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THE  
PULPIT TREASURY.  
AN EVANGELICAL MONTHLY.

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VOL. II.

NEW YORK, OCTOBER, 1884.

No. 6.

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→\*SERMONS\*←

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COMPLETE IN CHRIST.

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NEW YORK.

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*Ye are complete in Him.*—COLOSSIANS ii., 10.

EVERY great system of faith, as every valuable mechanism, represents a principle peculiar to itself, a characteristic which entitles it to consideration. There may be deduced from that, or revolving around it—as you may furnish power from a central machinery for a whole system of wheels and spindles—many important adjuncts, but there must be one principle which imparts its force to all the rest. The world must have one central sun. The animal organization must have a heart, the pulsation of which sends its vitality to every other organ and member. The intelligent creation must have one all-sufficient mind. That is to each of these its characteristic.

So in every really valuable mechanism which the requirement of man has called forth, we find some one distinctive and essential feature which marks its individuality. Implements differ one from the other as each kind expresses an excellence peculiar to it, and therefore to be desired. Where we may not possess the genius for invention, we may yet be capable of new adaptations which shall entitle our results to the dignity of a discovery.

In the same manner men are of large or small account in the world as they recognize their individuality. The profoundest wisdom is to meet the

requirement for the talents with which we have been endowed, in the spheres which Providence has assigned us. Each stone is hewed for its especial place, whether for foundation, or wall, or arch, or turret. To fail to appreciate our purpose, as those whom the grace of the Great Architect has contemplated, is to degrade our manhood and to insult the divine prescience. I do not doubt that when we come to understand the ground upon which the awards of eternity are fixed, it will be seen that the verdict of approval or of condemnation shall be as we have maintained or disproved our right to our existence here, by filling or failing to fill a vital place.

The claim of Christianity to be is that it, in like manner, embodies one pre-eminent and distinctive fact. It does not assume to be one of many, but one by itself. It draws its inspiration, as the sun its light and heat, solely from its own heart. Valuable as it might prove in other respects, if it did not present this characteristic of features peculiar to itself, and supremely desirable, it could maintain no especial title to our regard.

Ethically considered, the Christian system has much in common with other religions. As embodying worship of the Supreme Being it is not exclusive. The practical virtues which it commends may be found blooming and bearing fruit along the course of certain earthly streams. Indeed, in the fortitude which the tortured savage displays; in the patience and submissive self-repression of enslaved peoples, heroic to hold temper and physical might in check; in the native quietness and peaceable disposition of distant eastern nations, our faith, as to its practical forms, might find examples the imitation of which would be to its advantage.

The central feature or force of Christianity, however, you at once perceive, is that which its name indicates—the Christ element. As tests which give both the fact and the measure of the quality in combination, the degree in which Christ is present in the faith and dependence of the heart marks the purity of the Christianity or its admixture with another spirit not its own. For the name of Christ is above every name not alone in His inherent dignity, but in the technical acceptance of it. To the believer it is the synonym of all that is comprehensive, of life, of light, of grace begun below and consummated in glory. The question which the Scriptures propose to every man is, "What think ye of Christ?"

A great deal—possibly a great deal of error—may be forgiven to the man who with all his heart believes in Christ. An early bias may have predisposed him to the rejection of certain truths which orthodoxy asserts are of immense importance. He may dissent from the statement of total depravity. Words are at best feeble vehicles of thought. The speaker and the interpreter may be of different schools, where terms were tintured each to its own prejudice. The sinfulness the one recognizes may not appear to him so dense, mitigated as he feels it is by better aspirations; the stream of life not so heavily overshadowed that not a gleam is ever reflected from its black and gloomy surface. He may mistake the brooding of the Spirit over this sullen waste for the quickening of his own emotion. But he who has accepted

Jesus Christ as his Saviour, has demonstrated a faith of the heart transcending the confession of the intellect, and has, as a conscious sinner, laid the crown of his salvation at the feet of the Redeemer.

