed by the glory.

> "My knowledge of that life is small,
> The eye of faith is dim,
> But 'tis enough that Christ knows all,
> And I shall be with Him."

Into that solemn world we shall all pass. We can choose whether we shall go to it as to our long-sought home, to find in it Him who is our life; or whether we shall go reluctant and afraid, leaving all for which we have cared, and going to Him whom we have neglected and that which we have feared. Christ will be manifested, and we shall see Him. We can choose whether it will be to us the joy of beholding the soul of our soul, the friend long-loved when dimly seen from afar; or whether it shall be the vision of a face that will stiffen us to stone and stab us with its light. We must make our choice. If we give our hearts to Him, and by faith unite ourselves with Him, then, "when He shall appear, we shall have boldness, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming."

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THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH.

III. VISION OF THE CANDLESTICK.—ZECH. iv.

THE preceding vision was meant to convey to the Jews the assurance that their high priest Joshua was re-instated as the religious head of the nation; this vision was meant to give a similar assurance regarding Zerubbabel, their civil head. The people might well be in doubt and despondency