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‘A DEBTOR TO MERCY ALONE’ by Augustus M. Toplady

A devotional appreciation by Gary Townsend.

A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with thy righteousness on, my person and off’ring to bring.
The terrors of law and of God with me can have nothing to do;
My Saviour’s obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which His goodness began, the arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen, and never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now, nor all things below or above,
Can make Him His purpose forgo, or sever my soul from His love.

My name from the palms of His hands eternity will not erase;
Impressed on His heart it remains, in marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the earnest is giv’n;
More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in Heav’n.

Augustus Montague Toplady.

Whilst claiming a great regard for Toplady’s hymn I pretend in no way to be well read on the man and his life or even the doctrinal themes of which the hymn treats. For authority and greater words of wisdom please see the article ‘Toplady and The Preservation Of The Saints’ by Don Elcoat in the 1992 Winter edition of *Cross†Way* and the other articles in this edition.

A consideration of the great doctrines of Predestination and Election and The Perseverance Of The Saints have engendered many a theological argument. In what follows I offer some thoughts on the hymn which I think demonstrate the effects which these great doctrines had upon Toplady; effects which I wish were better evidenced in many of us today.

First, consider what moved Toplady to worship. Toplady’s song is of *covenant mercy* by which I take him to mean that *better covenant* of Hebrews 8:6-13 which is the fulfilment of God’s promise to be *merciful to their* (Israel and Judah) *unrighteousness* (Heb. 8:12). Toplady is moved to take up this song by his sense of indebtedness to the mercy of God and nothing else. What right had he to take up such a theme? After all, anyone who has paid any attention to the Old Covenant given through Moses, with its exacting requirements on the part of both worshipper and priest, will know that making any offering to God is a difficult and dangerous thing. Yet Toplady speaks of no fear with *thy righteousness on, my person and offering to bring*. He recognises that with God and his law there is terror for the sinner. All this is very real to Toplady yet so is the perfect work of the Saviour: *My Saviour’s obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view*. Here is the source of his confidence; here is the reason for his song; here is the heart-felt worship of a sinner indebted to the mercy of God. *The terrors of law and of God, with me can have nothing to do* are the words of a man who recognises in the very depths of his heart just how much he owes to the God of mercy and grace. How many today flee to Christ crucified for fear that if they didn’t they’d have to face the full fury of God’s wrath? (1 Thessalonians 1:10). How many of us are moved to worship by a consideration of this Gospel truth?

Secondly, consider the insight into the importance of the incarnation suggested by the line *My Saviour’s obedience and blood, hide all my transgressions from view*. Indeed, Jesus gave up his life for us sinners (doubtless Toplady would be at pains to stress that Christ gave up his life for his

sinful brethren rather than for all sinners. Cf. Hebrews 2:9-15) but it is important that the life offered was pure and holy - perfect man; hence Jesus' obedience was crucial to the effectiveness of his propitiatory sacrifice. As we say in the Litany: *By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation, Good Lord, deliver us.* Do we have a deep sense of gratitude that the eternally begotten of the Father was made flesh for us? Evangelicals have sometimes been criticised for having a great appreciation of Christ's death but little understanding of the importance of His earthly life. (Cf. Romans 8:3 & Galatians 4:4,5).

Next, consider the confidence expressed in the second and third verses. I note that the scope of Toplady's confidence and assertions are limited to the proper bounds allowed by Scripture. What we can be certain of is what God has said and what God has determined to do: *Things future, nor things that are now, nor all things below or above, Can make Him His purpose forgo, or sever my soul from His love* (Cf. Romans 8:31-39) *and, Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the earnest is given* (Cf. Ephesians 1:13,14; 2 Corinthians 1:21,22 & 5:5). The believer's confidence must be in what is certain and nothing else; and what is certain is what God has said, what God has done and what God has set his mind to do. *Let him who boasts boast in the Lord* (1 Corinthians 1:31). Do we ever question God's motives in saving us? Remember, the work is that which *His goodness began* (Cf. Ephesians 1:3-6). Do we ever question God's ability to see the job through? Remember, *the arm of His strength will complete* (Cf. Ephesians 1:19,20; Ephesians 3:20; 2 Timothy 1:12; Jude 24). We have these truths in God's Word written. If we would ever doubt the veracity of his word let us remember, *His promise is Yea and Amen, and never was forfeited yet* (Cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20; 1 Kings 8:56; Psalm 111:7; Ezekiel 12:25; Matthew 5:18 etc.). Do we ever worry about what troubles lie ahead? Do we ever feel that our failures disqualify us from God's love? Remember, *Things future, nor things that are now, nor all things below or above, Can make Him His purpose forgo, or sever my soul from His love* (Cf. Psalm 73:26; Romans 8:28-39). Are we ever fearful that death will be the end of us? Remember, *My name from the palms of His hands eternity will not erase; Impressed on His heart it remains, in marks of indelible grace* (Cf. John 10:28,29; John 17:11 and 24; Ecclesiasticus 2:10; Psalm 94:14 and Lamentations 3:31).

Lastly, consider that, for all the confidence, for all the resolute affirmations of Toplady's hymn, there is clearly all the humility so characteristic of the true saint. Toplady was a debtor who knew himself to be loved; a child of grace, secure in the hands of his Lord, happy and expectant of yet greater happiness to come. This is the wonderful saintly disposition of mind that the Apostle Paul urged the Philippians to have in view of Christ's humiliation on their behalf (Philippians 2:5-13). *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.*

I think that this hymn by Augustus Toplady is a good example of the effects which, *a godly consideration of Predestination and our Election in Christ*, should have upon the life of one who knows they are of the Elect. For this doctrine is, as Art. XVII puts it, *.. full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons ... drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God.*

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