

THE GOD OF MERCY

"For I say that Christ became a servant of circumcision for the sake of God's truth, in order to establish the fathers' promises and that the Gentiles should praise God for His mercy."—Romans xv. 8, 9a.

THE apostle Paul was a man of whom these four statements may be pre-eminently made:—

First.—His soul dwelt in the heights of Christian truth and joy, Ephesians i. 3ff. He knew and loved the Risen Saviour Who had died for him and us; gratefully he remembered the free grace of God and the power to save. If you happen to think in Kierkegaard's categories (the infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity), you may say that Paul's mind and heart were at home in eternity.

Second.—His interests were very practical; he wanted to behave like a saved man who trusted in God through Jesus Christ and thanked God for His grace; he wanted his hearers to behave like saved people who trust in God and thank God for His grace. Adapting Barth's guide Kierkegaard again, Paul's acquaintance with eternity threw long deep shadows, or, if you prefer, sent bright gleams, into the lower world of time.¹

Third.—His whole thinking was steeped in the form and spirit of the Old Testament, the Bible on which he had been brought up. During those blind days at Damascus the remembered words of this book, in the light of the heavenly vision, must have been part of Paul's prayerful preparation for baptism. These same Scriptures he commends to Christians: Romans xv. 4, 1 Corinthians x. 11, 2 Timothy iii. 14-16. When he wrote this passage the apostle was thinking of Psalm cxvii.: "Praise Jehovah, all ye Gentiles; praise Him, all ye peoples: for His merciful kindness is great toward us, and the truth of Jehovah shall be forever. Praise ye Jehovah."

Fourth.—He was a close and logical thinker. His thoughts are closely worked in together like the threads in a piece of

¹ Indebtedness is acknowledged to L. M. Hollander, *Selections from the Writings of Kierkegaard*, University of Texas Bulletin No. 2326, July, 1923, 75 cents; 30 pp. of introduction and some 200 pp. of translation from the Danish, in the University's comparative literature series; published by the University at Austin, Texas; and to Walter Lowrie, *Our Concern with the Theology of Crisis*, 1932: they make parts of the melancholy Danish poseur's writings available in English. My adaptation of the time-eternity relationship may be excused in view of the fact that even Lowrie does not in every place insist that according to the Kierkegaard-Barth scheme eternity is not merely before and after time but also around and above time. Cf. Professor Wm. C. Robinson's note, p. 112, *Union Seminary Review*, XL, 1, October, 1928, in an article on the theology of Barth.

beautiful and elaborately woven brocade. The development of his exposition of the power of God unto salvation in this epistle is marvellously intricate, and some topics recur again and again. Paul's typical written discourse is not the "introduction, three main heads, and conclusion", of so much modern homiletics; nor the evenly twisted strands of a rope: but rather the elaborate and complicated pattern of a many-coloured tapestry.¹ The intricate recurving arrangement of the great missionary theologian's ideas makes us feel sometimes that his thinking is tangled: but Paul's logic is better than that of our textbooks on rhetoric and forensic.

We may expect light from above to help us live now at the end of the first third of the twentieth century, if by the help of the Old Testament we unravel some of the threads of Paul's close-woven thought.

Into the body of this paragraph (verses 7-13), Paul introduces a chain of Old Testament predictions about Gentiles praising God (9-12). Prophets of old, in the days when Israel was Jehovah's peculiar people and when all Gentile nations were idolatrous and wicked heathen, prophets of little Israel with matchless faith had announced that some day their own nation's God would be worshipped, praised, and trusted by all nations. One link in this chain of quotations is the first half of the short 117th Psalm: "Praise the Lord, all ye nations, and laud Him, all ye peoples." The rest of the Psalm gives two reasons for this praise, the greatness of His mercy² and the everlasting endurance of God's truth. Presumably Paul regarded his own missionary work among the Gentiles as part of the fulfilment of these predictions of ten, fifteen, and eight centuries before. To his practical mind, the Scriptures, the Old Testament Scriptures, carry instruction for us, that we may hope or trust³ in Christ as Isaiah foretold.

Of this hope or trust Paul has just written in verse 4. His words may mean that we are to have this hope through our endurance, perhaps endurance built upon Holy Writ, and through

¹ Observe the numerous threads that are so appropriately knotted together in the closing doxology, xvi. 25-27. On this doxology v. Sanday and Headlam, *International Critical Commentary in loc.*, pp. 432-6.

² Paul is quoting from the Septuagint, where the "merciful kindness" of our King James version, רַחֲמִים, from רַחַם, grace, kindness, is replaced by *eleos*, mercy. The tetragrammaton is rendered by *κύριος*.

³ ἐλπίζω, vs. 12; ἐπίστευε, vs. 13; cf. same, vs. 4.

the Bible's encouragement to us. May his words not have another meaning instead? These things were written aforetime that we through the endurance of the Scriptures might have hope: that is, because the Bible has lasted so long¹ we may be confident that it is true and depend upon its account of the future. And also through the encouragement of precious promises in this Holy Book we may have hope.

Then Paul, the practical missionary whose soul dwelt up in heavenly regions among the blessings of Christ, from the depth of profoundly reasoned discussion comes up for air: he invokes a blessing upon his readers, a blessing from the God of endurance and encouragement. Paul wanted the Christians of Rome to have the same mind one toward another after the manner of Christ Jesus. Paul, practical, high-thinking, deep-reasoning, Bible-soaked, wants believers to have the same mind toward one another according to Christ Jesus, to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus, to set our affections on the things above.² What effect will this likemindedness have on us? With one accord and with one mouth we shall *glorify* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first time, verse 6, Paul has introduced the glory of God into this passage.

