

The Bible Student



Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.



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If we would know how Paul felt about the gospel of the grace of God, by which he was saved, we could not do better than go to "the great thanksgiving" with which he opens the Epistle to the Ephesians. The Epistle to the Ephesians is, of course, not singular in beginning with a thanksgiving to God. That is Paul's customary method of beginning his letters. But it is, perhaps, singular in the marvellous richness and fervor of the thanksgiving with which it begins. And this is perhaps due to what we might have thought an entirely unimportant circumstance. The Apostle was accustomed to draw the theme of his thanksgiving from the special conditions and attainments of those he was addressing. But, unlike his other letters, this was addressed neither to an individual friend and fellow-worker, nor to a separate church with its special circumstances fresh in the Apostle's mind. There was in this case, therefore, no particular subject of thanksgiving, peculiar to the person or church addressed, pressing in on the Apostle's mind and requiring mention. He was thrown back on what was common

to Christians, to thank God for in behalf of his readers. And that is as much as to say he was thrown back on the great fundamental theme of the Gospel. Now Paul's fervor always rises when he is face to face with the first principles of the Gospel.

What Paul returns thanks to God for here is nothing less than the salvation in Christ.

The Trinitarian And with what magnificence of diction as well as depth of feeling and comprehensiveness of view he deals with it! The salvation in Christ involves naturally the saving action of the whole Triune God: and it is easy to make out a Trinitarian distinction in the parts of this long ascription of praise to God for His salvation. Many expositors have, therefore, so divided it. And in any event it is useful to note that there is described to us here the loving activity of God the Father in salvation (in verses 3-6),—of God the Son (in verses 7-12),—and of God the Holy Spirit (in verses 13-14). This successive adduction of the work of the persons of the Trinity in salvation would seem, however, only an inevitable incident of any full description of the process of salvation, for in it

PETER, THE ROCK.

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Simon the son of Jonas was in early days suggestive of anything rather than of a rock. Honest-hearted enough from the first, he was facile, impulsive, rash, and so impressible to every passing influence that few would have cared to count upon him in any matter of importance. With much that was attractive in him to those who really knew him, and with great capabilities, he was conspicuously lacking in one thing—and that the very thing we associate with a rock—reliability.

But Simon met with Jesus Christ one day, and in that hour he came under an influence that wrought in him a marvellous change. The meeting, recorded in the opening chapter of John's gospel, is full of dramatic interest. Andrew the fisherman, with another who was doubtless John himself, has made the great discovery—"We have found the Messias." Realizing the joy of having a gospel to proclaim, Andrew is filled with the desire to bring some one else to the Saviour; and, as natural affection gives appropriate direction to Christian love, he first finds his own brother Simon, and brings him to Jesus (John i. 41). What a meeting that was! It was a scene worthy of the noblest effort of Christian art to represent—Jesus and Simon for the first time face to face! That was a good day's work for Andrew, standing modestly in the background and thankfully looking on. Although his was no very conspicuous place among the twelve, he was here in a true sense the first home missionary, as he was afterwards to be in a true sense (John xii. 22) the first foreign missionary of the New Testament Church; and we can imagine how his honest heart would exult, as to such a Master he brought such a disciple as his brother Simon.

It is evident that it was felt by Jesus himself to be a notable day, when this great, rough, impetuous, but true-hearted man of Galilee was brought for the first time within the sphere of his personal influence. The Apostle John, who was a fourth party to the scene, can recall as vividly as if it were yesterday the very look and tone of the Master, as he describes, long after, an occasion so memorable—"And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou

art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation Petros" (a rock, or stone). Like the artist who, looking upon the rude, unshapen block, sees his own ideal in it, Jesus, looking upon Simon, sees in him the man that is to be. The name He forthwith gives him may often have to be to Simon a rebuke. But it is none the less a prophecy, which, coming from such a Master, has in it inspiration too for the disciple. A rock—a notable pillar in Christ's Church—that is what Simon is yet to be; that is what the Lord in His own divine way is to make of him yet.

The full result is not to be accomplished all at once. But He is faithful who has promised, who also will do it; and grace will have its perfect triumph at the last. It has been aptly remarked by Trench (*Miracles*, 138), that even as some statues are cast in a mould and at an instant, while others are only gradually hewn and polished, so there are "fusile" Apostles like St. Paul, who are melted and moulded as at one lightning flash, while others are shaped and subdued by "a more patient process," here a little and there a little, into the perfect image of their Lord's design. It was to the latter class that Simon Peter manifestly and preëminently belonged. He needed many a stroke of the chisel to make him what his Lord would have him to be. But there was the genuine grit in him, and the loving care and gracious discipline bestowed would not go without its recompense.

If we turn next to another scene in Gospel story—recorded in the 16th chapter of Matthew—we shall see how, in spite of manifold hindrances, the work of grace in Simon has progressed. His Lord's ideal for him has not been completely realized; but it has made large progress toward that end.

The time is nearing the close of our Saviour's ministry on earth. He has been devoting himself of late, with peculiar assiduity and largely in seclusion, to the training of the twelve for the great work that lies before them; and, being in the retired northern region of Caesarea Philippi (the modern Banias, at the base or Hermon), he puts to them the question—"Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (Matt. xvi. 13). The answer is, "Some, John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others, Jeremias or one of the prophets." Next comes the more incisive, testing question—"But whom say ye that I am?" And Simon Peter,

with promptitude, and also manifestly, with an impressive fervour that spoke out all his heart, answered—"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." This devout confession marked so important a stage in the preparation of Simon and those for whom he spoke that Jesus, evidently not without emotion, exclaimed—"Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And"—since thou hast borne testimony thus to me—"I also say unto thee, That thou art Petros, and upon this Petra I will build my Church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

Now, on this brief declaration of Christ, a whole controversial library has been written—the passage having been wrested by the Church of Rome to its own purpose, of vindicating a primacy of power for Peter among the apostles, which is supposed to have been handed down, through his so-called Pontifical successors, to the present occupant of Peter's chair, Pope Leo XIII. It is no part of our present purpose to expose the many unwarranted assumptions involved in the Papal claim—in respect of the historicity of Peter's connection with Rome, and of the continuity of the imaginary chair which unites the present Pope with the Apostle. Enough to observe that from this very passage in the 16th chapter of Matthew, on which so much is founded, it is evident that whatever primacy may have belonged to Simon Peter, it was very different from the heritable lordships claimed by the ecclesiastical potentates who have professed to succeed and represent him; and further, that possession of the infallibility said to be ascribed to Peter here and to be vested in his successors must be consistent with the sharp rebuke almost immediately administered (v. 23), when our Lord "turned and said to Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art a stumbling-stone to me; for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men."

Let it here be said, that we are not concerned to deny that a certain primacy did belong to Simon Peter among his brother disciples. His name always occurs first in the lists of the Apostles, just as the name of Judas always comes last. Peter had possibly a priority in age; he had certainly forceful, manful, forward qualities which made him a born leader of his fellows; and, as divine grace accomplished its work in him, he became more and more

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conspicuously a spiritual power both in the apostolic circle and beyond it. But this is very different from attributing to him any official supremacy, such as Rome assigns to "the pilot of the Galilean lake," who, with his "mitred locks" and "keys of massy metal twain," would not be very recognizable to the closest of his contemporary intimates it may be feared, either as portrayed in mediaeval art or as represented in his living modern "successor."

But what, then, are we to make of this declaration of Christ to Simon Bar-Jona—"Thou art Peter, and on this *petra* I will build my Church." Two things are to be guarded against. We are not, on the one hand, to denude it, in the interests of Anti-Roman orthodoxy, of its personal reference. On the other hand, we are certainly not to make the personality of Simon Peter everything, as though in him were to be found—as Christ's Vicar or otherwise, the seal and practically ultimate foundation of the Church. This is unquestionably, notwithstanding qualifying phrases used by Bellarmine and others, what the Church of Rome has in effect done. The history of long centuries proves, that "no character, unless it be the Virgin Mary, has been so much magnified, misrepresented, and misused for doctrinal and hierarchial ends," as Simon Peter has been.

The crux of the whole question is, the significance to be attached to the word *petra*, which is the feminine form of *petros*. Have the two words the same or a different reference?

It has been argued—with doubtful warrant—that in *petros* we have a stone or bit of rock that could be lifted and shifted from place to place, while in *petra* we have the bed-rock, solid, massive, immovable: and it has ever been supposed that, in mentioning the latter, Jesus pointed with the finger to Himself—just as perhaps he did on an earlier occasion, when, in speaking of the raising up of "this temple" in three days, "He spake of the temple of His body" (John ii. 21). All this is possible; and so also is the suggestion that the sight of the boulders and great cut stones on the sides of Hermon, in preparation for temples like that of Baalbec, may have supplied Jesus with His figure. But the supposition that Jesus pointed to Himself seems only too ingenious, and is hardly in keeping with the direct and personal apostrophe to Simon at this time. It appears to do imperfect justice to the emphasis which Christ is manifestly putting here on what has just trans-

pired between Simon and Himself.

Others, again, holding that the use of the feminine *petra* excludes reference to a man, have insisted that what the word solely refers to is, the truth embodied in Simon's foregoing confession. This it was that gave such supreme interest and dignity to the occasion; and therefore, when Jesus said, "Upon this *petra* will I build my Church," he plainly wished to emphasize the fundamental importance of the doctrine of his own divinity, and impressively indicated that now at length the rock had been reached by the disciples, and that the successful and permanent rearing of His Church upon the basis of that truth might soon commence.

