

CONFIRMATION; OR, THE INWARD GRACE

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St. Paul says to the Ephesians: "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption" (chap. iv. 30).

This makes us think what St. Paul can mean, and leads us to look into other parts of Holy Scripture for explanation.

We will turn back to a very early part of the Bible. When the holy prophet Ezekiel was living on the banks of the river Chebar, in Babylonia, whether he had been taken with his king, Jehoiachin, and others of the princes and Levites, God showed him many visions of his dear home at Jerusalem, and of those of his brethren who remained there; that he might warn them to provoke God no further, but to turn away His wrath from their city, or, at any rate, each man for himself.

In one of these visions—it is to be found in Ezekiel's ninth chapter—just after God had shown him how the glorious Temple itself, God's own house of prayer, was full of persons worshipping idols, the prophet beheld the destroyers, each with his weapon in his hand, gathered within the Temple, ready for the slaughter, and only writing for the word. Then he saw a figure, clothed in linen, with an ink-horn by his side. Then a voice from the bright glory that betokened the presence of God, spake and said:

"Go through the minds of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark on the foreheads of the men that sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof."

The same voice added, to those who held the slaughter weapons—

"Go ye after him through the city, and smite; let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity. Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children and women; but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary."

We might perhaps think that this awful message belonged only to the days when Nebuchadnezzar's men were doing God's work of vengeance upon the idolatrous Jerusalem, and when the unseen mark of God guided His true servants in the midst of destruction; but God's words are much too great and far-reaching to have their fulfillment at once, and they stretch on much farther than what concerned that first destruction of Jerusalem.

This very vision of Ezekiel was, as it were, carried on, and rendered more terrible and more significant when, four hundred years later, St. John the Evangelist, in his captivity, likewise saw the doom of the faithless revealed.

Instead of the Temple of Jerusalem, St. John beheld the courts of heaven; instead of the carved cherubim, the four living creatures; instead of the daily sacrifice, the lamb as it had been slain. But it was the hour of wrath for those who had despised the blessed sacrifice of the lamb; and thus instead of the six with their slaughter weapons, St. John beheld the horsemen going forth to slay; "a pale horse, and his name that sat thereon was Death, and Hell followed with him." Moreover, he saw four angels standing, holding the four winds of heaven, and instead of Him with the ink-horn, he saw an "angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God; and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads."

And while the earthquake, the fire, the destruction, had their way on the earth, the seal-

ed wore their white robes, waved their palms, and cried:

"Salvation to our God that sitteth on the throne, and to the Lamb."

We know that St. John's visions are of the state of things in which we live—on to the end of time. Therefore, what can import to us more than to be sure that we receive, and that we do not lose, that seal on the forehead which is to mark us for safety in the hour of vengeance?

Now, is that seal affixed on our brow unconsciously, as it seems to have been in Ezekiel's vision? Is it God's mark of holiness, unknown to man? In some degree it may be; and yet St. Paul speaks of it as being the right common to all Christians, for he says to the Corinthians:

"Now He which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God: Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts" (2 Cor. i. 21, 22).

And again, to the Ephesians: "After that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of Promise" (Eph. i. 13). And later in the Epistle he says: "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye were sealed unto the day of redemption."

Thus it is plain that St. Paul regarded the sealing as the special work of the Holy Ghost—nay, as if the Holy Ghost were Himself the Seal. Where He is present, the soul and body bear their seal and are safe, so that to them the day of vengeance is the day of redemption. Yet this seal, this abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, cannot be only the mark of a perfect Christian, just ready to die. It must be given to him while yet he is in a state of trial, and liable to be lost; or St. Paul would not speak as if everyone in his Church had it, or bid them be ware of grieving the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, he says that the Ephesians were sealed after they had believed (chap. i. 13); and his words to the Corinthians couple this sealing with the Holy Ghost with the being established and anointed to God.

