

SERMON XXI.

THE UNSEARCHABLE RICHES OF CHRIST, THE
SUBJECT OF PAUL'S PREACHING TO THE GEN-
TILES.

EPHESIANS iii. 8.

“ Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

THE writer and speaker before us had learned the knowledge of the HOLY ONE from Christ himself, and was caught up into paradise, where he saw the Lamb of God upon his throne, and heard the surrounding hosts of elect angels and saints sing a new song to the honour of his name, saying, “ Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood: worthy is the Lamb that was slain.” When he was permitted to descend and dwell again on earth, he proved that he had caught fire at the altar above; for he “ determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

When he wrote this epistle, he was a prisoner for Christ at Rome; but though bound with a chain, the word of God was not bound. His prison was a palace, being sanctified by the presence of Christ Jesus, who so enlarged Paul's heart, that from thence he watered the churches with several letters, full of the perfume and fragrancy of the beloved Immanuel. This before us, is a most noble one, full of the deep things of God, and the sublime mysteries of grace, so that none of his writings exceed it. He was most enlarged heavenward, when most straitened in body, as is very commonly the case with real saints, who, when they are most afflicted, oftentimes flourish most in their souls: hence some say that this epistle smells of the prison.

In the first chapter, we are informed concerning the eternal acts of the will of God; respecting his love and choice of the elect, in the person of Christ, God-man, before all worlds; of his blessing them in Christ, with all spiritual blessings; of his predestinating them unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ; of his accepting them in the person of the beloved, to the praise of the glory of his grace. After which he treats of their redemption by Christ, from the state of sin and misery into which they were brought by the fall of Adam, and how they were brought to the knowledge of Christ, and their interest in him; it was by hearing the

gospel, which he calls the gospel of salvation, which giving a full and clear account of him, and his finished work, they, through the light and teaching of the Holy Ghost, were led to believe on the Lord Jesus for salvation; and having believed, they were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which was the earnest of their right and title to the inheritance, and that he would remain in them, until they were perfectly redeemed from all the frailties of mortality, and raised in their bodies from the grave of death, when he would continue to dwell in their souls and bodies to all eternity. He then prays the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, to bestow the Holy Ghost, as the Spirit of wisdom and revelation on them, that they might be led into a further knowledge of these mysterious acts of grace, and of what had been done and passed on their head, the Lord Jesus Christ, that they might centre and rest simply and wholly on him.

In the second chapter, he sets before them the state of sin and corruption they were in by birth, declaring that they were "by nature children of wrath, even as others." He sets an emphasis on their translation out of this tremendous state, saying, "But God who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ: by grace are ye saved."

In the chapter from whence I have selected my text, he tells the Ephesians, that he had set his knowledge of Christ before them, in the first chapter of this most divine epistle; and that in their reading it, they might understand his knowledge of the mystery of Christ.

It is recorded, concerning that truly great and valuable man, the late Doctor Coneyer, of St. Paul's, Deptford, that on reading the words which I have chosen for my text, (in the chapter which came in course for the second lesson, on a Lord's-day afternoon, in the established church, at Helmesly, in Yorkshire, where he then ministered) he was greatly struck: he thought with himself, 'What is there in my preaching, but every body must understand. There is nothing mysterious in it; whereas the apostle is here speaking of what is hidden and unsearchable.' This led him, through the light and teaching of the Holy Ghost, to a real and supernatural knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and he began from henceforward to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to his people. This most excellent person, on the last Lord's-day of his ministry at Deptford, in Kent, having read, in the service of the church, the twentieth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, in which Paul's farewell sermon to the elders of the Ephesian church is registered, he preached on these words, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth."

As he was pursuing his subject, he lifted up his hands, and waving them, said, that our Lord Jesus was upon his throne, sending forth his gospel, accompanied with his Spirit, to bring his people home effectually, by the knowledge of his person and work, to believe on him to life everlasting. While he was preaching, death arrested him, which he feeling, recovered himself so much as to finish his sermon; when not being able to come out of the pulpit, he was carried from it to his own house, where being put to bed, he soon fell asleep in the arms of Jesus, experiencing the truth of his Divine Master's words, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord."

The words of my text, which are, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ," contain an account of Paul's view of himself. By a singular expression, which he has chosen as his peculiar motto, he styles himself, "*less than the least of all saints.*" He then declares his qualifications for the work in which he was engaged, "*Unto me who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given.*" Then he declares the subject of his ministry, "*the unsearchable riches of Christ;*" and points out the persons to whom he was to preach them, *the gentiles.*

These are the particulars contained in the words before us ; and I shall only touch on the former, as introductory to the latter. Therefore I shall divide my text only into these two heads.