There is a good deal to be said in favor of this view. The deity of Christ is the fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, and upon its truth the Church rests and will abide indestructible before the assaults of her worst foes. But, as Alford and others have pointed out, it is not doctrines or confessions, but persons that, according to New Testament usage (Gal. ii. 9, Eph. ii. 20, I. Tim. iii. 15, I. Pet. ii. 4-6, Rev. iii. 12), are regarded and spoken of as the foundation stones and pillars of the Church. Hence it is, to say the least, permissible to suggest that Simon Peter's personality, as well as his great confession was present to the Saviour's mind, when He "turned to him and said, Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church." Since it is the language of metaphor that is used, the change from the proper name (*Petros*) to the more common and comprehensive word *petra* cannot be held to exclude, on the score of gender, the personal reference.

On the whole, it seems to do fullest justice to all the elements in the situation, to regard as the *petra* on which the Lord declared that He would build His Church, the truth of His divinity *as grasped and firmly held by staunch believing followers*, to whom the conviction of it had become so real and dominating a conviction as to be truly part of themselves, making them the men they were. Such bold confessors first came here into view in the person of Simon Peter, in whom Jesus sees and hails all the faithful souls who are to witness a like confession, and to acknowledge and adhere to Him as the Christ, the Son of God. And the Saviour's heart is stirred and gladdened, as He discerns at length in this man and his associates the trustworthy beginnings of the Church,

the Ecclesia,—which is now for the first time mentioned in the gospel record.

It will be observed that the Saviour here affirms, that Simon Bar-Jona not only (as formerly in John i. 41) “shall be called,” but “is,” Petros, a Rock-man. The disciple has now actually, in measure at any rate, attained the ideal suggested by the name. And how? Through such intelligent and believing fellowship with his Master as has brought him the length of discerning and expressly owning—and that at a critical time of severe opposition and sad wavering on the part of many—the divine Messiahship of Jesus. The permeation of mind and heart with this great essential truth, as by a fresh intuition, which was nothing less than an inspiration from the Father in heaven (v. 17), has wrought in him mightily. And now Simon, prepared to assert and maintain this truth, with all its consequences, before the world, is a Rock-man indeed, made meet for the Master’s use in the extension and consolidation of His Kingdom.

This being so, there need be no difficulty in going a step further, and understanding Christ to mean, not merely that Simon is now a true *Petros*, but that he may be regarded also as a reliable *petra*, for whom there is a foundation place in the structure of the Christian Church. No Protestant interest requires the denial that he may be scripturally so regarded—as not merely a stone to be built in, but a basis to be built upon, in the rearing of Christ’s spiritual temple.

It is indeed forever true that, in the supreme sense,

“The Church’s one foundation
Is Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ (I. Cor. iii. 11). But there is a secondary sense in which the Church is said to be “built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets” (Eph. ii. 20). In the apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem, too, the wall of the city is said to have “twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. xxi. 14). And in this sense Peter was of course at the foundation of the Christian Church, as one of those privileged to be the first herald of the true faith concerning Him who is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Nay, more; in view

of his unique place in early Church history—as the first to confess Christ, the first after the Lord's ascension to exercise the Apostolic function, the first to make bold and fruitful proclamation of the gospel on the day of Pentecost, the first to testify afterwards before the hostile Sanhedrim, the first to open the door of entrance within the Church to Gentiles as well as to Jews—we may frankly concede to Simon Peter a primacy of influence in Apostolic times, with which nothing could compare until Paul appeared upon the scene, to catch up the spirit of Peter's work and to carry it to yet wider and grander issues.

We know that in the Son of Jonas there lingered for long certain traces of his earlier weakness. He thrice denied the Master, whose divine Messiahship he had so confidently affirmed. But he was converted and restored, that he might be a strengthener of the brethren (Luke xxii. 32), and a good shepherd both of young and old in the flock of Christ (John xxi. 15-17). Even after Pentecost, he showed some signs of vacillation still, and shuffled so pitiably about the admission of Gentiles to Christian communion that at Antioch Paul "withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (Gal. ii. 11). But the Spirit of all grace continued to work in him His perfect work, as a Spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. The Peter revealed in the two epistles which bear his name is a pillar indeed in the Church of Christ, "stablished, strengthened, settled"—a ripened saint, in whom the strength and the beauty of the Christian character are seen graciously blended—a princely man, powerful yet tender, for others to lean upon, with nothing of the hardness and ruggedness of the rock about him now, but with all the rock's stability.

THE LAST JOURNEYS TO JERUSALEM AS DESCRIBED BY LUKE.

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Each of the four evangelists draws an independent portrait of our Lord's life and character. Each picture is a unit, but we need all four together to enable us to realize the full glory of the divinely complex character in which dwelt not only the fullness