

## HEBREWS 13.20-21

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THESE two verses, though formally (since God is not directly addressed but referred to in the third person) a wish or 'prayer-wish', are really tantamount to a prayer.<sup>1</sup> The structure of the sentence may be indicated as follows: (i) God is named ('the God of peace'); (ii) an adjectival clause follows (as very often in collects); (iii) the first part of verse 21 expresses the substance of the petition; (iv) the whole is concluded by a doxology. A most perceptive and stimulating commentary on these verses is afforded by Philip Doddridge's phrase, 'Father of peace, and God of love', to which we shall refer from time to time.<sup>2</sup>

### I

Verse 20 may be said to set forth the grounds of the writer's confidence in God's ability and willingness to answer his prayer. It points to the objective reality of God and to the objective reality of His saving deeds. God is referred to as 'the God of peace', that is, the God who is the source of peace.<sup>3</sup> But 'peace' here (as often elsewhere in the Bible) means much more than we normally mean by the word: it signifies not merely peace as opposed to war, or peace and tranquillity of mind as opposed to disquiet and perturbation, but complete well-being, the sum of all true blessings, salvation.<sup>4</sup> By calling God 'the God of peace' the writer is indicating that God is the Source and Giver of all true blessings, the God who is able and willing to help and save. Unlike the god of some contemporary popular theology who is no more than the ground of our being, the principle of our more loving relationships, a god who has

<sup>1</sup> For this prayer-wish form cf. Rom. 15.5-6; 2 Thess. 3.16a; 2 Tim. 1.16, 18.

<sup>2</sup> This paraphrase is to be found in the revised *Church Hymnary*, No. 481, and in *The Scottish Psalter* of 1929, paraphrase No. 60.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase 'the God of peace' is found also in Rom. 15.33; 16.20; 2 Cor. 13.11; Phil. 4.9; 1 Thess. 5.23; and also in Testament of Dan. 5.2. The expression 'the Lord of peace' is used in 2 Thess. 3.16.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. von Rad and W. Foerster, in G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (ed.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart), II. pp. 308-418.

no real being outside and beyond and independent of the processes of our life and thought and so 'is unable by definition to stoop down to us and intervene creatively and redemptively in our need and condition',<sup>1</sup> the God of Holy Scripture is the living God, whose being is independent of us, beyond and outside our life, the transcendent God, who is able to condescend to us in mercy and to come to our help. Philip Doddridge brings out the meaning of the phrase well:

*Father of peace, and God of love!  
We own Thy power to save.*

The author of Hebrews goes on to mention two of the mighty acts of God, in which His power and will to save are to be seen. One of those mighty acts is the raising of Jesus from the dead ('who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep . . ., even our Lord Jesus'). The language used is reminiscent of the LXX version of Isa. 63.11, which speaks of God as *ὁ ἀναβιβάσας ἐκ τῆς γῆς* [so Rahlfs: B\* has *θαλάσσης*] *τὸν ποιμένα τῶν προβάτων*. God's deliverance of Moses with his flock, the children of Israel, from the land of Egypt and from the Red Sea foreshadowed His deliverance of Jesus from the dead as the shepherd of the flock which consists of those 'many sons' whom God purposed to bring 'unto glory' by Him (Heb. 2.10). The adjective *μέγας* is added by the writer to the Hebrews (cf. 'a great high priest' in 4.14 and 'a great priest' in 10.21). The implied comparison with Moses underlines the fact that the Resurrection is not thought of as a mere inward change in the thinking and attitude of the disciples but as an external event—God's decisive intervention by which He acknowledged, ratified, sealed, the Cross of Christ as man's redemption. The fact of the Resurrection assures the writer that his prayer will be heard and answered.<sup>2</sup>

The other mighty act to which reference is made here is the

<sup>1</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London, 1965), p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> To conclude from the fact that this is the only direct reference to the Resurrection in Hebrews that the author of the epistle was probably not the original author of this prayer and/or that the Resurrection was not important to him, is surely unjustified. The absence of other references in Hebrews is probably adequately explained by the author's special concerns. His concern to show Jesus as the great High Priest, for example, makes it natural for him to concentrate attention on the sacrificial death on the one hand and on the entrance of Christ into the heavenly holy of holies on the other; the comparison he is making affords nothing

Cross ('with the blood of the eternal covenant'). The Resurrection is thus defined as the resurrection of the Crucified. The language reflects the author's thought of Jesus as the great High Priest who takes His place in the innermost sanctuary of heaven. As the earthly high priest entered the holy of holies in Jerusalem on the Day of Atonement taking with him the sacrificial blood, so the risen Christ is thought of as having entered the heavenly holy of holies taking with Him the atoning efficacy of His death. His blood is called 'the blood of the . . . covenant', because the writer believes that, as the covenant of old was ratified by the sprinkling of the sacrificial blood (Exod. 24.6-8), so the new covenant (Jer. 31.31) has been established through the death of Jesus. And this new covenant is 'eternal' (for the phrase 'eternal covenant' cf. Isa. 55.3; Jer. 32[LXX: 39].40; Ezek. 37.26; and also the assurance expressed in Jer. 31.35-37); for, since He who died on the cross is truly God as well as truly man, His death was *God's* mighty act for the redemption of the world, effective once for all, the one 'full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice', and the forgiveness of the new covenant (Jer. 31.34) is nothing provisional or temporary but God's final, costly forgiveness, which in no way glosses over or condones our sin, but is altogether worthy of the God, who in all His ways is holy, righteous and true. The essential meaning is brought out by the paraphrase:

*Him from the dead Thou brought'st again,  
When, by His sacred blood,  
Confirmed and sealed for evermore  
The eternal covenant stood.*

## II

Verse 21 contains the substance of the petition. It is that God may enable those whom the author is addressing to live the Christian life—a prayer for their sanctification.

