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GOD'S EVERLASTING LOVE

Sermon preached before the Southern Baptist Convention at Hot Springs, Arkansas, evening session, May 14, 1908, by Henry Wilson Battle, D. D., Charlottesville, North Carolina.

"Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love." Jeremiah 31:3.

Is it intended that this amazing declaration should be accepted as the language of truth and soberness? The sentiment of love confers special privileges, and one does not care to hamper it by the requirements of a too exacting literalism. Poetry has its wing as well as its song, and love is ever instinct with poetry. Hyperbole is the most natural and universal figure of speech in love's rhetoric. Shall we, therefore, look for pardonable exaggeration in the glowing phraseology of the text, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love"?

In the interpretation of words suggestive of a doubt, it is important that we take into consideration the character of the author and the occasion which called them forth. Who is the author of this wonderful statement? and to whom does it apply? Jeremiah does not leave us in doubt at this point: "Jehovah appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." Jehovah! with whom there can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning; who, exalted above time, is infinitely removed from the shifting moods and varying circumstances which cause the feelings of even the best of men to be, at times, grievously disappointing and painfully unreliable -- Jehovah! for whom, consciously or unconsciously, every heart is yearning, and in whom is rest, and joy, and completion, Jehovah said, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love."

To whom does this wonderful declaration apply? Again we turn to the record: "for Jehovah hath ransomed Jacob and redeemed him from the hand of him that was stronger than he" -- ransomed as the evidence and pledge of his everlasting love. God's ransomed ones till time shall be no more! Before I had being, save in the thought of omniscient Love and Power, He loved me -- oh blessed paradox! -- and He will love me forever!

I, with the approach of motherhood, holy thoughts of the life-to-be opens a rill of yearning tenderness from earth's purest and sweetest fountain (the while deft fingers secretly stitch and embroider), to gush forth a river, boundless, fathomless, and inexhaustible when that life is, and its first feeble cry tells the good news of a new born child; so is there answering motherhood in the bosom of God. "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you". If He loved me before I began to exist -- "from afar" - before the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy -- shall He not love me now that I have entered his great universe, endowed with the life he gave, and in supreme need of him? I am ignorant, but his book says, "If any lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given unto him"; I am sinful -- I know what Paul meant when he cried, "Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" But I also know what he meant when he shouted, in ringing challenge to earth, and heaven, and hell, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things

present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" - Oh love of God, dateless as eternity; boundless as infinitude!

Brethren, when I think of love like that I find but one word by which to designate it -- not a popular word, but a Bible word; and, to my way of thinking, the only word. That word is SOVEREIGN. My most minute and exhaustive study of the history of the race utterly fails to discover sufficient inducement, or even justification, for such love from the great God of the Universe. I thank God that I find in all men vestiges of nobility that have survived the fall--psychic foundation, if you please, for God to build on -- but adequate cause for such love for a sinner, I can find nowhere outside the bosom of God. I dare take my stand in hope of eternal life nowhere - on mother Earth, or lurid Mars, or belted Orion, or smiling Pleiad, or within the jeweled walls of the New Jerusalem, -- nowhere beyond the impregnable ramparts of that sublime revelation: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life".

It has been said that there is an infinite life of feeling in God. So there is, but feeling alone is not love. Love implies not only receiving, but also giving; not languid emotion ending in itself, but active and glad power reaching out and lavishing self with superb prodigality. The eternal love of God involves eternal giving, so James tells us of "The giving God" -- giving, not as an episode in life, but a law of being. "Therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee". The best and greatest gift man can make is the gift of self. This is ever love's largess, love's

radiant goal --beyond it no demand can reach, and toward it all true love-tokens move by the impulses of an inner and divine law. Oh that we might give OURSELVES unreservedly and completely to God to-night! -- then would we give money and service hilariously because we had first given Self.

As man's ultimate, and all inclusive, gift is the gift of Self; might we not reverently infer that God's ultimate and all inclusive love-gift would be the gift of Himself? He has given himself to us in Jesus Christ --"the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance" , and "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things."

