

# THE GOSPEL MESSENGER,

OR UNIVERSALIST ADVOCATE.

["AND THE ANGEL SAID UNTO THEM, FEAR NOT, FOR BEHOLD! I BRING YOU GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY WHICH SHALL BE UNTO ALL PEOPLE."—Luke 2:10.]

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## Occasional Sermon.

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"By Christ we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand."—Rom. v: 11.

The aim of the apostle in the preceding portion of this epistle, has been to show the inability of all the ancient religions to justify man in God's sight, or his own. He demonstrates this by drawing in the first chapter a true and fearful picture of the morals of the Gentile world under Paganism; and in the second, and first part of the third, by appealing to the conduct and conscience of the Jew, whether the law in which he boasted had lifted him to such an elevation of righteousness as was satisfactory to the desires of his better nature, or whether its main effect had not rather been to reveal to him the deep distance at which he lay from God.

He closes the third chapter by a statement of the conclusion of his first argument; that by deeds of law—that is by man's whole conduct under the Mosaic and Pagan religions—no flesh could stand justified in the sight of God, both Pagan and Jewish laws convicting their subjects of alienation from God, and leaving them to perish under that conviction.—In the next verse he proceeds to proclaim the Gospel as fully able to accomplish what they had failed to achieve. It was able to impart a spirit which should prompt the disciple to a righteousness far transcending that attainable under either of the two preceding systems—a righteousness therefore, by way of distinction, styled, "the righteousness of God"—and it was also competent to convey a comfortable and satisfactory assurance of abundant pardon to the penitent.

Jesus Christ he next declares to be the Author of this Gospel. "Now," says he, "the righteousness of God without law is manifested, even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation," (or pledge of mercy) "to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God."

Having thus proclaimed the new religion to be the only one by which true righteousness could be attained and remission of sin secured, he turns aside throughout the fourth chapter, to meet and quash certain objections he anticipates from the Jew, and in the first verse of the chapter of our text thus resumes the subject he had left:

"Therefore being justified by faith,"—in this new system—"we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom also, we have access by faith, into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

Striking indeed, and impressive to the eye of the apostle, must have appeared the contrast between the general spiritual condition of the race and that state of grace to which himself and his fellow believers had been called.

Let us suppose him entering some great city of the empire, to find his way to the secluded synagogue by the water side, where, in the suburbs of Philippi or Antioch, the brethren await his ministry. As he presses through the principal streets, every object he beholds, every word that strikes upon his ear, every trivial custom and courtesy of society, presses home on him the conviction of the rooted and absolute sway with which the universal paganism holds captive the feelings and the minds of men. On his right rises a magnificent

temple, built and sustained by the offerings of the rich, and the contributions of the poorest. Attached to it, thronging its porches, or lurking in its obscene recesses, sustained by governmental authority, and secured in their pride of place and power by the reverence of the multitude, a numerous band of priests, his special and formidable opponents, stand ready, in defence of their profession, their power, and their offices, to employ against him all the unscrupulous means with which the anxious conservatism of the authorities, the interested animosity of a hundred crafts, and the bigoted rage of a sanguinary populace can furnish them.

As he passes the porch, he observes before the altar, each presenting his votive offering and making invocation to the gods, a gray-haired philosopher, secretly smiling at the superstitious rite, yet, to avert suspicion, ready, instantly to sacrifice to popular wrath, any less hypocritical sceptic; a gladiator imploring the favor of Fortune for the morrow's combat; and in the abasement of ignorant devotion a wretched slave, his nature brutalized by his condition, exhibited now in its aspect of deepest degradation as he bonds before the deities of a religion whose purest portions are its poetical fables, and whose practice and service of worship are combinations of imposing ceremonial, wretched chicanery, and abandoned sensuality. As Paul turns to pursue his way, the Emperor, marching to the seat of war, and surrounded by all the symbolic majesty of Rome, pauses at the gate, deferentially consults the augurs, and stoops, curiously to enquire in the entrails of the victims, of the success of the expedition. A procession of the vestal virgins approaches, the army stands aside, the emperor uncovers, the imperial eagles stoop in honor of the representatives of Pagan chastity. Pressed by the crowd, the apostle takes refuge in a public schoolroom. Mercury and the Muses preside over instructions, and their images adorn the galleries and court offerings of their worshippers. As the throng disperses he resumes his way, but the sun is hot, the air is stifling, and he enters a house and requests some cooling drink. Over the hearth brood the Penates and the Lares, daily saluted and consulted in all that touches domestic life. His host drinks with him, but ere the goblet touch his lips he pours a few drops in libation to some deity.

He passes the market place, and in the chafferings of traffic, in the conversation of the groups he encounters, in the very meat in the shambles, the larger portion consecrated to temple use, and afterwards sold by the priests to the butchers, in every object he sees, and every sound he hears, he reluctantly acknowledges the incontestable evidences of the depth and thoroughness of the hold which the ancient religion has secured upon the sentiments, the habits, the associations, the business, and the pleasures of the community.—His passage through a single public street of any of the great cities of the empire, deeply and painfully convinces him how inextricably intertwined with the whole warp of society and civilization is the web of a gorgeous but rotten idolatry. The public and private, the social and domestic life, the tribunals of justice, the palace of the patrician and the hut of the pauper, the tavern, the garden, the solitary chamber, are filled and interfused with an atmosphere of Paganism, and consequently of impurity and sin. The field of battle resounds not less with the clash of arms than with supplications to adverse or favorable gods; the

merchant as he hurries to the port drops a pinch of propitiatory incense on the wayside altar, the freighted ship bears upon her brow the name of some divinity, and the mariners returned in safety hasten to deposit their chaplet of gratitude in the temple of Neptune or of Fortune.

The art, the philosophy, the literature, the public festivals, and the common interests of every day experience are steeped and saturated with the poison of Paganism. And poison virulent and deadly to the spiritual nature of man, its manifestations in a gross public sentiment and a fearfully defective private morality, in the light and contemptuous estimation of the marriage tie, in the prevalence of infanticide and poisoning, in the reckless indifference with which human life was regarded, in the universal leprosy of a slavery too immense in extent, and too horrible in its nature almost for modern belief, in the ferocious pleasure in the sports of the arena, and the love of all sanguinary excitements, incontestably proved it to be.

His brow beating, his brain dizzy, his spirits drooping, his heart trembling with compassion for his wretched race, and his whole renewed nature revolting with indignation at the foul delusions besetting and besotting them, the apostle hurries from the frequented street, down the narrow and deserted alley that leads to the obscure tenement he seeks. His hand upon the latch he hesitates to enter, for "the voice of psalms the simple song of praise," in honor of his Redeemer, meets his ear. The hot tumult of his thoughts subsides, and the Holy Ghost from the bosom of God, floating on that strain of sacred music, glides into his heart and sheds upon it silently the sudden sunshine of an unspeakable peace. He passes within and stands among his brethren, his children in the Lord. He looks thoughtfully around him and sees there the swarthy Gaul, the fair-haired German, the soft Oriental, the supple limbs and rounded features of the beautiful Greek, and the short dark hair, curling on the bold brow, and firm cheek of the soldierly Roman.

Representatives of all the races thronging the busy streets are there. Their form and features the same, how changed the expression of their faces? They have left the wide-spread fabric of idolatry, and they dropped on its threshold as they departed the garment spotted by the flesh, and exorcised from their bosoms the evil spirit of sin with its affections and lusts. Residents now of the New Jerusalem, they are clothed with the white robe of the righteousness of God, and the spirit of Jesus it is which shines upon their happy faces and gleams like serene starlight in the meek lustre of their eyes. And as Paul contrasts their former with their present state, as he thinks of the vast masses of the race under the sway of an imposing, secure, and apparently invincible Paganism, and reflects on the means by which those before him have been rescued from its tenacious gripe,—idolators, sensual, faithless, hopeless, Godless, then, no higher aim than present pleasure, no future prospect unbounded by the grave, now justified by faith, rejoicing in hope, heirs of God, blameless and harmless, and without rebuke, and looking forward from the sepulcher that angels filled, from the radiant cloud on which He rose, from the cleft sky through which he passed, to the resurrection of just and unjust which He predicted, when all who have borne the image

of the earthy shall also bear the image of the heavenly,—the heart of the apostle swells and his eyes moisten with gratitude and joy, as breaking the silence he cries, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for by Jesus Christ have we access by faith, into this grace wherein we stand, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God."

Brothers, as inhabitants of a Christian land, as Christians in name and nurture, if not in principle and conduct, putting aside the question of a future world, and looking only to the temporal advantages conferred by the religion of our Lord, we have no little cause of gratitude to Jesus Christ. The dominion of Christianity is co-extensive with the limits of civilization, and for the peculiar type of civilization the modern world exhibits, so very unlike, so vastly superior to that of ancient heathenism, we are indebted, if not solely, at least mainly to the religion of Christ. We can merely allude to this, but we would suggest that if we are superior to ancient Rome in the purity of our public sentiment, in our finer and truer conceptions of moral excellence, if from a conviction of the immortality of man, our social and domestic relations are invested with a sanctity unknown to theirs, if the moral element, rather than the physical, or even the intellectual, is becoming the predominant influence of human progress, if the sentiment of the spiritual equality of men before God is daily developing itself in a tendency towards institutions, which shall, as far as possible, leave open the avenues of happiness to all, if human life is becoming more sacred, the true worth of our nature, even in its vilest specimens, better estimated, and the appeals of distress more potential and persuasive, if there be a deeper interest in the welfare of the masses, a livelier, more expansive and more practical sympathy for them, springing from the pressure of the tie of human brotherhood, if all these, and many more of equal significance, be the characteristics that distinguish the civilization of our time from that of ancient heathenism, then may we with truth affirm the religion of the Gospel to be the chief cause of our superiority, with Paul in the text say, "by the faith of Christ have we access into this state of grace wherein we stand."

But if we may adopt this language as our motto as Christians, emphatically it is ours as Universalist Christians. From none of the blessings derived by men from the benignant religion of Jesus, we are debarred, while some of its brightest prospects, its purest delights, its most animating incentives, are peculiarly ours. When we reflect upon the aspect that religion bears to thousands of our kind, our Christian kind—sorrowful and sad, mantled with mystery, and armed with terrors which even Judaism disowned, with one hand marshalling millions to doom, and with the other, urging up difficult steps from whose far summits shines a doubtful heaven, a few sad climbers, over and anon looking back reluctant upon the lost they leave below,—when with this we contrast the aspect she presents to us, "pure, peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated," though denouncing retribution on sin, swift, condign, and sure, yet effulgent in mercy too, and singing ceaselessly of the time when there shall be no more sin, and therefore no more sorrow, when the spirit of love divine shall animate all spirits, and the great universe shall beat like a pulse with the life of God that fills it, oh how well it becomes us, not in exultation over others, but in deep and devout acknowl-