

you will feel yourself in the presence of God, who hath included you "with all saints" in the self-same bundle of life.

**"THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST,
AND THE LOVE OF GOD, AND THE
FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY GHOST
BE WITH YOU ALL."**

The apostle from whose hand the richest epistolary legacy has come to us, was in the habit of opening and closing his epistles with a blessing. The one he used in opening was almost always: "Grace be with you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." And the prayer with which he closed mostly read: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." It was truly exceptional, when at the close of his second epistle to the Corinthians he so far departed from his usual way, that he expanded his prayer, and said: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with you all." This closing prayer is particularly noteworthy, because the church of Christ almost everywhere has used it as the apostolic benediction at the close of public worship. Millions upon millions of times these sacred words, so rich of content and so tender of purport, have been repeated, after the departure of Paul, and it is for a large part now that congregations of believers return home from the place of worship under the impression of these words.

In this habit of St. Paul of opening and closing his epistles with a benediction one can observe the aftermath of the manner of the East, and on this ground take it merely as a phrase, and merely as a formula of good breeding, which as such has no spiritual significance, at least to us. But is not this unspeakably superficial? Is it true that from of old, and even to this day, it is customary with people in the East, in meeting and in taking leave of one another, to use fairly lengthy formulas of salutation, and this salutation and farewell consists mostly of prayers for blessings from on high. But how can it follow from this, that such prayers are nothing but empty phrases? Is not throughout the whole Scripture the selfsame use in application? Did not our Lord himself appear to his disciples with the salutation of blessing: "Peace be unto you!" And again has not this constant use in the apostolic writings given rise to the adoption of this ancient custom as a true integral part in mutual Christian fellowship? Adopted not merely in the church of the East, but transferred to the church of the West, and there also consecrated by the usage of nearly twenty centuries? And if, moreover, as for instance in Jacob's blessings of his sons, even prophetic revelation has employed this benediction, by which to throw a beam of light upon the future, is it not superficial and thoughtless, to see in such a prayer for Divine favor, nothing but words and sounds, and to deny it all real significance?

By the side of blessing stands the curse, and this also in Scripture is deeply significant. Not in

every case. Not the curse of hatred and anger. Not base meanness, which uses the curse as a poisoned weapon to wound. But the curse of him who is authorized to pronounce it, the curse of a father, or of a mother, or of one who is clothed with spiritual authority. Such a curse was valid as spoken under supreme responsibility, under inspiration from above. And such a curse came true. And where by the side of the curse there stands an equally sharply outlined address of blessing, which also derives its words and significance from the person, from the position and the occasion whereby and under which it took place, it is evident, that in this most noteworthy phenomenon of blessing and of curse, there hides a spiritual utterance for which in our Western lands and in our unspiritual times appreciation and receptivity have all too far been lost. Of the curse there is almost nothing left among us, save the blasphemous language of profane persons who abuse the holy name of the Lord as expletive and as an expression of anger. And of the prayer of blessing little else remains than good wishes at New Year, at a birthday, or at the solemnizing of marriage.

But in this mighty difference between a wish and the ancient address of blessing the weakened and abated character-trait of our utterance of life delineates itself. Even upon the deathbed little more is heard of such blessing of one's children. At present the only particular of a death that is mentioned is, that the patient passed away quietly

and calmly, i. e. without any perceptible death struggle. In most cases nothing more is heard.

In the face of all this the church usage has stood firm, and the congregation of God gathers in the sanctuary with the holy salutation and returns homeward with the address of blessing from the Lord. For this closing benediction the congregation even stands, or kneels, and reverently bows the head, and in quiet seriousness listens to the words of blessing, presently closed with the Amen. This is most encouraging, and the minister of the Word will do well to heighten this last act of dismissal by restful, calm and solemn tone. The preceding utterance of the words: "And now, receive the blessing of the Lord," is an introduction which tunes the heart and mind and consecrates and exalts. For what else utters itself in this salutation and final benediction than the glorious perception that the church of the living God stands in living contact with an higher order of things from what this world offers, and with him who has founded his throne in it. He who stands in the faith knows that he lives in a two-fold world. In the common world together with unbelievers, and in the higher world with the saints around God's throne, with the good angels, with his Savior and King, and in Christ with his Father and his God.

These two worlds are dove-tailed into one another. From the higher order, grace, peace and life, power and might have come down into this visible world; they have attached themselves, and now cleave in Christian lands to all sorts of

Christian ordinances and usages. But the real meeting of these two spheres takes place only in believers, who still live in this visible world, and yet carry the higher world in their heart; the latter expressing itself in their communion with the Holy Ghost. And as often as this preponderance of the holy in believers comes to a clear expression through the word, there is the holy salutation, and presently at parting, the address of blessing.

But this gives rise in life to a twofold sphere. The sphere of the unbelieving world, and the sphere that is breathed upon from the higher order of things. You are at once aware of this by the difference in your feelings as you move among children of God, or among children of the world. In both circles, in both spheres a different tone prevails, different language, different love. With the children of the world the flower of one's inner nature inclines to close itself up; with the children of God this calix opens itself. This is no reason that one should withdraw himself from the visible world. On the contrary, God has given us here our calling and our work. We should even be on our guard, not to lift ourselves up in spiritual pride before the children of the world. What better are you than they, and what is your higher life other than pure grace? You should never be unmindful even to give yourself to this world, like your Savior to serve it, to bless it with your love, and to work for its good.

But our spiritual saving of life is always to be

fully aware of the antithesis between the world and the higher order of things, and always to foster fellowship with that higher order of things, to strengthen it, to feed it, and to remove everything that might hinder or weaken it out of the way. This power and ability does not come to us from ourselves, and not from one another, but solely and alone from God. That which maintains our vital connection with that higher world is exclusively the grace of Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost. And for this reason, as often as the congregation assembles, the minister of the Word salutes it with this assurance, and at the close dismisses it with the same in the name of the Lord.

To be near unto God is the vital strength of all believers. That alone and nothing else. He who wanders away from God, and becomes estranged from him, weakens himself, disturbs his inner life, and is lost again in the world. On the other hand he who continues to be near unto God and lives in secret fellowship with God, drinks in the powers of the kingdom each morning anew, lives in spiritual realities, and is breathed upon from on high. And this salutation of blessing and this dismissal with blessing is the constantly repeated assurance from the Triune God that his grace, his love and his fellowship continue to incline toward you; that God will be near unto you, in order that you may be near unto him, and that it is your sin alone that deprives you of this blessed communion.

"I, THE LORD THY GOD, AM A JEALOUS GOD."

"Say to my people," said the Lord to Ezekiel: "I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them" (Ezekiel 11:5). Hence also he knows what should, but does not, come into it. Neither the all-seeing eye nor the all-hearing ear of the Holy One of Israel are ever impeded. The sight of that eye penetrates into everything, and no vibration escapes the hearing of that ear. In one of the marble tombs at Syracuse the tyrant Dionysius was able to build a wondrously far-carrying echo, that he might overhear the conversations of his captured opponents. Even now this echo clearly returns the crackling of a sheet of paper at a distance of several hundred feet. and as the story runs, nothing kept these prisoners in check like this so-called "ear of Dionysius." They could not put it out of mind. They thought of it with every word. It ruled their spirit and their life.

This is what these wretched prisoners did for the sake of the ear of a man. And what do we do about the holy ear of the all-hearing God? What do we do for him who does not only see and see through everything we do, but to whom also every word is known before it passes over our lips. Yea, who moreover scans the thoughts, which we will never put into words, and who is aware of every impulse, every motion, every vibration, which will never crystallize itself within us into a thought, but which nevertheless comes into our mind. He who does not believe, experi-