All through the ages God has been wanting to give himself to man; all through the ages man has been wanting to give himself to God. Through the pathetic, yet thrilling story of human life, there runs two lines: one indicating the upward reach of man for God; the other indicating, the downward reach of God for man, and the two converging lines meet in Jesus Christ. We follow them like golden threads, often obscured but never broken, running through the maze of history -- in benighted heathendom lurking in rites and sacrifices; in cultured paganism vibrating in strains of poetry and teachings of philosophy; in Israelitish monotheism waxing clearer and clearer, brighter and brighter, till on the threshold of the New Dispensation the voice of prophecy changes to a glad shout of victory: "He has visited and redeemed his people!" and as Jesus of Nazareth stands revealed, listen! - "All things have been delivered unto me of my Father; and no man knoweth the Son save the Father, neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son

willeth to reveal him. Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

If, therefore, O my brother, you would draw nigh unto God through the intellect, like Kepler thinking God's thoughts after him, it must be over a way made luminous by the words of the Divine teacher; if you would know God in the sweeter, surer, and infinitely more satisfying way of the Spirit, again I say it must be through the revelation of Jesus Christ. I declare unto you ~~in~~ the everlasting love of God, but I declare unto you the everlasting love of God in Jesus; I declare unto you the fatherhood of God, but I declare unto you the fatherhood of God through the brotherhood of him that loved us and gave himself for us!

"The Weeping Prophet" of our text represents Jehovah as seeking to win back his chosen people unto himself under the figure of a lover wooing a maiden. From afar Jehovah appears and pleads with tender protestation: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love"; therefore, though all unworthy as thou art, "Again will I build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: again shalt thou be adorned with thy tabrets, and shall go forth in the dances of them that make merry. Again shalt thou plant vineyards upon the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit thereof". A century later, Hosea strikes the same tender note with fingers that quiver under the stress of his own heart-anguish: "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall make answer there as in the days of her youth. And it shall be

at that day, saith Jehovah, that thou shalt call me Ishi" ---my husband ---"
and shalt call me no more Baali "---my master."

Arthur, the generous, the pure, the brave, could only say to
Guinevere:

"Lo I forgive thee, as Eternal God
Forgives; do thou for thine own soul the rest,
But how to take last leave of all all I loved:

Let no man dream but that I love thee still.
Perchance, and so thou purify thy soul,
And so thou lean on our fair father Christ,
Hereafter in that world where all are pure
We two may meet before high God, and thou
Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and know
I am thine husband, not a smaller soul -----
Leave me that,
I charge thee, my last hope: now must I hence;
Thro' the dark night I hear the trumpet blow."

Poor Arthur! - Poor Guinevere! Our God takes no "last leave!" He
will lead His betrothed into the wilderness of affliction, where
the might trees cast spectral shadows and the solitude whispers of
eternity; there he will speak "home to her heart", and when she comes
forth, clad in spotless attire, leaning on the arm of her beloved,
purified, redeemed, he will say:

"Thou art all fair, my love;
And there is not spot in thee".

John on Patmos heard the shout of a great multitude, and a mighty noise as if the billows of old ocean, clapping their hands, were answering back to reverberating thunders, saying:

"Halelujah: for the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigneth.

Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, and let us give the glory unto Him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made her-self ready".

It's all going to end in a wedding! The place will be heaven; the witnesses will be the angelic principalities and powers; the bride will be the Redeemed of every tribe, and tongue and people and nation; God the Father will bestow the bride, in her peerless beauty on his Son; and when the Divine bridegroom places the ring, endless as eternity and set with the ruby of his own atoning blood, on her finger, all heaven will break forth into shouts of tumultuous joy! -- the bursting forth into glorious fruition of ten million longings, and hopes, and dreams!

At last, at last, at last, thank God! at last, O my prophetic soul, all, and more than all, has come true! And it's going to be a love-match -- the purest, the gladdest, the most enduring the universe will ever see! Bride and Groom will be sweethearts forever! Sometimes I think I can hear them--the wedding bells--ringing just over the river, and their silvery cadences steal upon my spirit's ravished sense with a solemn sweetness soft as down on angel pinion, and grow so insistent that I long to be gone. It is to be a wedding, not a funeral! serious and yet how glad!