You know, too, that when this inquiry is proposed, "What think ye of Christ?" or the declaration made, "Ye are complete in Him," it is to go much farther than our recognition of Christ as a historic character, bearing to Christianity the relation of its Author, as you would associate Buddhism with Buddha or Mohammedanism with Mahomet. It is Christ interpenetrating Christianity at every point, its life within and its radiating light, the Alpha and Omega, commensurate with its length and breadth and height and depth. To believe in Christ is salvation; to walk in Christ is holiness; to die in Christ is victory; to rise in Christ is glory.

I know that you could not have failed to be impressed with the comprehensive, all-filling character and capacities which the *Scriptures* assert for Christ. Our utmost effort could not exaggerate these representations. Hear Christ himself say, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me." "Without Me ye can do nothing." Hear Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians: "Of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." That covers all the ground from the first divine thought of salvation to the crowning of every believer in glory. Or perhaps more comprehensively than by all the others, in the context, "For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in Him."

I. Observe this completeness in Christ in contrast with all others. We are not considering now the greatness of Christ in himself, His supreme deity, save as it is incidental to this nearer thought, the everlasting buttress of our hope. It is *our* completeness in Him.

No life is or can be in itself alone. By providential appointment, as by the necessity of our nature, we are sustaining a multitude of relations, those of family, of neighborhood, commercial relations, civil, governmental. Some of these are immensely important. We may not see how society could exist without them. Individually we are not more helpful to them than they are elevating to us.

You perceive at once, however, that it would not be possible to employ such language as I have quoted of Christ, of any one or all of these. Of any other save God, or one who stood for us as representing God, it would be the extreme of egoism. The very fulsomeness of such description would condemn it.

No! of no relation of life, even the most tender and valuable, can it be said, "This is essential." The callow birds that nestled for a while beneath the mother's wings, whose very life was held in her hourly provision, soon grown strong of flight, forget the distinct note of her call, nor know her from others of the flock. Somehow the little child whose orphanage touched us to tears, moves on to youth and womanhood, perhaps herself scarcely missing the care we deemed so essential.

That seems the destiny of man in almost every sphere, to grow out of existing states, to use places that are, only as the oar employs the water into which it dips, as a leverage for progress to a further stage. We obtain but to desire more. The roof-tree shelters and the parental hand lovingly guides until we can walk alone, and then we push aside the gentle, trembling touch, eager in our turn to become the guides of others. Then, later on, the best things cease to content, until at last the faded eyes gazing dimly upon a disappointing past, gather their remaining strength for an outlook toward the eternal hills, and heights that are unending progression.

We may thank God that it is so, that in a world where death spares neither relation nor rank, and the mutability of everything beneath the sun checkers the most constant spheres—we may thank God that there is no one person or condition wherein our completeness lies.

I assume this to be a truth which has been demonstrated in every conceivable position in which human beings can be placed—that there is no absolute relation, none which men sustain to men which may not be dispensed with. The king, the hero, the father dies: the nation, the community, the family mourns as if nature had stopped in its courses: but to-morrow—and the world moves on unchanged, save that one grave more has furrowed its surface. It is a very humiliating lesson, no doubt—so disappointing to our hope to be remembered—were it not a divine hint that that hope is to have its realization in a sphere where there are to be no changes.

No! it does not require much reflection to show us how small a valuation, and to what very narrow dimensions the most important and self-esteemed may be reduced. That any of us is essential to the place he occupies is but a fiction of his own weakness, or the too flattering adulation of his admirers. Only of God is it true, that by Him all things consist, and that without Him nothing lives which does live.

The reason of this, and as marking the essential difference between our relations to any other and to Christ, is that the former are, in a sense, conventional. We found them when we came into the world—as the child found the ready provision of the mother's care—and we have become habituated to them. Nevertheless, social, civil, commercial, they are not necessary, nor are we complete in the possession of them. Others made out to survive and to flourish independently of them.

Only of One can it be said that He is essential. Only in One is there completeness for us in life and death, in joy and sorrow, in eternity as in time.

That we are complete in Christ, therefore, renders necessary that other declaration which precedes it—that “in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the godhead bodily;” or, as it is elsewhere expressed, that He, Christ, is “the fulness of Him who filleth all things.”

If I should pause here then to deduce the doctrine of this context, it would be to state that what God can do for us, Christ can do for us. Whatever there is of power in God to save, is, by this divine revelation, transferred to Christ.

II. That we are complete in Christ as necessarily implies that apart from Him we have absolutely no moral or spiritual standing place.

I care not to argue the question of degrees. Incompleteness, where perfection is demanded, where the judgment is by an infinitely holy standard, is as condemnatory and destructive to our *moral* basis as is any other degree of sin. A few years ago a large object-glass was prepared for a telescope for one of our national observatories. With all the vigilance and care employed, when critical examination was made a single defective point was discovered not far from the centre, a clouded opaqueness or blur upon the otherwise perfect lens. It was not broken, there was no flaw or blister upon it, but it was condemned. Its purpose was to be as a clear, undeviating eye turned toward the heavens, accurately to determine localities and distances. That single *imperfection* was its entire condemnation.

This I take to be the idea of the much controverted doctrine of human depravity. Few, perhaps, hold that all human impulses are sinful, that they spring in personal selfishness or greed. To what eloquent disclaimers are we treated, with what outbursts of apparently righteous indignation arraigned, as maintaining that the rill of maternal love that flows with such constant, pellucid stream, oozes from the black marsh of selfishness! How, we are asked, can the heroism that hazards life, the philanthropy that hovers in unbought ministrations above the camp and the hospital, consist with a universal moral degradation; a virtue so godlike be of satanic suggestion? We are not aware that they can, or that any one ever supposed they could. It is well to remember that he who puts an unfair representation of the statement he would criticise, confesses thereby that he is afraid to meet the doctrine as it is. A large proportion of the arraignment of orthodoxy is after this sort. So in this case, the illustration is all on the part of the eloquent caricaturists who insist upon formulating the dogma they would attack; and then, having succeeded in depicting a false portrait of a truthful face, proceed to wreak their vengeance upon it.

The doctrine of human depravity, as held in the faith of the Church, never asserted that all human impulse, however lovely, springs in selfish purpose. It is merely—and surely this is enough—that the defect in the web of the cloth renders the whole piece unmarketable; that slight incompleteness is still incompleteness, and that when the judgment is to be upon righteousness, that foundation is taken from beneath our feet.

It would be a curious study to investigate by what process of reasoning so many, of different minds, who have long resisted grace, have coolly concluded to risk the great ordeal of confronting God and the judgment, upon their personal moral standing. If it be in the simple unbelief of a future life, and therefore of all accountability, the matter is easily explained. But the mystery is that minds and hearts accepting a belief in a hereafter, and in the God of revelation, can view with complacency a righteousness which even their fellow-men pronounce defective.

For it is a principle that may well command this easy-going complacency

to a halt, that the nature of sincere virtue, of high moral qualities and of positive excellence, is ever to discontent with that whereunto we have already attained. Even as eminence with the pencil and the chisel leads to the detection of manifold deficiencies and desire for the higher ideal; so the advance toward holiness, instead of satisfying, always reveals a disheartening lack. While limping mediocrity and self-inflated pretence may rest upon the applause of their own conceit, the experience of the best and purest minds the world has ever known, renders axiomatic the confession of the Apostle as a universal confession, "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."

Note the principle: that the approach to the light toward which we would attain is invariably attended with discontent, and as invariably with a search for some other mode of meeting the requirement of our consciences.

As you move around the room darkened from the outer light, a common grey rests on all objects. The soiled appears as fair as the clean, the rickety to stand as firmly as the good. But throw open the window, let in the light of day, and what a revelation! That, in a moral sense, you remember, was Job's awakening—Job, an upright man in his own estimation, until he had brought himself before God. Then his own clothes abhorred him, as one plunged in a ditch, and the cry of his heart was for a daysman, a mediator who might stand between him and God.

The mere copyist can perhaps reproduce the model to his satisfaction, for he has but to measure lines and imitate shades. But to him who would put upon the canvas an original, the glowing fancy of his brain, the portrait of the spiritual, there is so rapid an increase in his own conception that he stops and stands disheartened at the eluding richness of his ideal. So to take an earthly model of virtue and to set him before you may not greatly discourage; but to stand for ourselves in the light of the divine holiness, what is this but to outline our form in more intense shadow?

Now the mystery is that any can trace the steps in his own course by which he would come up to fitness to appear before God, and not observe with most depressing effect his moral deficiencies, his impotence, the down-pulling tendencies of his nature and association. May it not be, I submit, that this failure to perceive our own incompleteness, and the requirement of a better, justifying righteousness, is rather to be ascribed to moral blindness than accepted as the evidence of superior virtue? For if once our incompleteness out of Christ be admitted, then the neglect to obey the Gospel is stripped of its dignity, and reduced to pitiable, almost childish trifling with an eternal interest.

Yet how can one more fully commend the completeness that there is in Christ than to point to that spotless life on the earth, consummated by the sacrificial death upon the cross? For all the way through—where the suffering by innocence must either mean injustice on the part of God, or justice receiving satisfaction for us—there is not a step or act which is not eloquent with the perfection of that sacrifice.

You are asked to trust, therefore, in a Saviour of whom the Scripture exultingly asks, "Who is He that condemneth? It is Christ that died. Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth." Here is your completeness. It pleads no weak abandonment by God of the holiness of His nature, no degradation of His law. Redemption in Jesus Christ is the crown of God's holiness, while it is the sublime expression of His love.

III. But I would have you feel that this completeness in Christ, which is completeness for every believing soul, goes much farther than this. It gathers in the circle of its embrace every conscious want. It is the grace which *keeps* as well as saves.

That is one of the most impressive utterances of our Saviour's lips where he prays, "Holy Father, *keep* through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me." For I beg you to bear in mind that this whole intercessory prayer of Christ is not a supplication such as we would offer, but the prayer of one claiming and recapitulating what had been secured by Him in His expiation.

Glorious will be the day when the ascending Lord, bringing with Him His gathered saints from earth and sea, awakened by the resurrection blast, shall stand at heaven's gate claiming admission by His victory over death and the grave, for all this mighty host. The voice of this intercessory prayer is that same tone—the mediatorial putting forward of his title to certain promised and secured results of his redemption.

A great deal of force is added to this prayer when you view it in this light. "Father, I will that those whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am." "Holy Father, *keep* through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me."

Now, one of the features of Christ's completeness must be an all-covering virtue. It must not be exhausted on a past forgiveness; it must extend to the present, the future, as long as I am a fallible man. It must be a power also to deliver from sin. I want a grace which when I take it within, will not only cleanse but keep me clean; a Christ that shall not alone dispossess the devil, but Himself assume the throne, and reign within, king of my mind, my will and my affections. The grace that would save sinners, men and women of our exposure, must be a prescient, all-controlling grace; which alike, through allowed and withheld temptation, apparent disaster and evident good, holds unswervingly to its final purpose.

Through just such changes God's kingdom of nature is going on to the perfection of all its vast ends—through storm and earthquake, chilling reverses and distressing heat; but the great conserving power of nature is stronger than all these.

So there is room for our individual characteristics in the kingdom of grace, for falls and apparent failures; but, blessed be God, the conserving and preserving power of grace in Jesus Christ—which means grace for sinners as for saints—is always there, and by it finally we shall be presented as victors.



The Church and the individual Christian, dear brethren, are alike complete in Christ. The life in Jesus, as the atmosphere which inflates your lungs and mine, vitalizes everything that breathes. Grace stops not at human measures in numbers or in extent of exigency. It has in its vocabulary no word that answers to our thought of difficulty.

It is a sublime spectacle when you look upon the power of *man* represented in the steam-engine, throbbing as a mighty heart within the iron-ribbed vessel, putting to scorn all the impeding and, in one sense, destructive forces of nature, making the engulfing ocean a crystal pathway for progress; meeting the force of the gale as if it were a zephyr, and pressing unheeding on its way, ready to receive the aid of wind and tide, or as independent to dispense with them.

Even a more sublime spectacle would it be could we rise to contemplate that mightier enginery of nature, by which Providence, in utter independence of or in the employment of resisting influences, carries on its courses of administration in revolving worlds and recurring seasons, and all those influences in heavens and earth and seas which promote or retard vegetation and manufacture and commerce.

But sublimest of all it is to contemplate the independence of God of every human condition, for the success of that kingdom which is not of this world, the completeness for all its requirements as it is found in Christ. Men have come and men have gone: some have seemed so important that hope almost expired in their departure—as Melancthon felt for the cause of the Reformation when Luther died. Yet how local are all such influences. How belittling is it to think that the kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, is seriously affected by our limitations. God uses men, and so do we; but even with us how inconsiderable is a man. How quickly the gap is filled! God's Church is not complete in man.

The application of this truth has so, like the entrance of the sea along the indentations of the coast, moved to the measure of its consideration, that all which need be urged in conclusion is, that we individually seek this completeness in Christ. What is a man without God? A waif, a thistle-down blown before the wind. Strip him of his immortality, and you strip him of his single dignity. Yet what is immortality without Christ? Is its possession even a questionable boon? Is it not a heritage of woe?

For O, the completeness of life is not to be judged now or at any advancing stage of that journey. It is never settled: it is always growth; first, Childhood—that is incomplete; Youth—that is only the second step; Manhood—that is still looking out; Old Age—that is decrepitude, the apparent contradiction of all that has gone before. Open the windows of the old man's soul; let in a light more beautiful, more glorious than his natural eyes have ever seen. *That* is our completeness, the life of immortality, life in Him who brought life and immortality to light in the revelation of himself, the Saviour of sinners, the Conqueror of death, the Victor of the grave, the Destroyer of hell for us.

I know, dear friends, that it is possible for you, in one sense, to live *without* Christ. Multitudes have lived without Him, and, stranger still, have died without Him. But do you not see that life, in every such case, has missed its noblest purpose, its grandest employment? Coming forward in the person of the successful man, it has perhaps laid its sheaf upon the pedestal of the monument to genius, industry or frugality; and then confessedly turned aside to the bitterness of death. Is that moth existence all that pertains to intelligent humanity, never even to recognize hereafter the silken thread which was to be the product of its brief life?

Hear the lament of the philosopher, metaphysician, economist, at whose feet the nations sat to learn wisdom, as from the windows of his English home he looked out upon the newly made grave of her who was the sharer of his very soul—the lament that was as the giving up of the ghost. Yet that is the very best which existence out of Christ can do for a man.

Yes, you may live and you may die without Christ; but be assured that in eternity such a career will bear the same relation to the joys and the blessedness of the hereafter, as a wasted, worthless, dissipated life does to usefulness and happiness in this world. Here in Christ alone is the key to our perpetuated being, the only answer to immortality consistent with the goodness and love of God. To be without Christ is to be without God and without hope in the world; to be in Christ is to place the crown of eternal blessedness upon a brow already glorified by an association with Jesus.

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COMPLETENESS IN CHRIST (COL. ii., 10).—This is the Christian's grand resource under apprehensions arising from any cause whatever. He is "complete in Christ." Christ has answered for him, atoned for him, intercedes for him, and is the Advocate with the Father on behalf of every believer. For his comfort then, for his growth in grace, for the honor of his Saviour, he should always strive to apprehend this glorious truth—"Ye are complete in Him." Let this be his answer to every unbelieving fear, to every disquieting suggestion of his great spiritual adversary. Satan will often accuse and seek to overthrow his confidence, but the motto "Complete in Christ" should be the shield with which he repels every accusation.

If it were not for this precious truth, every shortcoming and every instance in which he was betrayed, which was inconsistent with his Christian profession, would serve to kindle despondency; but it is because, "if any man sin we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous," and because "we are complete in Him," the Christian can, while struggling against guilt and corruption, go forward in hope with confidence and peace. He should therefore strive to realize more of a personal, abiding union with Christ, by a daily increasing conformity to His image. The believer is called to advance from strength to strength; at length he will appear before God in Zion, and "Complete in Christ," his motto of hope during his earthly existence, will be his joyous experience throughout eternity.—*Bishop R. Beckersteth (Episcopal).*