Surely, then, the sealing must be the having the special grace of the Holy Ghost conferred. See, then, how the Apostles conveyed this grace. When Philip the Deacon had baptized the converts at Samaria, St. Peter and St. John were sent down, "who when they were come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Ghost (for as yet He was fallen on none of them; only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus); then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost" (Acts viii. 15-17).

To Cornelius the Holy Spirit came visibly before baptism; but that was an exceptional work of God, wrought to remove all doubt as to the admission of the Gentiles; but he was baptized afterward, so that it is plain that baptism and sealing by the Holy Ghost are two different things.

Indeed, though the Samaritans were baptized by Philip, the two Apostles laid their hands on them before they received the Holy Ghost; and later we find that after the Ephesians had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, "when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them" (Acts xix. 6).

And it is in writing to these very men that he reminds them that "after they had believed, they were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise."

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we find "baptisms and the laying on of hands" spoken of as the very first outset of the Christian course; and from all these evidences we perceive that not only were Christians received to baptism, but that as soon as possible afterward, the Apostles whom our Lord had Himself commissioned laid their hands on them and thus conveyed to them the presence of the Holy Ghost; and that this was called by St. Paul the sealing of the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption. What that seal does for Christians we further

know from the awful yet hopeful sight which St. John beheld, of the dire judgments of God fast bound, until the sealing of all the faithful shall have secured them. And though in St. John's vision the sealing was the work of angels, yet we know that angels are messengers of God; so that what is done by the ministry of Christ would be spoken of as done by the angels. Indeed, in the earlier chapters of the Book of Revelation, we find the course of Bishops, the Episcopal ministry of each place, spoken of as the angel of such and such a Church; and our Lord says the stars in His right hand are the angels of the churches. These angels who sealed the servants of God, would plainly mean the messenger spirits, including the whole line of Bishops of each Church from the very first, all gathered into one vision before the saint.

The churches in the very places where St. Paul and St. John preached still used the name "Sealing," while we use the name "Confirmation," for being thus marked by the Apostolic hand. We all know that the grace which our blessed Lord gave to His Apostles to be imparted to the whole Church, is continued to our Bishops, and that the same grace that was bestowed by the laying on of the Apostles' hands; is still bestowed by the laying on of our Bishop's hands; so that when we kneel before our Bishop, it is the same thing as when the Samaritans and Ephesian converts knelt before St. Peter, St. John and St. Paul. The power of speaking different languages and of working miracles was sometimes conferred at such times, in order that the yet untaught people might know of the coming of the Holy Ghost by their outward senses.

But we have to trust to faith instead of to sight; and our Lord Himself, and His Apostles after Him, have told us that these wonderful gifts were of no consequence at all to the soul of the possessor. They were only given to convince the Jews and heathen; the real benefit, the being sealed by the presence of the Holy Spirit, comes to us without these outward signs, as it came to the Christians of old with them.

So it is that the Bishop makes the solemn prayer: "Strengthen them, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost the Comforter, and daily increase in them Thy manifold gifts of grace: the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and ghostly strength, the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness; and fill them, O Lord, with the spirit of Thy holy fear."

Such is the sevenfold seal of the blessed Spirit of God; and it is the more precious because this is the same Holy Spirit wherewith Jesus our Lord became the Anointed, the Christ (Acts x. 48). For doth not Isaiah say: "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots; and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, and the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord, and shall make Him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord" (Isa. xi. 1, 2).

In this manner, it may be, that "Him hath God the Father sealed" (St. John vi. 27). How should even our chief pastors dare to hand on to us that awful seal, that wonderful anointing, but that we are His members, and His blessings flow down to us, as did the oil on Aaron's head to the utmost part of his clothing? (Ps. cxxxii).

Who, then, would presume to turn away from the Seal of the Holy Spirit, by which we are to be marked for the great day? Who would venture to go without that laying on of hands, by which, once for all, the blessed Spirit may be conveyed to us as surely as when He sat on the Apostles in fiery tongues?

At our baptism we were indeed born into Christ's Church. Our new life began then, our spirit became alive to the influences of God; but the work is imperfect till the seal is given.