"I give my heart to thee, Savior divine,
 For thou art all to me, and I am thine.
 Is there on earth a closer bond than this,
 That my Beloved's mine and I am his?"

All this is but telling over and over again, first under one figure and then under another, the story of the everlasting love of God in the end will win. The shepherd will find his sheep; the father will have his lost boy safe at home; the lover will some day meet his betrothed at the altar, and they twain shall be one.

Given the everlasting love of the infinitely intelligent and resourceful God, and the successful execution of a world-plan of redemption follows, as a postulate, for every thoughtful mind. This vast concourse of messengers of the churches of Jesus Christ have assembled at this place in Convention from every section of our own Southland and beyond the seas because there is a divine world-plan of redemption, and in that plan has been provided a place for the noblest activities of mind, and heart and body for a consummation the sublimest that ever challenged the thought of a philosopher, or inspired the sacrifice of a hero! O you who sigh for an ampler field of thought and a nobler motive, a realm where the soul may find room to expand its powers without disappointment or regret, behold it here. The nature that can lift itself out of the dust, fog, and clatter of our little-day ambitions to the serene and sublime height of God's world-plan, wed itself to that plan and join finite energies to omnipotent forces, may lose somewhat in the tawdry and adventitious conditions of a fleeting existence, but it will gain an infinite part of life - the life of God! "Be ye imitators of God as dear children." We cannot imitate him in the swing of his scepter, sovereignty reaching to wherever a world twinkles in space; we cannot imitate him in the splendor of associated attributes before which the angels veil their faces, - but O, my brother, we can imitate God on

the lowly plain of a fallen world, among creatures fellow to ourselves, for the redemption of that world and the salvation of those creatures. This is to be like God! - the grandest ambition that can throb in the brain of a man, or thrill in the heart of a seraph!

A great manufacturer related this incident to me. It was at Petersburg soon after the war between the states. Time had not smoothed down the embankments, not filled the rifle pits which left that entire section seamed and scarred by the signs of the terrific conflict. One evening the distressing report, "A Child Lost," spread through a suburb of the city with the rapidity of heart telegraphy. A little four-year-old had wandered off and was lost, - or had some miscreant kidnapped the child? Who could tell? for the country was in a state of demoralization, infested by roving bands ready for any deed or crime. A company of sympathizing friends and neighbors searched long hours. Night came on. Some thought they found signs of the tracks of little feet leading in the direction of the great woods nearby, and into those woods half-a-hundred brave men plunged with lighted torches and lanterns to search every inch of ground; but all was in vain. The hours dragged slowly by. It was past midnight, and the child had not been found. Father and mother were well-nigh wild with anxiety. The mother's inventive love devised a plan. She caused every searcher to return. O, it was enough to melt a heart of stone -- that spectacle of strong men, their anxious countenances revealed by the light of the lanterns, ranged about a mother pale and sharply-drawn features, depicting the heart's unutterable anguish! "Listen! Each night for a week past, our little lost darling has waked while the clock was striking three, and, frightened by the darkness, called out 'Papa!' If she is in the woods and alive, sleeping

in some undiscovered place, - who knows? - maybe at that hour she will awake and her little voice call out in the darkness, 'Papa!' Let the men resume their search; let scatter to every quarter of the woods; let them take their watches from their pockets, and when the hour hand nears three, let them be still, scarcely daring to breathe, and listen as they never listened before." An hour passed, and another- a moment more and it will be three o'clock.

Hark! A glad shout! somebody has heard a child's feeble cry; somebody has rushed to the spot and taken the little one out of a hole dug by bayonets, and , with glad shouts, is bearing her back to mother - back home!

O, my brothers, God and his angels are listening for a lost world to cry out in the darkness, "Father!" - and will there not be joy up yonder, when not one, but millions, out of every tribe and kindred and tongue, shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the Father's home? Will you be there? Look around you - it is his banquetting hall; look above you - his banner over-head is Love; behold, O, my soul, with adoring wonder, the joy on the Savior's face! He sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied!