
Dying for Friends

James W. Alexander

FROM THE INHERITANCE OF OUR FATHERS
— Series XXXIV, No. 3

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James W. Alexander (1804-1859) was the eldest son of Archibald and Jenetta Alexander. Born in Virginia, he attended his first schools in Philadelphia, where his father was minister of the Third Presbyterian Church from 1807 until 1812, when he was called to be the first professor at the new Princeton Theological Seminary. James came to assurance of his salvation in 1820 and entered seminary in 1822. Licensed for the ministry in 1825, his first pastoral charge in Virginia (1827-1829) was followed by three years in Trenton, New Jersey. He was appointed Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres in the College of New Jersey in 1833, but his chief attachment was to the ministry. From 1844 until his death in 1859 (except for three years as a professor at Princeton Seminary, 1849-1851), he occupied influential pastorates in New York. His health, which was never strong, appears to have been terminally undermined by his excessive labors in the great revival of 1857. He was considered one of the foremost preachers of his day.

Dying for Friends

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.”

—John 15:13-14

Friendship is a sacred word, belonging as truly to Christianity as to morals. It is such a relation of man to man that from mutual esteem, admiration, and attachment rather than from regard to interest, each contemplates the person of the other with complacency and benevolence, each desires the welfare of the other and delights in his company, and consequently each is ready to fulfill the wishes of the other and to make sacrifices for his pleasure. It is a flowing of soul to soul. It is—so says the Roman adage—to will and to refuse the

same things. Wretched is he who cannot go to experience for his definition; for "poor is the friendless master of a world!" We need not go to the Damon and Pythias of Gentile story, or even to the touching records of David and Jonathan in the Old Testament. The gospel assures us, that in the circle around our Lord, there was one disciple whom Jesus loved. Friendship never rose to so sanctified an exaltation. We do well, therefore, against certain perverse philosophers, to include friendship among the Christian virtues, and to practice it in the daily intercourse of life. Even in common society, its triumphs are sometimes beautiful and ennobling, but it is nowhere so pure and unearthly as where it subsists between souls which have been touched by the Spirit of God. Then it is a fountain which wells forth from the cross of the heavenly Friend. But we are this day to ascend a yet loftier eminence, and to contemplate a friendship which exists between Christ and the believer. The word

seems to acquire a new and more heavenly acceptation when we apply it to Him who is above all blessing and all praise. And this we shall do, in meditating on the delightful words of the text.

This relation then of friendship is sustained by the Lord Jesus to His people. His whole life was a series of blessed friendships. There are no pictures of attachment like those of Bethany and the upper chamber. The twelve, the seventy, the holy women who companied with Him, the thousands of less distinguished disciples, all stood to Him in the relation of friends. It was not merely John, who reclined on His bosom, or James and Cephas, who shared His more sacred retirements, or Lazarus, whom He loved, or Mary and Martha, who ministered to Him; but all who hearkened to His words and sought His companionship. He was so unlike us who preach His gospel in degenerate times that He associated visibly and at the banquets of the Pharisaic great with per-

sons who had lost their character, and was designated as the friend of publicans and sinners. To every diversity of people He showed Himself accessible; as indeed He is, still the most accessible being in the universe. The most abject offender against purity felt reassured by His forgiving rebuke, and the very leper cast out of human habitations, and the demoniac haunting tombs, ventured to accost Him. How much more near and delicate and solemn and rapturous must have been the interviews with His chief disciples, in those days on the mountain and on the plain, when thousands swarmed forth from city and village and, spreading themselves on the green grass, were fed by His wonder-working bounty and His yet more marvelous words; those voyages on the little lake; those mighty gatherings on Sabbath evenings, when the synagogue was out and the sun was going down, and they came flocking, with wives and children, to the house where He was guest,

and spread their sick and dying on the earth at His feet; those evenings during the high festivals, when, as we know, He did not tarry in the great city, but pursued His quiet path among olives, across the ravine of Kedron, and up the ascent of Olivet, to Bethany, and probably to the house of Lazarus; those walks through the length and breadth of the land, in which, accompanied by eager groups, He discoursed of divine counsels and things of the kingdom.

In all these conjunctures we behold Him the *Friend*, in every lofty and every tender acceptance of that pregnant word. All who accepted Him were His friends. He admitted them to the title; He treated them as such. And now that, in His human nature, He is no more on earth, He just as really sustains the same relation to all who truly believe on Him and partake of His Spirit. It is this sacred alliance which is brought prominently forward in these discourses of the first Communion season.

The highest proof of friendship is when friend, as in this case, dies for friend. We do not pause for proof of this proposition. Children understand it; it sinks into the deep conviction of the heart. Death is such a dreaded evil that all a man hath will he give for his life. A man will give many things for his friend, vast labors, vast possessions, yea, all things, before he will give his own life. Sometimes we find one willing to risk his life for a friend; but absolutely and without reprieve to give the life is a different matter. We do not think so negatively of sanctified human nature as to disbelieve it possible. Scripture does not allege that it never happened; Christ does not allege it. We believe there has been many a parent, who, on fit occasion, would die for a child, many a wife for a husband, and many a loyal soldier for his prince. But what we affirm is that, when this occurs, it is the indubitable testimonial of the highest love. Other marks may deceive, but this is infallible. If a human

friend had died for us, we should cherish his memory with a sentiment little short of idolatry; for we cling with passion and reverence to one who has even jeopardized life for our sakes. This, then, is the acknowledged principle on which the Lord Jesus founds that which He has to say respecting the love He bears to His disciples. It is a matter not for proof but meditation.

The amazing truth which we have to contemplate is, that this conclusive proof of attachment Christ actually gave. The church is founded on the fact that Christ died for His friends; He made them friends by dying for them, for they were once foes. "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man (or a man barely just and upright) will one die; yet peradventure for a good man (a man attaching himself to us by affectionate kindness) some would even dare to die" (Rom. 5:6-7). Unusual as this spectacle is, a rare and singular instance might

be found in the lapse of ages—"but God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8)! It is the great lesson of Scripture and sacrament. Has it become a weariness to you? Then your hearts have never been touched by renewing grace; you have never felt sick because of the evil of sin; you have never rejoiced with the transport of faith. There is a power in genuine experience which freshens the oldest doctrine to the heart of the believer, and makes him come back to these truths as to fountains of consolation, ever new with the sincere milk of the Word. For which cause, the sacrament that sets it forth, so far from losing value and attraction by repetition, is sweetest to the old disciple and the pilgrim near his journey's end.

The death of the Lord Jesus Christ for His people is pronounced by divine authority to be the grand argument of His love; and they feel it to be so. Hence they love to celebrate it. He uttered these

touching words to the wondering and sorrowing group, just before the great event. His eyes saw what was hidden from them. He was already, in purpose and dedication, a sacrifice. It was anticipated as a glory: "Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son" (John 17:1). Already, as the Lamb of God, was He bound with cords and palpitating upon the altar; already His soul was troubled, preparing for "the strong crying and tears" of the awful night. He had a baptism to be baptized with, and was burdened till it should be accomplished. The cup which His Father was giving Him was already in His hands. When He spoke of dying for His friends, He had a perfect foresight of the scenes which were to mark the next few eventful hours. It was not the simple article of death, the bare separation of soul and body which He contemplated. He saw the mysterious shadow of Gethsemane, the agony and bloody sweat. He saw the midnight assault, the arrest, the hurrying by

torchlight from tribunal to tribunal, the cords, the scourging, the robes of scorn, the insults of the populace, the languor, the exposure, the ignominy, the blasphemy, the crown of thorns. He saw the accursed tree, the nails, the spear, the desertion, the blood and anguish, the complicated dying. He saw this to be a substitution, a suffering for others, for friends, for those who should forsake and deny Him, for millions who were as yet His enemies. And seeing all this, He said, with an emphasis which we can now better understand, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Let our powers try to devise a testimonial of love which shall be equivalent to this. Reason and imagination are at once baffled. And yet we do not begin to apprehend the magnitude of the divine affection until we take into view the nature of Him who evinces it. Man, simple man, might testify great love, and testify it by

voluntary death, by death unmerited, by death surrounded with every aggravation of torment and shame, by death for the unworthy. This would be affecting and sublime, yet only finite and comprehensible. But, as we love to sing, and to sing without emendation: "God the mighty Maker dies, for man the creature's sin!" The person who sustains this suffering is a divine Person. It is the infinite Jehovah descending to take the place of the rebel, and to subject Himself to penal humiliation and agony.

This is the great fact of Christianity, the capital demonstration of the Godhead. Here we behold more of the heart of God than in all His works and Word beside. Into these things the angels desire to look; and the cherubic emblems hover and stoop over the ark, bending to inspect the mystery of the law covered by the golden propitiatory and the mercy-seat sprinkled with divine blood. For this there had been a preparation in all the foregoing economy

of the Old Testament, from the sacrifice of Abel to the Passover they had just been celebrating. All altars and priesthood, all unblemished victims and sprinkling of blood, every sin-offering, scape-goat, basin and hyssop-branch, whispered of the dying love that was to come. All types and emblems foreshadowed this testimony of divine friendship. There has been a reverberation of holy echoes in the arches of all temples, betokening the descent of divine compassion. The fires of all combined sacrifices have been going up to presignify the whole burnt-offering of this great Day of Atonement, in which the sword of God is to awake against the man that is His fellow, and the perfect and final victim go up in the flame of unutterable and infinite consecration. Christ dying for the ungodly is the central radiant point, at once of divine dispensations, of the world's history, of gospel theology, and of sound experience. Who, by searching, can find it out! Herein is love, not that we

loved God, but that God loved us! And it is all that we "may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length, and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:18). The demonstration is complete, but its measures are unfathomable. When we would know how much Christ loves His friends, our only reply is by looking to the cross; but we must look forever. Though we come again and again, with the concentrated powers of all human minds, we cannot reach the mystery, "the breadth, the length, the height." "Angels that hymn the Great I Am, fall down and vail before the Lamb." It is reserved for the heavenly state to launch out more fully into the ocean of inquiry, and to survey the unattainable dimensions of such a friendship from God to man.

The love of Christ in dying for sinners is the ground of their friendship towards

Him. "We love him because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19)—and this in two senses; for first, if He had not loved us beforehand, there would be no grace dispensed to work these affections in our hearts; and secondly, it is the consideration of this sovereign and abounding love which awakens these affections.

"The love of Christ constraineth us." Here is the springhead of all true religious feeling. Mistake on this point may be disastrous. General views of the divine character and excellencies may produce awe, dread, adoration, and approval, but will never enkindle love. The friends of Christ are made such by contemplating His love, and especially by acts of faith directed toward His cross. Oh, that I knew how to treat this subject aright! Perhaps it will be safest to turn aside from the beaten track of a merely doctrinal theology, and make an immediate appeal to the experience of the new creature.

Take a view, then, first, of the soul un-

renewed by grace. And let us not choose for one instance any extreme case of wickedness or unbelief, but one of those gospel hearers who fill our assemblies and are somewhat instructed in the elements of religion. Let it even be one who is not totally indifferent to the things of another world. But he is, nevertheless, as yet unreconciled. Often does he endeavor, in thought, to present to his view the sublime idea of the Great Supreme. Yet, if he makes frank confession, the thought is not pleasing. He is overshadowed and weighed down by the conception of one so high, inflexible, and distant. The spirituality of God overwhelms him; holiness dazzles and humbles; inexorable justice terrifies. The startling truth perpetually reappears that this pure and mighty Jehovah is his enemy. The distance seems a gulf which cannot be transcended. Efforts at obedience and reform recoil in a sense of incapacity and guilt. There is no inward view of the way in which God can be just

and yet justify the ungodly. These are among the most wretched moments of life. Often does he turn away from the subject because it increases pain, reveals sin, and awakens enmity. As often he is reluctantly drawn back by the unwelcome fascination of the awful verities. Thus it is with many during the tedious night of legal conviction. They seem to grow worse rather than better. They are under the law, and the law worketh wrath. Condemnation increases; for, "by the law is the knowledge of sin." It is far more distressing than the former state of carelessness into which, indeed, the sinner vainly and madly tries to return. No ray of benign compassion breaks through the cloud of justice which envelops the throne of the Infinite Majesty. No tender melting views of sin dissolve the heart, which seems harder than before and sullen in its unloving discontent. No approaches to God as a Father sweeten the acts of a constrained devotion.

But after a while, a signal change is experienced. This same soul, disheartened at the sight of its own turpitude and ill desert, and appalled by the view of divine perfections, is led by grace to contemplate a new object and to turn its regards to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The sinner forgets himself for a little while he gazes on this unparalleled exhibition of divine love. He beholds God descending in human nature, to become the Sacrifice and the Priest. He sees the immaculate Redeemer dying on the cross for the sin of man. He recognizes an atonement and satisfaction to justice, sufficient to obliterate the guilt of all mankind. He opens his heart to the Friend of sinners. He perceives that the whole work of redemption is out of himself and independent not only of his obedience, but of all his feelings and exercises; and that the salvation thus complete is offered and made over to sinners and to him, just as he is, without any preliminary qualifica-

tion. Now, for the first time, he is struck with the sovereignty of uncaused love. It is nothing in him, or his state of mind, but all in this act and demonstration of heavenly friendship. He owns with wonder the freeness of the salvation. He can no longer deny that it is for him, now, this moment, on his acquiescence and acceptance. The chief of sinners may come. God loves the chief of sinners; the proof is in the cross; the proffer is in the gospel; his bonds are loosed; his self-righteousness is left behind; and, before he is aware, his sinking soul is lifted in the arms of the Son of God and his tears are wiped away by the pierced hands. "Now, now," he exclaims, "I perceive the truth which I have heard and repeated a thousand times. God is love, and love to me! God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!" He is a believer, and while he believes, he loves. He sees the things that are freely given him of God. He understands what is meant by salvation

without money and without price. God is no longer a taskmaster and a judge, but a merciful and reconciled Father, through Christ Jesus. He is astonished to observe that all along, during his whole protracted struggle, this infinite love has been equally free and equally offered; that God was willing, but he was unwilling; and he adores the grace which waited for his delay. Unutterable is his grateful attachment to Jesus his Savior, who is now the chiefest among ten thousands. He is the friend of Christ; no longer a servant but a son; and from this moment onward, he lives a new life, by faith in the Son of God, who loved him and gave Himself for him. Thus the love of Christ, as dying for sinners, is the ground of his friendship toward the Redeemer.

There remains an important truth to be considered: the true and certain test of being the friends of Christ is obedience to His precepts. "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you." It is not pro-

fession, my brethren, which makes the Christian. When Naomi had her affecting interview with her two daughters, "Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clave unto her" (Ruth 1:14). On this very paschal evening, Simon Peter was louder in profession than John; and if Peter's character had been always no other than during the denial, he would have been only a hypocrite. You cannot quarrel with this test. It is reasonable, it is incontestable. The proof of love afforded by obedience is triumphant. Good works are not our passport to heaven in the way of merit, but they are the infallible fruits of faith, and so the best criterion of attachment to the Lord.

The operation of this principle is not abstruse or recondite. We recognize its influence in the little child who does what is bidden out of love to the parent, and in every act of compliance or service that proceeds from common friendship. But it rises to its highest achievements in the

grateful affection of the believer to the crucified Redeemer. That dying love works wonders and constrains obedience. Reflect on the tender instance when John and Mary stood at the foot of the accursed tree, gazing intently on the Son of God in His last pangs. "When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother, and the disciple standing by whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy Son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother!" (John 19:26-27). Can we doubt the result? Love wrought obedience. "From that hour," that hour of love and death, "that disciple took her unto his own home" (John 19:27). And when the sacred body, devoid of life, was lifted from the cross and made ready for burial, and when the holy women and such friends as had not fled looked on the heavenly countenance of One who had loved them unto the end, charging upon their own sins the awful event and expiation, do you need argument to convince you that they

felt bound forever to obey His highest wish? All the way down through the ages of faith, this love has acted itself out in obedience. Every believer owns in his inmost heart that he lies under an obligation to surrender all to Him who died for him, as one redeemed not with corruptible things, such as silver and gold, but with the blood of Christ as of a lamb without spot or blemish. Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price. "Henceforth," says Paul, "let no man trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17).

More need not be said as to the certain efficacy of the principle; but a word is necessary as to the extent of the obedience. It is universal. "Whatsoever I command you"; that is, all My commands. In this life, the obedience, indeed, is never perfect as to its acts and the details of duty, "for in many things we offend all" (James 3:2). Yet it is universal in its purpose or intention. True love, taking its origin from the

cross, does not discriminate and select, does not prepare for some duties and refuse others, but girds itself for all. And this tendency of the will is a better evidence of grace than any or all particularities of performance. Friendship to Christ perpetually utters this language: "I will hear what God the Lord will speak. Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? I will perform whatsoever my dying Savior has commanded. I have sworn and I will perform it, that I will keep all thy commandments." He therefore who speaks thus, "I will obey up to a certain point and there I will stop short," is not the friend of Christ. He who says, "I will keep the commandments at large, but this or that commandment I will not keep," is not the friend of Christ. He who whispers to himself, "I will be pure in all things else, but this one secret, cherished, easily besetting, darling sin I will not relinquish," is not the friend of Christ. The true disciple abandons in purpose and endeavor all known transgression.

And if we turn our thoughts inward to find one particular exercise in which more of true religion is concentrated than in all others, we shall discover none more certain than this, the absolute unselfish oblation of the whole man—mind, heart, and will—as a sacrifice to Christ, out of thankful regard to His dying love. And when, as is sometimes our privilege, we stretch forth our hands to the bread and the wine at the Lord's Table, and rely on that broken body and shed blood for our justification, the faith thus exercised is inseparably connected with a solemn act of self-renouncing and unreserved dedication to the holy will of our redeeming God. This is the living sacrifice, the reasonable service, with which God is well pleased. To keep back anything is to deny our Lord. He asks only the heart; but He asks it all. And in gracious souls, He has it. It is His. He has bought it with His cross and passion, and carries it away in triumph; embracing in almighty arms the

ransomed one, who desires no other Master, and is happy to be borne away captive by Him, whose commandments are not grievous, whose yoke is light, and whose service is freedom.

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