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Five Suggestive Figures.

NOTES OF AN ADDRESS BY SAMUEL J. B.
CARTER.

(2 COR. II. 12-16 ; III. 3-6, 17, 18 ;
IV. 3-6, 7-18.)

IN these scriptures we have the saints of God portrayed under five suggestive figures : as a "sweet savour," as a "living epistle," and as a "reflector." These three are collective. Then in the other two we have what is individual—"light-bearers" and "earthen vessels."

The apostle says, "We are unto God A SWEET SAVOUR of Christ." This scripture has often comforted me in ministry, and I doubt not it has

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comforted many others. Whenever we minister Christ, whether there be success or failure, a sweet savour goes up to God, a sweet savour of Christ. Sometimes we speak and the walls seem to throw back what we say ; there is nothing responsive in the audience—there is a lack of that spiritual telepathy that should exist between speaker and audience. Even in individual ministry, the giving away of a gospel tract, or the giving of a cup of cold water to any one in the name of a disciple, it may be so. But, beloved brethren, whether we feel helped and refreshed in ministry, or otherwise, how comforting is it to know that whenever we minister Christ, however faultily we may do it, we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ. A savour of His devotedness in His death, as set forth in the burnt offering,

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and His devotedness in His beautiful life down here, as set forth in the meat offering, now goes up from the saints.

When a Roman general achieved victories and returned to Rome, he was oftentimes accorded a triumph, and so he rode at the head of his troops through the city—his booty and captives following in his train. Then aromatic drugs were burnt and the air was filled with fragrance! Then some of the captives were put to death and others were spared. That is what the apostle means when he says, "To the one a savour of death unto death, and to the other a savour of life unto life." It is intensely solemn; he felt it to be so, and so he adds, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Then he falls back upon God and says, "Our sufficiency is of God." In a sense it was Paul's triumph, but yet he

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gives all the glory to God, and shews how essentially the triumph was really the triumph of God. So he bursts out crying, "Thanks be unto God, who always causeth us to triumph," or, as it is in the New Translation, "who always leads us in triumph."

Paul was greatly cast about in his mind as to his path when he got into Troas. One of the greatest exercises a servant of Christ has, is as to where he is to go. He has no greater exercise than that, except maybe what he is to say. Well, Paul was greatly cast about; he had written a letter to those Corinthians and he feared that he had done more harm than good, and he repented having written that epistle. A very serious thing indeed, to repent having written an inspired epistle. But the Lord made every allowance, because He saw at the

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bottom of his heart he loved the saints so much, otherwise he would not have been so anxious about them.

When he got to Troas, a door was opened for him to preach the gospel, but he did not avail himself of that door. There were needy souls there ; they needed the gospel ; but Paul turned his back upon them. Does this mean that Paul loved the church more than the gospel ? I would scarcely say that, but certainly on this occasion Paul put the church before the gospel, and so he left Troas because he did not find Titus there, whom he had sent to see how the saints at Corinth were getting on. Paul was very anxious about them, so he left Troas and went to Macedonia. But things were no better for him there : "Without were fightings, within were fears," says he. Paul could not help the fightings

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without. "Within were fears." He need not have had those fears. And we need not ! There need be no fears within, and there will not be if only we have that restfulness of spirit which the apostle seemed to lack on this occasion. "I had no rest in spirit," he says, "because I found not Titus my brother." But by-and-by in Macedonia he did find him (chap. vii.), and Titus brought him good news about the Corinthians, and how the epistle that he had written had wrought restorative grace in their souls. The apostle in writing about it was jubilant, and says, "Thanks be unto God, who always leadeth us in triumph." Beloved brethren, He always does.

Some of us can look back upon a long pathway in ministry and life. How many ups and downs there have been ! How sometimes we have been

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turned aside and sometimes we have got awkward tumbles ; but we read : “He led them forth by the right way” ; and that surely has been true of us. The way we have trodden has not always been our way ; but it has been His way ; and as we look back we can only say that it has been the right way.

The blessed God sometimes has to lead us blindfolded ; we are in darkness ; we grope about ; we do not understand the path, and we can only sing :

“I would rather walk in the dark with God,
Than walk alone in the light ;
I would rather walk with Him by faith,
Than walk alone by sight.”

And then when the bandages have been taken off and the light of God has shone upon the path that we have trodden, we have seen that it has

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been the right path. We see how God has led us on in triumph, and how the sweet savour has gone up.

The next figure is a very important figure of what the church is even now. It is a "LIVING EPISTLE." "Ye are manifestly declared," says the apostle, not simply to the church at Corinth but to all, "to be the epistle of Christ." I think he took in the whole company of the people of God at that time. The church then as a whole was the epistle of Christ, and the church is such still. It may be and doubtless is a blurred and blotted epistle, but it is the epistle of Christ. The Bible is here! Thank God for the Bible. But the word of God cannot be understood apart from the Spirit of God. People read it with no dependence upon the Spirit for light and for instruction, and they do not

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understand it! But they do understand us.

What God wants is vitality, what is living. The church is here, and the church is here to be a living epistle. As a whole it is not that; but still it is the epistle of Christ. The saints are the only living representatives of what Christ is before the eyes of the world. The church has not yet gone to the dead letter office. When the professing assembly, the public body—as Laodicea and utterly corrupt—is spued from out Christ's mouth, the church will go to the dead letter office! But then the true saints will be gone, and only a lifeless mass of profession will be left. As long as the saints are here, the church as a whole is the epistle of Christ.

Well now, I may be only a tiny character in that epistle and nothing

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more, but let me be legible. Sometimes we get a letter that is blurred and blotted, but by-and-by we can distinguish a sentence here and a clause there, and a word somewhere else. Perhaps we puzzle over a letter. Well, that is very much like things are now in the church as a whole. Oh, let us be legible. However small and insignificant we may be, let us be something Christlike in the epistle of Christ.

. This epistle is not written in ink. Christendom makes very much of what is written in ink ; all the creeds are written in ink. Think, too, of all the books and magazines that are issued from the printing press amongst us—all most blessed and most needful. But what God wants is vitality—what is living. Not simply what is written with ink, but what is written

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with the Spirit of the living God ; not on paper or parchment, or on tables of stone, as the old covenant was written, but upon our affections ; upon “fleshy tables of the heart”—upon affections that have been made susceptible to divine impressions. Whatever is written on the heart comes out. If Christ is written on the heart Christ will come out ; and whatever we may be in the epistle of Christ we shall at all events be legible.

Now this brings in the new covenant ; it brings in the assembly viewed as **A REFLECTOR**. The Spirit of the new covenant can do what no human mirror can accomplish. It can transform us so that being morally transfigured we reflect that wondrous Person that we are occupied with when we get into the holiest.

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The apostle brings in the *new covenant*, and later, *reconciliation*, and he enlarges upon both ministries. (Chaps. iii.—vi.) In between it is the holiest, because it is in the holiest that these two ministries touch each other—the ministry which shews what God is to us, and that which shews what we are to God. Paul says, We have been made able ministers of the new covenant, “not of the letter, but of the spirit.” I think when he speaks of the letter he speaks of the old covenant. The old covenant was engraved, or lettered, upon tables of stone; the old covenant was the ministry of death and condemnation. No wonder, then, the apostle should say, “the letter killeth.” But the new covenant is the ministry of life and righteousness, and so he says, “the spirit giveth life.” And what

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is the spirit? Now note, it is not a question of *what*, it is a question of *who*. Who is the Spirit of the new covenant? The Spirit of the new covenant is the Lord. "Now the Lord is that Spirit." The new covenant has not yet been made. But the blood of the new covenant has been shed, and so the saints now come into all the moral gain of that covenant

Some one has said that every blessing that Israel forfeited by her unbelief is now taken up spiritually in the assembly. So it is, and so we must see to it in order to understand any truth in the New Testament *that we get in the Old*, to start first of all on Jewish lines. Whether it be the kingdom, or the new covenant, eternal life, or any other truth, we must follow it on Jewish lines first of all; and then when we understand what the truth

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was to a devout Jew, then we can let the light of Christianity upon it, and then the thing becomes glorified. "The Lord is that Spirit." He is the Spirit of the new covenant ; so that in spirit we can enter into it, and we can enjoy it now in an infinitely higher way than Israel will by-and-by.

We are not to get occupied with the letter of the new covenant but with the spirit of it. Then, when we view things from the divine standpoint, what do we see ? We see the Lord. "Now the Lord is that Spirit : and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Gospel liberty ; it is what James speaks of when he says, "looking into the perfect law of liberty." Unless we have liberty in our souls—gospel liberty—being free from ourselves, we shall never be able to look into the perfect law of liberty, and

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we shall never come under the influence of the Spirit of the new covenant.

Then says Paul, "We all, with open [or unveiled] face [no veil upon His face ; no veil upon our faces] beholding as in a glass the glory—are changed." The Greek verb has a reflective force and its noun means a mirror. The context, too, suggests moral reflection. When the lawgiver came down from the mount with the law in his hands, his face shone ; but the glory died out ! That system of things, so Paul tells us, began in glory, but the glory did not last. But the glory in the face of Jesus Christ never wanes.

When the Lord came down from the mount, the people ran—greatly wondering. Why ? Was it the glory that transfigured Him on the mount still lingering on His countenance ? Did that make them wonder ? The

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glory upon that face can never die out. As we gaze upon Him in the holiest, the glory will be reflected in us. "We all, with open [or unveiled] face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image." We look into the mirror of the new covenant and we mirror the One we see there. You see it is collective; we *all* become morally alike. And so there is a beautiful and collective testimony that goes forth. We are changed from glory to glory.

The objective forms the subjective. If my soul is to be in a healthy condition I do not look within. No, the source of its healthiness is not found within. I look without; I get occupied with the objective—Christ in glory. But if my soul is not right I cannot enjoy the objective! Then the Spirit works upon my conscience that the

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subjective may be able to appreciate the objective.

Now we get to what is individual—
“LIGHT-BEARERS.” Paul says, “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord ; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.” We are to be light-bearers. Sometimes we sing the little ones’ hymn—I suppose we do sing it sometimes, we have not got beyond it :

“In this world of darkness, We must
shine—
You in your small corner, And I in
mine.”

The apostle says to the Philip-
pians, “Shine as lights [or luminaries]
in the world ; holding forth the word
of life”—light-bearers. Satan does
not want them. He wants to put
out the light, and sometimes here and
there he manages to do so and then

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the testimony of the light-bearer is gone and he is no good in the way of testimony. The apostle says, "If our gospel be veiled." *Our* gospel, mark you ; that is the gospel that belongs to us. It is scarcely apostolic, because in writing to the Corinthians he says, "Paul, an apostle . . . and Timothy our brother . . . with all the saints." So I think when he speaks of *our* gospel he speaks of what is common to all the saints of God. "If also our gospel is veiled, it is veiled in them that are lost ; in whom the god of this world has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving." What terrible work. The Lord calls him the *prince* of this world. As prince of this world he is the political head of the world system. No wonder politics are rotten when Satan is at the head of them. No brainy politician is at

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the head of them. No, Satan is at the head of them. And as "the *god* of this world" he is the head of the religion of the world, and so the religion of this world is quite as rotten. "The god of this world has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving." How often I have fallen back upon that word in preaching the gospel, and finding out afterwards that as far as some people have been concerned in the audience I might just as well have been talking Sanscrit or Greek, or talking to the walls. I have fallen back on this word, "The god of this world has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving."

I remember in Brisbane some time ago meeting a young brother, and saying to him, "How did you get on last night in the open air?" (It is the custom there to have open-air

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meetings before the gospel in the halls and then again after, because the weather being semi-tropical is very suitable for it.) Said he, "I didn't get on well. I felt very down. So-and-so got up and he preached very well; he spoke from that passage, 'By grace are ye saved through faith . . . not of works, lest any man should boast,' and shewed the people clearly that they could not be saved by their works. Then So-and-so followed suit, and dwelt on that verse, 'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.' He shewed just what the preceding brother had shewn very clearly! Then I began and I felt greatly helped. I spoke from that passage, 'If by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace; and if by works, then it is no more

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grace : otherwise work is no more work.' I shewed the people as clearly as I could that they could not be saved by their own deeds. Now there was a woman standing all the time and in the inner circle of that big crowd, listening so intently that I thought, 'I must get a word with her.' So after the meeting I went to her and said, 'I am glad you have been with us to-night and listening so attentively. Are your sins forgiven, are you on your way to heaven?' What do you think she said? 'Sir,' said she, '*I am doing the best I can.*' Ah! my heart went right to my boots, and I thought, everything has been thrown away."

"Well," I said to him, "that need not trouble you; don't you know 'the god of this world has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving'? The devil was busy in that audience,

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as he always is in audiences to which the gospel is preached.”

“The god of this world has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving.” Why does he do it. “Lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ . . . should shine unto them.” Is that what the apostle says? No. He says something else. “Lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, *who is the image of God*, should shine unto them.” *That* is what Satan hates. Why? He does not want gospel light to enter into the minds of the unconverted because he knows that if light gets there the light will come out and there will be in that one some moral reflection of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. When Christ was here He was the image of God and Satan hated Him, and he prompted the wicked hands to crucify Him.

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But He is far beyond those wicked hands now. The enemy cannot touch Him now. But Christ is still here, Christ in His people. That is what Satan is against. That is why he blinds people. But, blessed be God, he cannot frustrate God, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give [to give to others] the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Now just a few words on the final figure, that of **EARTHEN VESSELS**. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." We know who the 'Treasure is—the Spirit of the new covenant—the Lord. And we know who the earthen vessels are—that body of yours and this body of mine. The Lord works death in us, and He works death often in our bodies as well as our souls; and

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that is why so many of us are more or less afflicted in our bodies. "Death worketh in us," says the apostle, "but life in you." That is to say, it was through his ministry life worked in those Corinthians as death worked in him. God rolls death in upon us that the vessel may be broken.

In Psalm xxxi. we hear One say, "*My times* are in thy hand." Yes, everything in His life was in the hand of the One who had sent Him ; and again He says, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit." In death it was the same. Everything was in the hand of the One who had sent Him. We hear Him say, "I am forgotten like a dead man out of mind ; I am like a broken vessel." Reverently speaking, He was that in death ; He was a broken vessel. Death worked in Him, but life flowed out, and we are more

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or less in the enjoyment of that life. And so it must be with us. "We are troubled on every side," says the apostle, "yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed." The vessel gets blow after blow, and presently it breaks, and what is the result? "*Always* bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus"—the *necrosis*—the putting to death of Jesus.

"*Always*"! What a *constant* exercise we get here. But, beloved brethren, if death works *in* us it also works something out *for* us, and so the apostle says, "For our light affliction *worketh for us* a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." Think of that! There is what death is working out for us. But, mark you, it is "*while* we look not at the things

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which are seen, but at the things which are not seen." Sometimes it is said, "Look at the bright side of things." There is no bright side of things. If we have a beautiful landscape in front of our window, we look not at the window, but *through it*. So we are not to be occupied with the things that are seen by the natural vision, we must use them as windows, windows by which we can see the things that are not seen, that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

There is a lovely passage in the Book of Job. Elihu says, "Men see not the bright light which is in the clouds." Stop! That will not do! The New Translation puts it: "The light as it gleameth, it is hidden in the skies. But the wind passeth by and cleareth them"—that is, clears the skies. The sun is ever shining,

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but we do not always see it. How is it that sometimes Christ is not before our souls? We do not see Him because clouds have come between our souls and Him. Then the wind comes; it may be the gentle zephyr, or it may be the cruel wind of adversity. What is the result? The skies clear, the clouds are dispelled, and we are able once again to gaze upon that face that is everything to us, and which we love to look upon and upon those

“Bright and blessed scenes,
Where sin can never come.”

And as we gaze we feel how the pressure here—the breaking of the earthen vessel—works out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory! How it all fills our souls full of delight and makes us feel that we would like to be gone! How it makes us look up again, and wait and watch for the

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return of that One who is coming so soon ! And we feel just on the tip-toe of expectation ; we want to go.

I remember learning a few verses written by an old Puritan divine, years ago, that I might give you in closing :

Says *Faith*, Look yonder, see thy home,
Prepared in heaven above ;
Says *Hope*, Anon I will be there—
I'll dwell in it, says *Love*.

Desire doth say, What's there—*my* home ?
Then to that home I'll flee ;
I cannot brook a longer stay—
At home I fain would be.

But stay, says *Patience*, rest awhile,
The crown's for those who fight—
The prize for those who run the race
By faith and not by sight.

Thus *Faith* doth take a pleasing view,
Hope waits, *Love* sits and sings ;
Desire, she flutters to be gone,
But *Patience* clips her wings.

S. J. B. C.

Kennington.

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