First, the subject of the apostle's ministry, " the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Secondly, the persons to whom he preached these unsearchable riches, the gentiles, " Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ."

The expression here used by the apostle, is singular ; he styles himself " less than the least of saints ;" which is very expressive of the state and views of his own mind ; a full proof of his littleness in his own eyes. This is the fruit and effect of grace, and is realized in the experience of many great saints, whose names are recorded in the bible. Abraham, the father of the faithful, and the friend of God, though admitted into free and holy familiarity with the Lord, cries out, " I am but dust and ashes." Jacob, though he was favoured with a vision of Jehovah at Bethel, and afterwards with several manifestations and communions with God-Jesus, yet he says, " I am less than the least of all thy mercies." Moses, though favoured with the presence of the angel Jehovah at Horeb, and afterwards admitted on the mount with God, yet when he

heard his voice speaking out of the midst of devouring fire, cried out, "I exceedingly fear and quake." This was likewise the case with Job, who, when the Lord spake to him out of the whirlwind, cried out, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee; wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." So Isaiah, when he was favoured with a vision of Jehovah Jesus, in the temple, (as he was to be in the fulness of time, when incarnate, God manifest in the flesh,) attended with the seraphim, who worshipped him with a thrice holy, and veiled their faces with their wings, as unable to behold his essential, personal, and mediatorial glory, it being beyond all that they could possibly take in and conceive, he cried out, "Woe is me, for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of Hosts."

We have the like example of humility and self-abasement in our apostle, who had been in heaven; yet when he classes himself with the apostles, he says of himself, "I am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." When he puts himself among sinners, and speaks of himself as a sinner saved, he adds, "of whom I am chief." And here, numbering himself with saints, he entitles him-

self "less than the least of all saints." We see from hence, that the more the mind is enlightened by the Holy Ghost, to apprehend the majesty, holiness, purity, and perfections of God, and to conceive the same as reflected on us in the person of the God-man, Christ Jesus, and in his glorious mediation, the more self-loathing and self-abhorrence is produced.

We have also another instance in the case of the apostle John, who, though dignified with the title of the disciple whom Jesus loved, and favoured with most sweet, free, and heavenly communion with him, yet, in the isle of Patmos, in the Archipelago, when favoured with a visionary representation of one like unto the Son of man, he tells us, "when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead." And he would have remained thus, had not his most gracious Lord and Saviour addressed him, saying, "Fear not; I am the first and the last; I am he that liveth, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and have the keys of hell and of death," Rev. i. 17, 18.

The apostle having taken his motto, speaks of his qualification for his work. He ascribes it to a gift of grace; "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

That he should be elected in Christ to grace and glory before the world was, was altogether

of grace; it was altogether out of the same free sovereign grace, that God had revealed his Son in him, and called and appointed him to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the gentiles: hence he says, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given." His call to the apostolic office, his being separated to the gospel of God, his mission, and commission to preach the everlasting gospel, were altogether of grace, free, rich, and sovereign grace; and he values it as such, esteeming it next to his own personal and eternal salvation. This appears from that most solemn doxology, which he offers up in the first chapter of his first epistle to Timothy.

Our apostle was the chief of the apostles, and greatest preacher of the free grace of the eternal three, of the everlasting covenant, and transactions of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the finished salvation of the God-man, Christ Jesus, in the new testament church. His love to Christ was fervent and sincere; his attachment to the truths and doctrines of the gospel, its worship, and ordinances, firm and stedfast; his zeal in the cause of God and truth, great; his knowledge clear; his judgment sound; his labours many, arduous, and abundant; his success in winning souls to Christ, such as was never exceeded, and, we may safely add, never will be. Yet it was all of grace; it was no part of his

salvation; it was but a gift bestowed on him, and which he here most freely ascribes to the Lord, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given." It is a good thing to be employed for God: it is heaven upon earth to be engaged in thinking, speaking, writing, or preaching the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet the whole is but a fruit of grace; the ministry of the word, and ministers to preach it, are ordained of Christ, the fruit of his royal ascension, and enthronization at the right hand of the Majesty on high. When ministers have done their best, and are most useful, they have nothing of their own to glory in: their gifts, their success, the blessing which crowned the whole, is all from the Lord. Yea, ministers of Christ, whether more or less successful, as far as they labour in the Lord's vineyard, shall receive a reward from him, not according to their success, but according to their own labour; "Every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labour," 1 Cor. iii. 8. The reward is, indeed, altogether of grace, and will consist in that honorable mention which will be made of it by Christ in the new Jerusalem state.

Having thus made way for introducing what I design to lay before you, in the two heads into which I have divided my text, I begin with the first, viz. The subject of the apostle's ministry,

which he says, was, "The unsearchable riches of Christ."

The Lord Jesus Christ is infinitely glorious in his person; he is rich beyond conception. The gospel reveals and sets him forth, in all the riches of his mediatorial person, love, and mercy, with all the glory and worth of his righteousness and blood, in all his fulness, and with all his treasures of grace and glory. Yet his riches are so durable, so inexhaustible, that when all is conceived which can be taken into the spiritual mind, concerning him and his riches, by the light and unction of the Holy Ghost, they are unsearchable. The person of Jesus Christ is inestimably rich and glorious: he is one in the Godhead with the Father and the Spirit, co-equal, and co-eternal. He, by the will and transactions of the eternal Three, is God-man, the image of the invisible God, the brightness of his Father's glory, "In whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead." He was before all things, and by him all things consist; the heir of all things; as such, the glory, the excellency, the worth, the riches of his person are unsearchable: he is the infinite treasury of all the communicable grace and glory of Godhead.

The love of this divine and infinitely glorious head and bridegroom of his church and people, passeth knowledge: it is an ancient, personal, invincible, yea, an everlasting love. "He for us

men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven." He had a glory with the Father before the world was: he, though in the form of God, and "thought it not robbery to be equal with God," yet having engaged with the Father and the Holy Ghost, on the behalf of the elect, he "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man." "He who was rich, for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich." And as one says, 'If his poverty enriches us, what will his riches in glory do for us? when we shall see him as he is, and behold his glory, how immensely rich will he then make us!' He who was rich beyond all computation, emptied himself, became incarnate, lived and died, "the just for the unjust, to bring us to God." His love hath heights, and depths, and lengths, and breadths, which shone forth in his life, and was evidenced in his bearing the sins, and carrying the sorrows of all his people. Measure the height and depth of it, as evidenced in his coming down from his Father's bosom, and giving himself up to be nailed to the cross; and then say if his love be not unsearchable! His mercies prove him to be rich: he pardons freely, fully, and eternally, the sins, iniquities, and transgressions of all his people. He is rich in mercy: his one perfect and everlasting righteous-

ness, which he wrought out by his own personal obedience to his Father's law, as the representative, surety, and mediator of his church and people, is a rich and glorious robe: in it the sinner is justified from all things, appears righteous in the sight of God, is made the righteousness of God in Christ, and is entitled to heaven, and eternal glory. The atonement of Christ, the treasures of his bloody sweat and bitter passion, his fulness of inexhaustible grace and glory, with his intercessory life in heaven, contain riches which are unsearchable. To proclaim this Saviour, to open his heart, to declare his bowels of mercy, to point out the everlasting perfection of his righteousness, and to spread abroad the odour, perfume, virtue, and efficacy, of his sacrifice, soul-travail, blood-shedding, and death, was the subject of the apostle's ministry; so that he might well entitle it, preaching "the unsearchable riches of Christ."

This brings me to my second head, viz. the persons to whom he preached the "unsearchable riches of Christ." He tells us, they were the gentiles; "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ."

The subject was most glorious; the preacher most admirably qualified; his commission quite clear. The persons to whom he was sent, and

among whom he was to preach "the unsearchable riches of Christ," were all, to a man, dead in trespasses and sins; they were blind, ignorant idolaters, "without hope, and without God in the world:" they had never heard of Jesus and his salvation; they were without spiritual life and light: they were, in every instance, act, and way of sinning, most vile and detestable: their lust, impurity, guilt, and pollution, were shocking and monstrous. But as no sinners out of hell could more need a Saviour, whilst they were thus in their natural state, in their sins, and in their blood, the gospel of Christ was sent amongst them, preached unto them, and, as accompanied by the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, it became the power of God unto their salvation. It was indeed a season, when free grace reigned and triumphed; so that the righteousness and blood of Christ were proved by the Holy Ghost, (who accompanied the testimony and report made of them in the word, to the sinful consciences of men,) to be an effectual antidote to remove all guilt from their minds, and to heal every wound which sin had given.

Let us view the gentiles, to whom it was preached, and we shall plainly see, that the Lord God doth not deal with sinful men according to what they are, as sinful creatures, but according to his eternal purpose, which he purposed to

them in Christ Jesus our Lord. When our Lord gave Paul his commission, it was expressed thus, "I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness, both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee, delivering thee from the people, and from the gentiles, unto whom now I send thee; to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness unto light, and from the power of satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified, by faith that is in me," Acts xxvi. 16, 17, 18. The apostle, in agreement with this commission, went into the gentile world. He preached at Corinth. The inhabitants were inconceivably unclean; yet he preached unto them Jesus, freely, fully, and suitably, to their lost and guilty cases; and the Holy Ghost setting in with the word, they heard it, and believed, received Christ, and with him all the blessings of peace and pardon.

The apostle afterwards addresses them, in his epistle to them, saying, "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye

are justified; in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." 1 Cor. vi. 9, 10, 11. Surprising grace! These persons were washed, sanctified, and justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God, and were living witnesses, that the "blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin."

The Thessalonians were gross idolaters: to them the everlasting gospel was sent; and by it they were turned from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, "whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." 1 Thess. i. 10. This was a glorious proof, and evidence of their election in Christ, before the world began; "Because the gospel came unto them, not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." 1 Thess. i. 5.

The Ephesians worshipped the goddess Diana, whose temple was set on fire, and burnt down, the very same night on which Alexander the great was born. They were also in compact with the devil, and used curious arts, and practised magic; yet the gospel preached amongst them, was the means of producing glorious effects: many were quickened from a death of trespasses and sins, born of God, heard the gospel of salvation, and believed the record given therein, concerning Jesus, and the power of his

salvation; so that it became the gospel of their salvation; to the truths of which they, in believing, set their seals, and had peace with God, by faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. "It is not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he shed on us abundantly, through Jesus Christ our Savior; that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life," Titus iii. 5, 6, 7. Christ is all, in the salvation of sinners: he is the Father's ordinance of life and salvation unto them; he quickens whom he will: he conquers by invincible grace, and by the omnipotent sweetness of his love.

The gospel is a most blessed means of drawing poor sinners to Christ, for there is every thing in him, which can possibly encourage them. The unsearchable riches of Christ, are, in the preaching of it, fully proclaimed in the hearing of poor sinners; and the Holy Spirit, working with it, gains their hearts for Christ. The glories of his person attract them; the love of his heart overcomes them; his mercy bears down their sins, with a full and eternal pardon of them; his righteousness and blood, in their dignity and infinite virtue, are preached unto them, that they gaining an apprehensive sense of them, may experience free and full salvation,

manifested to their souls. We may truly say, no blessing can exceed the gospel ; it is indeed a joyful sound ; it fully proves that no sinner can be too vile for Christ ; the most vile and hell-deserving he saves. His blood and righteousness exceed the utmost guilt, pollution, and evil, contained in sin, "The blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin." The sinner can have no misery, but Christ is almighty to save him from it : he can have no want, but Christ is most divinely qualified to supply. The sinner is to come just as he is, with the whole of his sinful disease, and to believe on Christ, for present and everlasting health and cure. This is the one only way in which a sinner can honour Jesus ; and when it is given unto him, thus to believe the ability of Christ to save him, and the infinite virtue of the blood of the Lamb, to make him clean from all sin, it is with him as though he had never sinned, in thought, word, or deed : for he is in believing justified from all things : he receives the revealed account of the atonement of Immanuel into his heart : he views the righteousness of Christ, as his robe and garment of salvation ; and apprehends the Father, as beholding him complete in his beloved Son, who sheds abroad a sense of his love in the heart, and fills the mind of the believer with a knowledge of his peace and pardon.

The believer in Christ, being freed from all condemnation, and made alive to God by the power of the Holy Ghost, nothing remains but for him to live to Christ, and go on holding communion with him, all the way to heaven. The saints in the apostolic churches, made partakers of Christ, and his unsearchable, infinite, and eternal riches, might well break forth in praise, and say, "Praise the Lord, all ye nations, praise him, all ye people: for his merciful kindness is great towards us, and the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Praise the Lord." Christ, with all the treasures of his love, mercy, and grace, in all the glory and perfection of his work, with all the blessings of his salvation, with his unsearchable riches of grace and glory, are set before poor sinners in the everlasting gospel; and they, by believing, are interested, and possessed of them. May the Lord, the Spirit, shine upon what has been set before you. Amen.