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What is the Evangel? The Miracle of God's Grace

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I.

THE question put to us is *What is the Evangel*; and the answer suggested is *The Miracle of God's Grace*.

What do we mean when we speak of God; and Whom do we mean when we name Him as God? The two questions are quite different.

What do we mean when we speak of God? We are not thinking of a far-off First Cause: of a remote impersonal Origin of Being: of an ultimate Destiny to which the cycle of things visible and invisible is inexorably tending. Still less do we think of an Immensity which sums up and includes all life and motion in a Pantheist envelopment. We mean a Personal Being of Infinite and Absolute Righteousness, with whom the individual soul is able to come into personal contact and fellowship: the great One who is at the same time Transcendent and Immanent—summing up alike the Semitic and Aryan conceptions of Deity—God over all and God all-pervading: the God that made the world and all things therein, and in whom we live and move and have our being; as St. Paul told the Athenian philosophers.

But before we can consider the Grace of God, we have a second question to answer: *Whom* do we mean when we speak of God. That is a more difficult question. Perhaps the readiest reply that would commend itself to us might be—We mean the God and Father of our Lord JESUS Christ. But are we sure that this would be the right answer? Some weeks back a divine of another school or group of thought than that to which most of us here belong, writing in a Church newspaper, asserted roundly that the bulk of members of the Church of England were either Arians or Tritheists. The gibe is unjust: but it touches us near enough to the quick to hurt. It must be admitted that overmuch of the theology of popular hymns and religious talk gives point to the gibe; and the practical disuse in our worship of the wonderful commentary upon the simpler creed of our baptism that we once (no doubt in defiance of strict historical accuracy) used to associate with the name of Athanasius and regard (as our Articles regard it) as a third Creed has ministered to the trend to a limited conception of the Godhead. So I venture to say that when we speak of God, without further definition, and particularly when we are about to turn our thoughts to the conception of God's grace, we mean the Holy and Blessed Trinity, One in Three, and Three in One, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Yet always in the expression of our Trinitarian faith we are careful to preserve strict Monotheism, regardful of the old rule *Omnia opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*.

II.

What do we mean by *grace*? The word so translated in the New Testament is χάρις. As used in the LXX it may not be pressed to mean more than beauty, gracefulness, loving kindness, goodwill; and those meanings go over into the New Testament. But Dr. Alexander Stewart writes "The special use, however, of χάρις in the New Testament is in reference to the mind of God as manifested towards sinners, His redemptive mercy, whereby he grants pardon to offences, and bids those who have gone astray return and accept His gift of salvation and everlasting life." And again, "the great work of grace is redemption, which has its origin in God (1 John iv. 10-19), in His eternal good pleasure (εὐδοκία) Eph. i. 3-6, and is carried out by His will and power. Therefore . . . the Christian revelation is called 'the grace of God,' 'the grace of God our Saviour,' 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,' or simply 'grace'."

E. A. Litton (*Dogmatic Theology*, p. 149) says "Grace, in Scripture, means free favour, or free aid, to the fallen: the term is inapplicable to Adam's state before the fall. The work and the result of regenerating grace must be considered as of another and a higher quality than that of original righteousness: it is more than a mere restitution." With this agrees C. Neil (in *Protestant Dictionary*): he defines grace first as "God's free, sovereign, undeserved favour or love to man when in his state of sin and misery by reason of the fall": this he chiefly relates to the purposes of God the Father. Second, he relates it to "grace as manifested in the provision made by God for man's salvation" (Titus ii. 11): this he refers to the work of God the Son. Third, he says it is "used for grace as manifested in the application of the plan of salvation, viz. the grace enabling the sinner to embrace the means provided for his recovery and restoration": this he regards as the influence of God the Holy Spirit. And he points out "purpose and grace" are joined together when tracing redemptive privileges to their source in 2 Tim. i. 9.

May we not here recall St. Paul's words Rom. v. "For if by the trespass of the one the many died much more did the grace of God, and the gift by the grace of the one man Jesus Christ, abound unto the many": and also "the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness": and he speaks of "this grace wherein we stand" and again of "the free gift" which elsewhere he defines as "eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So then by "grace" we mean the spontaneous, free, unmerited loving kindness and goodwill of God towards us "While we were yet sinners."

III.

What do we mean by *miracle*? Archbishop J. H. Bernard quotes with approval Thomas Aquinas: "A miracle is contrary to the order of all created nature: seeing therefore, that God alone is not a thing created he also alone is able to perform miracles by his own peculiar virtue." And Bernard adds, for himself, "It is important to observe that the very idea of a miracle, in this view, presupposes the existence of a supreme spiritual agent." Bernard, after stating that "The

possibility of miracle involves the existence of God; it does not at once follow that the converse is true, and that the existence of God implies the possibility of miracle" goes on to deal with the argument of Spinoza and the view that a miracle is an intervention which can only be demanded by an imperfection in the existing order and so is inconsistent with the perfection of God's creation; pointing out that this world is not the best of all possible worlds. "At some remote epoch in man's history, his progress was violently interrupted . . . as things are man has not fulfilled the Divine intention for him." Then in a sequence of thought that harmonises with our definition of grace he adds "From the consequences of his sin, he cannot be saved by the mere normal operations of natural law, by the orderly development of his own nature. That redemption can be brought about only by an act of Divine mercy, which may involve—which perhaps necessitates—a perturbation of the established order. But the real marvel is not the intervention of grace, but the sin which demanded it. For sin is *ἀνομία*, lawlessness, (1 Jn. iii. 4); it is a violation of moral law, which may be—and we can see reasons which suggest that it is—a far greater anomaly than any apparent violation of physical law could possibly be. There is an incongruity which we cannot reconcile between our conceptions of an All-Wise and All-Good God and the existence of sin; but that incongruity being frankly recognised, there is no further difficulty in conceiving of God as intervening, in an exceptional way, at an exceptional moment, to save man from the consequences of his own rash acts." Bernard goes on to point out, on an objection to the use of the word "intervention," as suggesting imperfect workmanship or foresight on the part of the Creator, that "one who upholds 'all things by the word of His power' cannot be spoken of as *intruding* either in nature or in grace": therefore the word "intervention" best expresses "a special and extraordinary manifestation of purpose on the part of Him who is ever immanent in nature," . . . "at certain critical moments in the history of the human race the uniformity of His rule has been departed from 'lest one good custom should corrupt the world.'"

So then by *miracle* we mean the deliberate intervention of our personal God, the great One in Three, in the affairs of life to correct some evil that has resulted from the condition of *ἀνομία* (lawlessness), due to the wrongful dealings of man.

IV.

What then is the miracle of God's grace which constitutes the Evangel? Here I am irresistibly reminded of a verse of an old hymn that I have not heard sung for more than fifty years

He saw me ruined in the Fall,
Yet loved me, notwithstanding all,
He saved me from my lost estate,
His loving-kindness, Oh how great !

Archbishop William Temple—and how glad we are to welcome a recognised theologian to the Primacy of all England—in his valuable *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, accepts the view that the sixteenth

verse of the third chapter is part of our Lord's own words, and not (as Westcott suggests) the evangelist's comment. He writes "So we come to the central declaration, more central for Christian faith than even *The Word became flesh*; for that depends for its inexhaustible wealth of meaning on the actual mode of the Incarnate Life. But here is the whole great truth. *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that everyone that believeth on Him may not perish, but have eternal life.* This is the heart of the Gospel. Not "God is Love"—a precious truth, but affirming no divine act for our redemption. *God so loved that He gave*; of course the words indicate the cost to the Father's heart. He gave; it was an act, not only a continuing mood of generosity; it was an act at a particular time and place. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel"—it is not a universally diffused divine essence of which we speak, but the Living God—"for he *hath visited and redeemed His people.*" No object is sufficient for the love of God short of *the world* itself. Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation, differing from its fellows only in offering a different road to that goal. It is the one and only religion of world-redemption. Of course it includes a way of individual salvation as the words before and after this great saying show. But its scope is wider than that—as wide as the love of God. It is the *sin of the world* that Christ takes away (i. 29)."

It is no accident that our Lord's own deliberate declaration of the redemptive act of the Father and the Son is placed by him in the immediate context of his assertion of the necessary action of the Holy Spirit in the new birth, linked with it by his words "If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things."

The redemptive Divine action is stated by St. Paul in 2 Cor. v. "For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that one died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him who for their sakes died and rose again. Wherefore we henceforth know no man after the flesh: even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more. Wherefore if any man is in Christ there is a new creation: the old things are passed away: behold, they are become new. (I heard Arthur Burroughs, the late Bishop of Ripon, translate this "His old environment is passing away: mark you, it has already become new!") But all things are of God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave unto us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses, and having committed unto us the word of reconciliation. We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God were intreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God. Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf: that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." With this we may put his words in Colossians (R.V. Marg.) "For the whole fulness of God (pleroma) was pleased to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things unto him, having made peace through the blood of His cross." On this latter passage Archbishop Wm. Alexander of Armagh writes "The whole Fulness of the Divinity abode permanently in Him."

But on the former passage Dr. Henry Wace (in *The Sacrifice of Christ*) says "It was God Himself, in Christ, who was bearing the consequences of human sin, rather than inflict those consequences on His creatures. The Atonement of Christ on the Cross is thus essentially an exhibition of Divine Love, not merely, nor so much, in its original intention, as in its execution." And he prefaces "The mystery of the Trinity, involving the mutual action of the Divine Persons within the Godhead, alone makes such a conception possible." Gustaf Aulén, bishop of Strängnäs (in *Christus Victor*) claims that what he terms the classic idea of Atonement (which he contrasts with the Anselmian and Abelardian theories) is that it is from first to last a work of God himself, a continuous divine work : and he says "the work of Atonement is accomplished by God Himself in Christ, yet at the same time the Passive form also is used. God is reconciled with the world (Cf. Art II). The alternation is not accidental. He is reconciled only because He Himself reconciles the world with Himself and Himself with the world." This he asserts to be the view of the early Fathers both in East and in West. God Himself enters into the world of sin and death, that He may reconcile the world to Himself. Therefore Incarnation and Atonement stand in no sort of antithesis ; rather they belong inseparably together.

J. S. Stewart writes (in "*A Man in Christ*") "The two great realities which confronted Paul at the Cross—the condemnation of sin, and the revelation of love—held in their arms a third, the gift of salvation. Not only had Christ by dying disclosed the sinner's guilt, not only had He revealed the Father's love : He had actually taken the sinner's place. And this meant, since 'God was in Christ' that *God* had taken that place ; and he quotes Brunner that the cross "represents an actual objective transaction, in which God actually *does* something, and something which is absolutely necessary." Stewart goes on to say that Paul could never stand in thought before the cross without hearing an inward voice which said "He died instead of me." He points out that those who seek to eliminate the vicarious (Here he clearly means substitutionary) principle do not see that to surrender this is to make an end of the Gospel : "if God in Christ has not borne our sins, there is no good news to preach" : and he adds "the essential correlative of the substitutionary idea is that "*God was in Christ*" : many critics of the idea have forgotten this." But, as Stewart also sees, the thought of Christ as our substitute goes hand in hand with the thought of Christ as our representative—"One died for all, therefore all died" ; this is more the aspect on which Westcott loved to dwell : the unity of humanity in Christ. But this is secondary to the main theme of our thought. Truly "if God in Christ has not borne our sins, there is no good news to preach." But God in Christ *has* borne our sins : this is the miracle of God's grace : this is the Evangel. And "all things are of God."

In the Cross of Christ I glory ;
 Towering o'er the wrecks of time,
 All the light of sacred story
 Gathers round its Head sublime.

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself."