

Everlasting Consolation and Good Hope through Grace

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"Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work." 2 Thess. 2:16, 17

Have you ever sought to enter by faith into the mind and meaning of the Spirit as expressed in the prayers of the saints of old, recorded for our instruction in the inspired Scripture? Or have you ever been led to compare your own prayers with them? As you may not be prepared to give an immediate reply to these two inquiries, let me make the attempt to answer them for you in my own person. First, then, when I look at the prayers of the saints of old, as recorded in the Scriptures of truth, I see in them a simplicity, a beauty, a power, a savour, a nearness of access to God, which I feel better than I can describe. And when I compare my prayers with theirs, O how poor, how meagre, how feeble, how imperfect are they when thus laid by their side! Many thousands of times have I prayed in private, in the family, and before the assembled saints of God; but how often have I been ashamed both of myself and of my prayers! How dark often has been my mind, how void my heart, how confused my thoughts, how feeble my expressions! But, perhaps, it is hardly fair to judge of one's own prayers or of the prayers of others by this high standard, except as a cheek upon self-conceit; for the prayers which we have preserved for us in the Scripture are treasured up there not only for our instruction and consolation, but as patterns of what true prayer should be.

They were inspired by the Holy Ghost in the breasts of the ancient worshippers of God in spirit and in truth; and when they had been presented before the footstool of mercy, were written down by inspired pens that they might be standing testimonies of what real, spiritual prayer is in the heart of God's people.

As being such, I shall devote a few moments' attention to them.

1. When, then, we come to look at these prayers a little more closely, we see that some of them were very *short*. But O how effectual! Prayer is something like the rifle contests which are now so much in vogue. It is not the number of times that a man shoots which decides the prize, but how many times he can hit the centre of the target. So with prayer: it is not how many times a man prays that makes him a winner in the contest: he may pray seven times, yea seventy times a day, and yet his prayers may be all wide of the mark. It is the prayer that brings down the answer which hits the target in the centre. I will give you two short prayers recorded in the Old Testament, and you will see how effectual they were and what an answer they obtained. One was the prayer of Jacob when he wrestled with the angel: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." (Gen. 32:26.) How short, but O how effectual! For we read, "And he blessed him there." Another is the prayer of David: "O Lord, I pray thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness." (2 Sam 15:31.) Few words, but how effective! for the Lord did in very truth turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. He gave counsel which would have been David's destruction; but the Lord turned it into foolishness, for it was rejected, and the counsel of Hushai preferred; for "the Lord," we read, "had appointed to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel to the intent that the Lord might bring evil upon Absalom." And

not only did this short prayer of David overthrow the counsel, but it overthrew the counsellor; for when "Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed," maddened with vexation, and seeing that Absalom's case was now desperate, he "saddled his ass, gat him home, put his household in order, and hanged himself." (2 Sam 17:23.)

Now I will give you two short but effective prayers out of the New Testament. The one, that of the publican in the Temple: "God be merciful to me a sinner." How short, but O how effective! for he "went down to his house justified;" he carried home the sentence of pardon and justification in his breast. The other is that memorable prayer of the thief upon the cross: "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." How short, but O how effective! How at once the answer came: "To day shalt thou be with me in Paradise."

2. But besides these short and effective petitions, which plainly show us that we are not heard for our much speaking, we have in the Scriptures examples of prayers at greater length, and yet dictated by the same Spirit. I will give you a few samples in the Old Testament which you may look at at your leisure: The prayer of David, as recorded (1 Chron. 17.) when he went and sat before the Lord after he had sent him a gracious message by the prophet Nathan that he would establish the kingdom in his house; the prayer of Solomon, which he offered up at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chron. 6.); the prayer of Jehoshaphat, when the children of Moab and Ammon invaded the land (2 Chron. 20.); the prayer of Hezekiah when Sennacherib sent a great army against Jerusalem (2 Kings 19.); the prayer of Daniel when he set his face unto the Lord God, and prayed, and made his confession (Daniel 9.); and not to take up longer time, the prayer offered up by the Levites on behalf of the children of Judah as recorded in Nehemiah 9. All these prayers are

deserving of your deepest and most prayerful examination and meditation, as divinely recorded patterns of the prayers of the saints, which, perfumed by the incense of Jesus' mediation at the right hand of the Father, ascend up before God, and enter into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. (Rev. 8:4; James 5:4.)

And now, to come to the New Testament, let me give the first place to that prayer, unapproached and unapproachable, which our blessed Lord poured forth, as recorded in John 17., when he specially entered upon his high priestly office and offered up that intercessory prayer, which we may regard as the model of the intercession which he now presents before the throne of the Most High. Next to this let me place before you the two prayers which the apostle offered up for the Church of God at Ephesus, as recorded in chapters 1. and 3. of that blessed epistle. But, besides those two special prayers which the apostle offered up as recorded at full length in the passages just quoted, he, being a man whose heart was full of prayer, was perpetually putting up aspirations and breathings for heavenly blessings on the saints of God, which we therefore find continually scattered through his epistles; for instance, such as, "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost;" "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit;" and that ampler benediction (2 Cor. 13:14) which, from its fulness and blessedness, has been adopted into the public worship of all Christian assemblies as containing everything which the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost can bestow.

In our text we have another aspiration of Paul's heavenly mind in the pouring out of his soul before God on behalf of the Church of Christ at Thessalonica: "Now our Lord Jesus

Christ himself, and God even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work."

In the desire to be a spiritual interpreter of the mind and meaning of the blessed Spirit as prompting this prayer, together with its connection, in the heart and by the pen of the apostle, I shall direct your thoughts to three leading features which seem most prominently stamped upon it.

I.—*First, the eternal Source and Fountain of every heavenly blessing, as intimated by the words, "Our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God even our Father, which hath loved us."*

II.—*Secondly, the streams of consolation which had already flowed down to believing saints from this eternal source: "And hath given us everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace."*

III.—*Thirdly, blessings still to come from the same ever-flowing, over-flowing Fountain: "Comfort your hearts, and stablish yourself in every good word and work."*

I.—If you look at the opening words of our text, you will see that the blessings prayed for are asked from "our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God even our Father." There is something remarkable in the collocation, or, to use a more familiar expression, the placing of these words. In the order of their divine existence, and in the economy of grace, the three Persons of the glorious Trinity are Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This is the order of their eternal being, for though the three Persons are in themselves co-equal and co-eternal, so that, to use the language of the Athanasian Creed, "None is afore or after other; none is greater or less than other," yet

they subsist in the order I have named; and this, too, is the order of their economy in the covenant of grace, in which the Father is represented as choosing, the Son as redeeming, and the Holy Ghost as sanctifying the people of God. But here, as in some other passages, our Lord Jesus Christ is put before the Father; from which we gather his co-equality and his co-eternity; and that he is not, as the Arians have asserted, naturally and necessarily inferior to the Father. Thus we have in our text a standing and striking proof of the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ; for who could dream for a single moment of putting a creature into such a place as he occupies in it? How would it stand if it read thus: "Now may Gabriel the angel;" "Now may Peter the apostle;" "Now may the blessed Virgin Mary?" As I use the words, even by way of supposition, how they grate upon the ear! Surely it must deeply shock every believing heart to see a creature exalted as if it could stand upon a level with the very Majesty of heaven, so that heavenly blessings should be prayed for as coming directly and immediately from it! Thus, were there no other passage; did this prayer of the apostle stand alone in solitary beauty, it would be a testimony, not to be overthrown by men or devils, that our Lord Jesus Christ is equal with the Father, because the same petitions which are addressed to the Father are also presented to the Son.

But though I have thought it right to lay this before you, yet, in opening up these words, I shall rather invert the order of our text, and speak first of "God even our Father" in his eternal love, and then of "our Lord Jesus Christ himself;" not as if I meant for a single moment that our blessed Lord was inferior to the Father, for I have already declared my belief to the contrary, but because it is more convenient thus to handle the subject, as the love of the Father in some sense precedes, and is the foundation of the love of the Son.

i. "God is love:" that is his name and that is his nature; and it is because he is love that he is the source and fountain of all the love that flows down to his creatures.

1. But in looking at the love of God, the first thing that strikes our mind is its *inscrutable and unsearchable nature*. When we look at man and consider for a moment his *insignificance*; that in the eye of God, man viewed merely as a creature, must be less than a fly upon a window, an ant in an ant-hill, a worm crawling in and out of the earth are in ours, nay less than that; for the Lord himself, speaking of the nations, says, "Behold the nations are as a drop of a bucket and are counted as the small dust in the balance" in his eyes who weighs the heavens and the earth and takes up the isles as a very little thing;—When thus we look at man's utter insignificance, a creature of the day, well may we admire and wonder that the infinite Being, he who fills all time and space, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, should love one so utterly unworthy of even a glance from his glorious eye. But when we take a further glance at man, and view him not only as being of himself so insignificant by creation but so *fallen by sin, so defiled and polluted*, then our wonder is still more increased that God, who is "of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on iniquity," and who "dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto," can look down upon sinful man, an object in himself so utterly detestable, and not only look upon him, but even love him with an everlasting love.

2. But there is another feature in this love of God that demands a few moments' thought, which is, that the love of God towards sinful man is one also of *pity and of mercy*. As the apostle says, "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins." Love in God, viewed at least in its relationship to fallen

man, is blended with the most tender compassion and ineffable pity. "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." His love is indeed antecedent to all consideration of the fall; for he loved his people in Christ, chose them in him, and accepted them in the beloved, before sin broke in to mar the image of God in which man was created. We may see the same feature in earthly love. A man does not love his wife, nor a mother her child, because of any infirmity or affliction; but should some infirmity or affliction befall the beloved object, then that love becomes blended with pity. The love is the same, but pity is now mingled with it. Indeed if the love of God were not mingled with the most infinite compassion and tender pity, how could it flow down into our breast? For are we not in a pitiable case? Has not sin utterly marred us and shamefully and cruelly defaced the image of God in us? Are we not full of wounds and bruises and putrifying sores? There is a beautiful description of this blending of love and pity in that striking language of the prophet: "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them." So speaks also the prophet Joel, "Then will the Lord be jealous for his land, and pity his people." (Joel 2:18.) And again, "For he will judge his people and repent himself for his servants when he seeth that their power is gone and there is none shut up or left." (Deut. 32:36.)

3. But there is another feature of the love of God which we must take into consideration, or else we shall sadly miss the mark and darken counsel by words without knowledge; which is, that the love of God to his people is wholly and solely *in Christ Jesus the Lord*. Were there no other passage of holy writ to prove this, it would be sufficiently plain from the words of the apostle, where he declares that neither height

nor depth nor any other creature "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:39.) God never loved his people out of Christ; in fact, he never viewed them out of him. In Christ they were chosen, in Christ they were loved, in Christ they were accepted. May this truth ever be deeply graven in living letters upon our heart, that only as members of the mystical body of the Lord the Lamb do the people of God find favour in the eyes of the Father, for they are only acceptable to him as they are "accepted in the beloved." (Eph. 1:6.) When, then, we speak, as I have already spoken, of man's utter insignificance and his fallen state by nature, as enhancing the wondrous love of God, we must not look upon man as a mere creature of God's hands, or view him in a state of isolation in himself and separated from the Lord of life and glory. To look upon the Church as with the eyes of God, we must view the elect as standing for ever in covenant union with the Son of God; creatures, it is true, of an all-productive hand, but exalted to an immortal dignity and glory as members of the mystical body of Christ. Our blessed Lord, therefore, in that wondrous intercessory prayer to which I have already referred, uses these remarkable words, "And hast loved them as thou hast loved me." O words of depth, unfathomable to human measuring line! that the infinite Majesty of heaven, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, should love his people with the same love as that wherewith he loves his only-begotten Son! But this can only be as they are viewed in the Son of his love as so one with him, that, so to speak, the all-comprehensive eye of the Father sees at one view, and his all-encompassing love embraces with one grasp, Head and members, folding them all to his bosom with the same equal and eternal affection.

4. But I must name one feature more of this eternal love of God before I pass on to show the love of Christ, which is,

that, like himself, it is *unchanging, unchangeable*. This indeed necessarily springs from the circumstance that it is eternal: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love." But could it come to a close it would cease to be everlasting. How tenderly does the Lord again and again assure the Church of the unchanging character of his eternal love! How he says, "For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee." Again, "In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee." (Isa. 54:8, 10.) So also he says, "I have graven thee on the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me." (Isa. 49:16.) One more testimony: "I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." (Mal. 3:6.)

ii. But now for a few words upon *the love of Christ*. This we find distinguished in the Scriptures from the love of the Father. Thus in the prayer of Paul for the Church at Ephesus, to which I have already referred, we find him entreating the Father that he would grant to the Ephesian saints that they might "comprehend," or, as the word means, embrace, "with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge." Thus there is not only the love of God in Christ, which I have endeavoured to unfold, but, as in some way distinct from this, there is the personal, peculiar love which the Son of God bears to his people. But as this is tender, delicate ground, let me seek to move on it with all holy caution, that I may not introduce any separation between the love of the Father and the love of the Son. In one sense, therefore, the love of Christ to his people is precisely and identically the same as that borne to them by God the Father, for he and the Father are one—one in essence, one in purpose, one in will, one in heart. In that sense there is no distinction between the love of God the Father and the love

of God the Son. Yet when we view the Son of God as taking our nature into union with his own divine Person, then we see there is something personal and experimental, something which I may almost call peculiar and individual in the love of Christ to his people, which seems to distinguish it very clearly to our spiritual senses from the love of God the Father. But as this point may not be at once obvious, let us look at it a little more closely, and I think we shall find that there are several features in the love of Christ to his people which distinguish it from the love of God to them.

1. First, then, the blessed Lord loves his people as being *the gift of God*. "Thine they were and thou gavest them me." (John 17:6.) It always was the eternal purpose of God the Father to glorify his dear Son; and in order to glorify him he gave him a people for his own inheritance; for Jesus is "to be glorified in his saints" as well as "admired in all them that believe." (2 Thess. 1:10.) He loves his Church, then, as the Father's gift and as his own inheritance. In this sense, therefore, he loves his people as his *own property*, folding them to his bosom with that peculiar love wherewith we, in our measure, love that which peculiarly and personally belongs to us, and loved all the more if it be also a free gift from one who warmly loves us and whom we warmly love.

2. But again the blessed Lord loves the Church as having *taken her nature into union with his own divine Person*. This indeed is the peculiar feature of the Lord's love which stamps it with its chief distinctness. The apostle opens up this feature very clearly and blessedly where speaking of earthly marriage, he traces up its foundation to the conjugal union which subsists between Christ and the Church: Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it; that he might present it to himself a glorious Church." (Eph. 5:25, 27.) There the apostle

intimates that the Church is the bride and spouse of the Lord the Lamb, and therefore that the love which he bears towards her is conjugal love, that is the love in its highest, most refined, and spiritual sense which a man bears to his wife. We may well say with the apostle that "this is a great mystery;" but, as viewed by faith, it casts a blessed light on that peculiar feature of the love of Christ whereby he loves her as his own flesh, he being one with her by a participation of her nature, and she one with him in his saints as "members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones."

3. But I must name one more distinctive feature of the love of Christ. Just look at what our blessed Lord *suffered for her*. Look at the depths of sorrow and suffering in which he had to wade to redeem her from the dreadful consequences of the fall! Look at the unutterable weight of agony sustained by him on her behalf in the gloomy garden of Gethsemane. See the wrath of God which he endured for her sake at Calvary, and how he hung upon the tree taunted by man and forsaken by God, with all the unutterable horrors couched in that dolorous cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And all for the love of her. May we not then truly say, "Dearly bought, dearly prized; dearly won, dearly worn?"

Taking these three features into consideration, I think we may draw a scriptural distinction between the love of the Father and the love of the Son, without infringing upon that unity of will and mind which subsists between them as one in the same eternal undivided essence. I may indeed have failed to convey the distinction to your mind, but I seem to see and feel it clearly in my own.

But I shall not tarry longer at the fountain head. I shall now come to the streams which have already issued out of this ever-flowing Source of all happiness and holiness.

II.—*"And hath given us everlasting consolation, and good hope through grace."*

Two heavenly blessings are here spoken of as streams from the fountain of eternal love—consolation and good hope.

i. The first is *"everlasting consolation,"* which God is said to have given his dear people. *"Consolation!"* The very word opens up a source of much spiritual thought as well as gracious experience. Its very name, its very sound, implies at the very outset that those to whom God has given consolation were in a state where that consolation was needed, and to which alone it was suited, for as Hart well says,

"Balm is useless to th' unfeeling."

Even naturally, what is consolation except to the afflicted? The mourning widow, the bereaved orphan, the distressed in providence, the prisoner in the low dungeon, the houseless and homeless, the oppressed, the persecuted, and the desolate—such only are subjects for natural consolation. How much more then in a spiritual sense! Thus the Lord speaks to Zion, "O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold I will lay thy stones with fair colours." It was because she was afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, that she needed the consolations of her God. (Isai. 54:11.) "As one whom his mother comforteth so will I comfort you." (Isai. 66:13.) And again, "I, even I, am he that comforteth you." (Isai. 51:12.) Once more, "Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord hath comforted his people." (Isai. 52:9.) But the clearest testimony to this point is the apostle's language, where, speaking of his own experience, he says, "For as the

sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ....And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye also be of the consolation." (2 Cor. 1:5, 7.) Thus we may lay it down as a most certain truth that in order to receive any measure of consolation from the Lord we must have a proportionate degree of affliction. But let us examine this subject a little more closely. I like to clear up my points to the best of my ability, and to leave as little unexplained as I can, that I may rightly divide the word of truth.

Let me first, then, show what is necessary before there can be any consolation from the love or mouth of God.

1. There can be no consolation to those who *are still in their sins*. Do you believe that God would drop consolation into a sinner's breast, I mean of course one who is still a rebel, still an alien, still an enemy? "There is no peace, saith my God to the wicked;" and if no peace, what room is there for consolation? Before, therefore, consolation can be given, there must be a bringing out of sin; in other words, there must be that work of grace upon the heart whereby sin is charged home as a burden upon the soul, guilt of conscience experienced, all iniquity confessed and forsaken, and a turning to the Lord with all the heart, and that with weeping and supplication.

2. But further, will the Lord administer consolation, "everlasting consolation," *to those who are still in the world?* What says James in his emphatic language? "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." (James 4:4.) Does God give consolation to enemies? Does he drop the comforts that belong to the righteous into the breast of those who are

still in the world which "lieth in wickedness?" There must then be a separation from the world before there can be any consolation dropped by God himself into the soul. What is God's own exhortation to his people? "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." (2 Cor. 6:17, 18.) Thus there must be a clean and clear separation from the world before the Lord himself will receive us into his arms, bestow upon us the Spirit of adoption, and give us a testimony that we are his sons and daughters.

3. Again, there must be *some knowledge of the truth*, some sight and sense not merely of our lost and ruined condition by nature and practice; but some view also by the eye of faith of that eternal source of happiness and holiness from which all true consolation springs. Thus there must be not merely a being awakened out of a state of sin and a being brought out of the world, with that sight and sense of the anger of God, of the curse of a broken law, and of our own ruined state, which bring grief and trouble into the heart, but there must be that communication of divine light to see and of divine life to feel the beauty and blessedness of the gospel, whereby the truth is embraced in the love of it. Our text speaks of "our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God even our Father which hath loved us," as having "*given us,*" already given us, "everlasting consolation." Do you not see from this that "consolation" is here spoken of as a thing already given, as a divine and heavenly blessing which the Lord himself has already breathed into the heart by his Spirit and grace?

Now the chief instrument whereby "the Lord Jesus Christ himself and God even our Father" give consolation to the wearied soul is *the Gospel*. You will see this very clearly

unfolded by comparing Isaiah 40:1, 2, with the reference made to it by Peter: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem." He then, after unfolding the nature of this comfort, adds, "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but *the word of our God shall stand for ever.*" Now the apostle Peter, quoting this inspired declaration by the pen of Isaiah, thus comments upon the language of the prophet: "The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth forever. And this is the word which *by the Gospel* is preached unto you." See how he connects the comfort wherewith God comforts his people with the "word of the Lord which endureth for ever:" which "word of the Lord" he declares is the Gospel preached in their ears by himself and his brother apostles. In fact, the very word "Gospel," which means good news, glad tidings, carries consolation in its bosom. It is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;" and its chief power of consolation lies in this, that it reveals and seals the pardon of sin. And is not that a comfortable sound to a guilty sinner? You will recollect that when the Lord said to his servants, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," they were "to speak comfortably to Jerusalem," and to cry unto her that "her warfare was accomplished, her *iniquity pardoned*; for she had received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." There is no pardon except through the Gospel; and without pardon there can be no real consolation for a guilty conscience or a wounded spirit. It is only when the soul can take up that blessed language, "O Lord, I will praise thee; though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away;" that it can add, "And thou comfortedst me."

4. But again, the Lord favours his people from time to time with *his sweet presence*; and when he is thus graciously pleased to draw near and fill their hearts with all joy and

peace in believing, then he administers to them "everlasting consolation." You never can be unhappy as long as you are favoured with the presence of the Lord. It is his absence, the withdrawing of the light of his countenance, the hiding of his face behind a dark cloud, which shut up the soul in misery and gloom. To be blessed with the light of his uplifted countenance, the testimony of his favour, the shining in of his mercy and love—if there be any happiness upon this earthly ball, then and there alone is it to be found. This is consolation indeed; and may well be called "everlasting consolation," because it springs out of everlasting love, and is an earnest of everlasting peace.

5. But the Lord sometimes administers everlasting consolation by *a gracious word*; for with the word of a king there is power. "Heaviness in the heart of man maketh it stoop; but a good word maketh it glad." (Prov. 12:25.) Thus, when the Lord is pleased to apply a promise, drop in a word of encouragement, speak home an invitation with power, he administers thereby consolation. It comforts the drooping heart; it speaks peace to a guilty conscience. And this consolation is "everlasting" consolation; for it flows from nothing less than such a source, viz., the eternal love of God; and flows onward to an everlasting ocean of infinite delight.

Any intimation, indeed, of an interest in the everlasting love of God is a blessing beyond all price; for the Lord never gives any such intimation but as a certain pledge, earnest, and foretaste of immortal bliss. He can neither disappoint nor deceive. Once blest, blest for ever. We may, indeed, for a long time together cease to enjoy the comfort and even may fall into the greatest depths of darkness and confusion, so as to lose sight of almost all our evidences; but the foundation of God standeth sure: "The Lord knoweth them that are his." The river of eternal love may seem to flow by and not to

reach our breast, so high are the banks and hidden out of sight the stream. Still, if ever it has watered our soul it will be one day "waters to swim in" of eternal delight.

ii. But there is another heavenly blessing spoken of in our text. Many dear saints of God seem to come short of "*everlasting consolation.*" They want it, beg of the Lord to bestow it upon them, and cannot rest without it. Still the Lord, for gracious reasons and wise purposes, withholds the coveted blessing. But there is one thing he does give them, which the apostle speaks of in our text, and which I have now to open up: "*a good hope through grace.*" Many of the Lord's own family who cannot say they have received that greatest and best of all blessing, "everlasting consolation," can still believe that they enjoy the second next best, "a good hope through grace."

1. Look, then, at the words, and observe first the expression, "*a good hope.*" This by implication means that there is a *bad* hope. And what is a bad hope? A hope founded, like the house of which the Lord speaks in the parable as built by the foolish man—upon the sand. Now if our hope rest upon a sandy foundation, it must needs give way when the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow, and beat upon it.

But the question may still arise, "What is a hope built upon a sandy foundation?" I will tell you. Any hope based upon self, whatever shape or form self may assume, is a hope that rests upon the sand. Any expectation that God will reward you for your good works; any hope that he will be merciful to you because you have not been so bad as others; any hope that by the exertion of your own strength and wisdom you may some day be in a better position to die than you are now; any hope based upon a mere profession of truth

without a feeling experience of its power; any hope that stands upon the good opinion of others, and does not rest upon the testimony of the Spirit of God within; in a word, every hope which is not lodged by the breath of God in the heart, will prove to be a hope built upon the sand; or, to use the strong language of Bildad, the hope of a hypocrite, which shall perish.

2. The hope, then, here spoken of as "a good hope" is set in diametrical opposition to that sandy hope of which I have spoken. It is a *good* hope, because the Lord himself, who is the author of every good gift and every perfect gift, has planted it by his own Spirit in the breast. It is a good hope, because it is "an anchor of the soul both sure and stedfast and enters into that within the veil." And especially it is a good hope, because it is "*through grace*," as flowing through the undeserved favour of God, and not resting upon human merits, or any similar creature basis. Yes; it flows purely and solely out of the same stream of eternal love which sends down consolation into believing hearts. The two blessings spoken of in our text we may perhaps compare to one mighty river, which parts into two streams of different magnitude, and yet both flow from the same eternal source. The larger and fuller stream runs in "everlasting consolation" into the breasts of some; the scantier, narrower, and shallower stream flows in "a good hope through grace" into the bosom of others. But the fountain is one. The same "Lord Jesus Christ himself and God even our Father which hath loved us," who gives everlasting consolation to some, gives a good hope through grace to others. Let not, then, the dwellers upon the banks of those two streams contemn or judge one another. Both blessings are of sovereign grace. If the Lord has given you "everlasting consolation," do not despise your brother to whom has been given only "a good hope through grace;" and you who have only a good hope

through grace, do not judge your more favoured brother to whom has been given everlasting consolation.

But *how* does the Lord give a good hope through grace, where he denies or gives but scantily everlasting consolation? I will mention a few means whereby the God of hope is pleased to communicate this good gift.

1. One way is by giving some *view by faith* of salvation by grace. If ever hope springs up in the breast of a sinner condemned by the law and a guilty conscience, it is when he gets a divine light upon the way of salvation through the blood of the Lamb. Many of the dear children of God walk in much darkness for want of a clear view of the way of salvation. Others are held in bondage for years from sitting under a half-and-half gospel, from never being brought under the sound of divine truth, but kept in the dark by legal teachers who knowing nothing themselves of true grace, never give forth from their trumpet either a certain or a joyful sound. Now, when the poor prisoners who have long sat in affliction and iron under this ministry of bondage and death, are brought under the sound of the Gospel in its purity and power, the Lord the Spirit is often pleased to cast a divine light into their mind whereby they see, as with a heavenly ray enlightening the eyes of their understanding, salvation by the free and sovereign grace of God. As illuminated with this divine light, the Scripture now shines before their eyes with a beauty and lustre of which they had no previous conception; salvation by grace is commended to their conscience as God's own plan of saving sinners; the gospel reaches their heart as a joyful sound; it is embraced with faith and affection; and as this light shines out of the fulness of Christ it kindles a sweet hope in their breast of an interest in him. Usually, the first hope that the Lord is pleased to inspire in the soul arises out of a view by faith of the way of salvation, an embracing of it in love, and an

inward testimony by the spirit's witness of some interest in it.

2. But again, a good hope through grace is sometimes raised up in the heart by hearing *your experience traced out by a man of God*. You hear your spiritual feelings described, the work of grace opened up in its various branches, and some clear scriptural account given how the Lord begins and carries on his own secret operations upon the soul, when he calls it out of darkness into his marvellous light. As you listen to these things you find an inward response to them; for "as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man." Life and power attend the word to your heart; and you find an inward testimony that God has done something for your soul by his sovereign grace. You can walk in the way described step by step; and thus as you "feed your kids by the shepherds' tents," you find that you are walking "in the footsteps of the flock." (Song. 1:8.) Now this experience raises up in your heart a sweet hope that the God of all grace has had mercy upon you; that you have been and are under the teachings of his Spirit; and that he himself has wrought in you the work of faith with power.

3. But again, there are ever and anon shinings in *of divine light through dark clouds*. It is in grace as in nature. There are days in the experience of God's saints something like the present, quite an April day, when the sun does not shine in full beauty and brightness all the day long; clouds gather over its face; but now and then it breaks through them all, and they flee before him. So in the experience of many who truly fear God, there is much darkness, many clouds, mists, and fogs that continually gather over the lower grounds of their soul. But rays and beams of mercy and grace every now and then shine through; sometimes in hearing the preached gospel; sometimes in gaining unlooked-for access to God in

secret prayer; sometimes by the line of a hymn or a passage of scripture which seems to fall softly and yet weightily upon the heart; sometimes in reading the word and sweet meditation on it without any special application. It is not, then, all darkness and gloom with the child of grace; and even if his sky be for the most part clouded, yet rays and beams of heavenly light break in upon his heart; and as these come from the same Sun of righteousness which shines forth in all his unclouded beauty when he gives everlasting consolation, they kindle within a good hope through grace.

4. But again, as I must not tarry too long here, I will just name several other heavenly blessings which will inspire a good hope. Such are, *marked answers to prayer*; the *coming in of any word of God* with power to the heart; a sweet confidence that where the Lord has begun a good work he will carry it on; a hoping against hope, and a believing against unbelief; a cleaving to the Lord with full purpose of heart in spite of every difficulty; a view of the way in which the Lord has led us from strength to strength; a retrospective glance at his kind dealings in providence; how he has borne with our crooked manners in the wilderness; how from time to time he has renewed his gracious work upon the soul;—all these marks and evidences of the Lord's favour which cannot be denied or put away, kindle and keep alive a good hope through grace.

We are not to despise any that fear the Lord and have this good hope, even if they cannot rise much beyond it. Is it not called a "*good hope*?" Then who shall despise that which the Lord calls "*good*?" Is it not also "*through grace*?" And what has any one but through the free grace of God? If any now on earth were as much favoured as was Elijah, so as even to be carried to heaven in a fiery chariot, he would only so

mount to glory by God's grace. If you had all the gifts and graces and heavenly revelations of Paul, it would be only by God's grace. To despise, therefore, the weak family of God and ride over them rough-shod because they cannot speak of great consolations or blessed manifestations, is to do what those are so denounced for doing in Ezekiel, as "thrusting with side and with shoulder, and pushing all the diseased with their horns till they have scattered them abroad." God forbid that any servant of Christ, at least, should act the part of those fat cattle who do such deeds of oppression and injustice—those "fat and strong" whom the Lord has promised to "feed with judgment." No; his office is rather to comfort the feeble-minded, to strengthen the weak hands and to confirm the feeble knees, and, according to the Lord's own description of a faithful shepherd, "to seek that which is lost, to bring again that which is driven away, to bind up that which is broken, and to strengthen that which is sick." (Ezek. 34:16.)

III.—But having thus, however feebly, opened up blessings past, yet we hope in a sense still present, I shall pass on to show *the blessings to come*, for which the apostle prayed; and those will be found no less sweet and no less suitable as we journey onward in this vale of tears: "*Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work.*" Two blessings are here prayed for from the same eternal source of all grace and glory, viz., that "the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God even our Father which hath loved us," that these two persons of the glorious Trinity (not to the exclusion of the blessed Spirit, for he is indeed the Comforter) would condescend to communicate two further blessings to the Church at Thessalonica; and not to it only but to all saints in all ages. This indeed is but a carrying further out, and a richer, ampler, and larger communication of a blessing already given. I shall not, therefore, go over again the same

ground, but rather attempt to show the trials and afflictions to which the Lord's own comfort is adapted; for, as I said before, what is comfort except to the afflicted? Both Scripture and daily experience concur to show us that the Lord's people are for the most part "an afflicted and poor people." I have seen at various times and in various places very many of the saints of God, and I believe I can say I never yet saw one manifested to my conscience as such without seeing or hearing of some trial or affliction in his lot. Indeed, according to God's own testimony, it is "through much tribulation" that we are to enter into the kingdom; and therefore there is no entering into the kingdom of grace here or the kingdom of glory hereafter without it. But let this be ever borne in mind that whatever affliction befall the saints, it is laid upon them by the hand of God, and that for the express purpose of putting them into a situation and making them capable of receiving those comforts which God only can bestow.

Let us then cast a glance at some of the afflictions of the saints of God.

1. Many of them are heavily afflicted in *temporal matters*. God's people for the most part are poor in this world's goods, for he "hath chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith." None know the heavy burden of poverty but those who have to carry it. What difficulties, perplexities, and heart-rending anxieties in these times especially of such severe competition, of such narrow profits, and such unceasing demands of sums which must be paid, rack and grind the very vitals of many of the Lord's dear family to maintain even an honourable position, and not sink down into the depths of debt and disgrace! There is also a constant dread upon their spirit of a future worse than the present; for an unbelieving heart and a timid mind often conjure up fearful spectres of a

terrible scene yet to come. The Lord indeed knoweth how to deliver; but the weight and burden of deep poverty are heavy indeed, and should touch with sympathy the hearts of those who have power to relieve any part of it.

2. Others of the Lord's people who may be spared the pressing burden of poverty or a struggling position in business, have heavy *family trials*, from their children growing up sickly, and thus a constant source of anxiety and expense, or removed from them by the hand of the Almighty in the very bloom of youth; or else, from their waywardness and stubbornness, threatening to be a source of future uneasiness and trouble. None but parents know the weight with which children lie upon the heart; what anxieties they cause; what fears for their health and success in life; and above all, what painful thoughts as to their eternal state.

3. Others of the Lord's people are more *personally afflicted* by having a suffering body, an earthly tabernacle bowed down by continual pain, or by some inward complaint which depresses alike both body and mind, and seems to quite unfit them for life and its needful struggles.

It is true that all these are but *temporal* afflictions, which will cease when the weary are at rest; and those who only look at them as borne by others may think them light; but the back which has to carry the load knows best the weight of the burden. You may see the collar on another's shoulder, but can you look underneath at how cruelly the withers are wrung, and how the bleeding neck is galled by the heavy yoke. Get the same collar upon your own shoulders, and then you will best know whether the yoke presses heavily upon the neck or not. At any rate, the Lord's family, pressed down by their various temporal sorrows, need comfort from God, if they cannot get sympathy from you; and the Lord, who

knows how to comfort the cast down, has abundant consolation to give them. If they are tried with poverty, he can appear conspicuously for them in providence; or if he withhold the providential blessings and delay the promised help, he can amply make it up by the sweet manifestations of his love. The bread which endureth for ever shall be given in the room of the bread which perisheth, and the riches of his grace for the gold and silver of this world's glory. If, as in David's case, their house be not so with God as their fond heart could wish, yet can he give them union with his own dear family, making "the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty" nearer to them than their own flesh and blood; and if family troubles mar family happiness, or if death rend asunder earthly ties, he can grant them submission to his holy will, and grace to kiss the rod. If they are afflicted in their tabernacle, the Lord can make bodily sickness a greater blessing than rude health, giant strength or unbroken spirits; for these have been the curse of thousands. Health, that greatest of all temporal blessings, has in thousands of instances added fresh impetus to every vile lust, and been the means of eternal destruction to legions who have put far away the evil day, and abused God's best gift to sin with greater eagerness and more unchecked impetuosity.

But these temporal griefs and sorrows I am willing to acknowledge are light compared with *spiritual* afflictions; but I can only now briefly name a few. The heavy burden, then, of sin upon a guilty conscience; the harassing workings of a body of corruption, which never seems to cease it, oozings up against the Majesty of heaven; sore temptations from the prince of darkness; doubts and fears as to the soul's present position before the Lord, and whether it will reach in peace the heavenly shore; a most painful sense of repeated and past backslidings which seem at times to cut off free and familiar access in prayer, and to intercept as with it dark

cloud the sweet discoveries of the Lord's love—these are but a sample of the many trials and afflictions with which the Lord seems good to exercise many of his people.