The Christian life is here set under the sign of obedience, of doing God's will ('to do his will'). There is no Christianity worthy of the name which is not deeply concerned with the doing of God's will. And the will of God is neither capricious nor esoteric. Every book of the Bible attests the fact that God has graciously revealed His will. 'He hath shewed thee, O man,

what is good . . .' (Mic. 6.8). God's law is His revealed will for man. With true theological perceptiveness Doddridge has here made explicit the reference to the law:

*But keep Thy precepts still.*

By His law God has claimed us wholly for Himself and for our neighbour, requiring—toward Himself—that love with the totality of our being which must include faith, gratitude, obedience, and—toward our neighbour—a love as sincere and real as that love which (sinners that we are!) we all in fact have for ourselves (cf. Mark 12.29-31).

But the writer does not just speak of their doing God's will but of God's enabling them to do it and of His working in them ('make you perfect in every good thing to do his will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ'). Here the paraphrase rightly introduces an explicit reference to the Holy Spirit:

*O may Thy Spirit seal our souls,  
And mould them to Thy will.*

For this divine work of restoring, repairing, equipping, enabling,<sup>1</sup> this 'working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight', God accomplishes (according to the New Testament) by giving Himself to us in His Holy Spirit and thus Himself creating our response to His love in Christ. The gospel would not be gospel—good news—at all, apart from this; for, of ourselves, we cannot respond, cannot love God or our neighbour, being held in bondage to self-love. Wherever a man begins to be turned in the direction of love to God and to his neighbour, there a miracle is taking place. Where this miracle is not taking place, there is no Church of Christ; for 'if any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his' (Rom. 8.9).

The Holy Spirit re-establishes God's law for us as no longer

<sup>1</sup> The verb *καταρτίζω* was probably chosen, as C. Spicq suggests (*L'Épître aux Hébreux*, II (Paris, 3rd ed. 1953), p. 436) because of its very wide range of meaning. Its meanings include 'adjust', 'put in order', 'restore', 'mend', 'recommission', 'furnish', 'equip', 'make good', 'prepare'. It would, of course, be wrong to infer from the AV and RV rendering 'make perfect' that the writer to the Hebrews expected Christians to attain perfection in this life. It may be noticed that the lines of the paraphrase,

*That to perfection's sacred height*

*We nearer still may rise,*

while speaking of our approaching nearer and nearer to perfection, avoid implying that we should hope to attain to perfection in this life.

an irksome and resented burden or something we can try to use for our own ends by a legalistic perversion of it, but the gracious gift of the revelation of God's fatherly will for His children, and enables us to embrace it with gratitude and joy. And this He does 'through Jesus Christ', that is, by uniting us ever more and more closely with Him, enabling us to embrace again and again, in ever-deepening love and loyalty, Him to whom we already belong, and so moulding our lives more and more into conformity with Him.<sup>1</sup>

But this work of the Spirit, which is basic and primary (*καταρτίσαι ὑμᾶς . . . εἰς τὸ ποιῆσαι . . . ποιῶν ἐν ἡμῖν*), does not render our work superfluous or unimportant. On the contrary, it makes possible, and demands, a real working on our part (the divine *καταρτίζειν* and *ποιεῖν* claim us *εἰς τὸ ποιῆσαι τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ*), and gives to it its true dignity and worth. It is significant that this epistle contains a considerable amount of exhortation.<sup>2</sup>

Whether the concluding doxology is intended to refer to Christ<sup>3</sup> or to God<sup>4</sup> it is probably impossible to decide for certain. In support of the former interpretation 2 Tim. 4.18, 2 Pet. 3.18 and Rev. 1.6 may be cited, in support of the latter Phil. 4.20 and 1 Tim. 1.17. We prefer simply to leave this question open.<sup>5</sup>

These two verses are implicitly—though not explicitly—Trinitarian; for they lead us to the mystery of the triune God, who is the God of peace who raised Jesus from the dead, and who is the Son, in whom He has given Himself to us as our 'shepherd', priest and 'Lord', and who is the Holy Spirit, in whom He gives Himself to us into our very inmost being, to work within us our sanctification.

<sup>1</sup> The best sense is obtained by taking *διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* with *ποιῶν*, as we have done above. It seems less satisfactory, though possible, to take it with *τὸ εὐάρεστον ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ*. It is scarcely possible to take it as the end-formula of the prayer (a pleading of Christ's merits), since this is not a prayer directly addressed to God.

<sup>2</sup> The verb *παρακαλεῖν* is, as a matter of fact, used in both 13.19 and 13.22, though little weight can be put on this.

<sup>3</sup> So e.g. Spicq, op. cit., p. 437; F. F. Bruce, in M. Black and H. H. Rowley (ed.), *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London, 1962), p. 1019.

<sup>4</sup> So e.g. J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, 1924), p. 242; H. W. Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1964), p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> As does H. Strathmann, in *Das Neue Testament Deutsch*, 9 (Göttingen, 1949),