But all those trials and afflictions, whether temporal or spiritual, pave the way for what the apostle prays for so earnestly in our text, that the Lord would "*comfort their hearts.*" Observe that he makes no mention of earthly comfort. All such comforts, like the ass and servants of Abraham, must abide at the foot of the mount when sacrifice is to be made, if need be, of an only son and Jehovah-jireh to appear. There is something very emphatic in the apostle's expression, "Our Lord Jesus Christ himself." Observe the word "*himself.*" See how it carries up our eyes and hearts to Jesus *himself* at the right hand of God. O, none but Jesus himself and the Father can comfort a truly afflicted heart. But he can and does from time to time comfort his dear people by a sense of his presence; by a word of power from his gracious lips; by the light of his countenance; by the balm of his atoning blood and dying love; and by the work and witness of the Spirit within. And as they receive this consolation from the mouth of God, their hearts are comforted. Thus they have an interest not only in the prayer of the apostle, "comfort your hearts," but in its answer too, when the Lord speaks comfortably unto them.

ii. But now let us look at the second part of the apostle's prayer: "*And stablish you in every good word and work.*" The living family of God need to be established in the truth, so as not ever to be "children tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine." It is not sufficient for a building to be reared: it must be established before we can know whether it will stand. The most anxious moment of the builder is to see how it will settle; how the walls will bear the roof, and every part stand firm and good without bulging or slipping. When the

centering is taken away from a newly built arch, how the architect looks to see whether it will settle well and the extent of the drop, if there be any. So in grace. It is not merely making a profession that will serve. Many a building stands well as long as the scaffolding remains; many an arch looks firm whilst the centering supports it. So many seem to stand well in early days, when upheld by zeal and earnestness or strengthened by the support of others. But how will the soul stand when these helps be removed? Will it be stablished in the faith, or fall into some error or some gross evil, and, thus like an arch badly built, drop into ruin when the centering is taken away. How we continually see those who once seemed firm in the truth now greedily drinking down some deadly error presented to their lips under the charm of a plausible novelty; and others fall headlong into some open sin, or get entangled in some delusion. O that the Lord would stablish you, me, and all who desire to fear his name firmly and deeply in his precious truth, that we may never fall a pray to evil or error, but may have a religion of his own maintaining; that the work upon our heart may be the genuine work of God first and last; a building of his own raising and his own establishing, that it may stand firm amidst the storms of time, and endure all eternity.

1. But this establishing is twofold. First, in *every good word*.

We read of Naphtali, that he is "a hind let loose; he giveth goodly words." (Gen. 49:21.) That words are of great importance the Lord himself tells us, where he says, "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." (Matt. 12:37.) The Lord's people, therefore, under the influence of his grace, speak good words; and when they have uttered them, they need to be stablished in every good word thus spoken. But what are these "*good*

words?"

Have you not sometimes spoken to a friend a good word *for the Lord*? Has he done nothing for your soul for which you can bless and praise his name? Is it all darkness within and unbelief, guilty fear and confusion? Is there nothing you can lay your hand upon that the Lord has ever done for your soul in a way of grace? Under the sweet influence, then, of his Spirit, you can sometimes speak a good word for the Lord. But when you have spoken a good word in this way, you are sometimes tried about it, whether it was spoken aright, or at the proper season, or with a proper motive, or without addition, and solely to the glory of God. Now the Lord alone can stablish you in this good word, by shining again upon your soul and giving you fresh reason to speak well of his name.

So again, when you have spoken to the children of God and told them how the Lord has dealt with you in providence or in grace, it has been a *good word to them* and they have felt it good to hear it; but you want to be stablished in it, that it may be proved to have been a real word for God, and that what you have said was made by God himself a good word to their heart.

But the servant of the Lord especially has to *give good words*. He has to speak well of Jesus Christ, of his blood, and righteousness, and dying love. And he too has deep need to be stablished in every good word thus spoken, by observing the effect produced by it upon the hearts of the hearers, and by seeing how the Lord blesses to them the word of his lips.

2. But there is also a being stablished "*in every good work*;" for believers have good works to perform as well as good words to speak. We are to be a people "zealous of good

works." Men must not cast the charge upon us that we neglect or think lightly of them. Let them rather see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven as the author of them.

But as the heart is to be "established by grace and not with meats" (Heb. 13:9), so also must every good word and every good work be similarly established. When, then, the Lord shows us that the words we speak and the works we do in his holy name are wrought in us by his grace, do not come from the flesh, but are of the pure operation of his Spirit, then there is a being established in every good word and work.

O the heavenly blessings thus prayed for by the apostle! O that we might have a manifest interest in them! How good the Lord is of his own free grace to bestow them upon his redeemed family! May he give us much of them! May he, wherever he has bestowed upon any of us everlasting consolation or even a good hope through grace,—may he comfort our hearts as we journey through this vale of tears; may our consolations be neither few nor small, and may he establish us in every good word and work. Then what we are and have, and what we speak and do by his grace, will prove to be of the operation of the Spirit, and we shall stand, yea stand firmly established upon the Rock of ages, both for time and for eternity.