But Paul has not said his all about the glory of God. He brings in the example of Christ, in the matter of our receiving one another, as he has already cited his example of seeking to please others rather than self. Christ received us for the glory of God. In more exact American, perhaps, Christ took us up for the glory of God. He received sinners and ate with them; He came to seek and to save that which was lost; He gave Himself for our sins that He might deliver us. For the glory of God we ought to receive one another too.³ Here is the second mention of the glory of God. Not only will we have the same mind to glorify God; but imitating Jesus we will receive one another to the glory of God as Christ received us for the glory of God, with a view to the glory of God.

Then Paul starts a new sentence that aims toward a third mention of the glory of God. Paul is building up a climax that

¹ See the uses of *ὑπομονή* in the Septuagint; especially Job xiv. 19 and 1 Chron. xxix. 15. In the same Greek version the truth of the Lord μένει unto the age; the verb is not expressed in the Hebrew, and a copula should be supplied.

² The same Greek verb is used in Rom. xv. 5; Phil. ii. 2, 3, 5; Col. ii. 2.

³ The words, "for the glory of God", even with Westcott and Hort's inserted comma, may modify either the imperative or the indicative. Since an example to be followed is in question, some of the colour may be allowed to tint each of these two forms of *προσλαμβάνω*.

is lofty but practical, that is based on the Old Testament, and that is intimately bound into his argument.

The formal structure of each of these two paragraphs (1-6, 7-13), is, "I urge, I say, I pray" (1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7, 8-12, 13). In each paragraph the second part includes an appeal to the example of Christ, a look back to the Old Testament, and a look forward to Christian hope. The second paragraph is intimately connected with the first, being, in fact, an elaboration of the same pattern with variations of the sort that give to Oriental art its characteristic balance without symmetry.¹ With a somewhat pleonastic "I say" Paul introduces a sentence that unites the two motives for praising God given in Psalm cxvii.

Paul says that Christ became a minister, a servant, of circumcision, that is of the whole Mosaic law, for the sake of God's truth. Observe three things:—

(1) One physical and sacramental rite is used by metonymy² for the hard laws of Moses. God had given this rigid and exacting code to Israel. It was the strictest code in the world. It included worship, conduct, speech, and desire.

(2) Jesus Christ the Son of God, coming to save us, became a servant of this strict code. He, Creator and Lawgiver, became obedient beneath the sharp heavy rule that was laid upon Israel. It was no easy task to fulfil that law. But He obeyed it all and even, as Paul had shown in previous chapter, iii. 25, underwent its penalty of death.

(3) Jesus did this for the sake of the truth of God. The truth of the Lord is, will be, shall be, must be forever. That God might be just and truthful in forgiving sinners, Jesus kept the law for us and then, innocent, served the law still more by dying under the law's curse to endure the law's ineluctable outcome for human sin.

Paul goes on to state that in becoming a servant of the law

¹ A perfect example is the great silver punch bowl of the officers' mess of a famous regiment of the United States Army. The silver was looted from the Summer Palace at Peking which was sacked by allied troops in the Boxer Expedition. This loot was taken away from the soldiery but, instead of being returned to China, was made up into the great bowl by Japanese workmen for a British firm. There is a dragon on each of the four sides of the bowl, but the dragons are unlike. Much that is most pleasing in modern art has structural balance but no symmetry. The principle of balance without symmetry makes it much easier to appreciate Hebrew poetry, and would have saved much vain effort to reduce the Psalms to classical and semi-classical metrical systems.

² More exactly, Paul's figure is synecdoche, part for the whole, circumcision (anarthrous) for all the painful, separating, onerous requirements of the Mosaic system to which the circumcised heirs of the Abrahamic covenant had been obligated since Sinai. There may be a second synecdoche in the background, the positive Mosaic law for any kind of legalism or works, for law in general. See Lowrie's two fine pages, *op. cit.*, 190f,—though Lowrie seems not to be aware that his statements which may be new to some, are no novelties among the Bible-believing Reformed.

for the truth of God, Jesus established two things. Jesus made these two things come true. Jesus changes these promises into facts, and let them be known.

For one thing, He established the fathers' promises. He made the Old Testament promises of hope come true. The typical promise is the one to Abraham in Genesis xii. Long before the Incarnation Abraham had received much blessing, but blessing was still to come to Abraham's descendants and through Abraham's seed to all the nations of the earth. Jesus made these things come true. He changed these promises into facts, and let them be known. After His Resurrection "from Moses and from all the prophets He interpreted (explained) to them in all the Scriptures the things about Himself" (Luke xxiv. 27).

For the other thing, Jesus¹ established the new and abiding custom, that the Gentiles should glorify God.² The gospel became the power of God unto Salvation for Greeks and Romans as well as for Jews, Christ made the Old Testament promises come true. He changed these promises into facts and let them be known.

We Gentiles are to glorify God for His mercy. This is Paul's climax. With one accord believers with one mouth ought to glorify Jesus Christ's God and Father. Because Jesus took up with us for God's glory we ought to take up with one another for God's glory. And now at last we learn why and how God wants us to glorify Him. For His *mercy*.

God is Creator of the Universe of time and of eternity. At His word things came into being. He said, "Let there be light", and the first light-waves began their journey across that space of whose curvature science now begins to speculate.³ But that is not why we should glorify Him. Glorify Him for His *mercy*.

¹ Of course Paul uses the name Christ. I suppose that in synagogue preaching Paul proved that the historical Jesus was really the Christ (Messiah); that point once established, Paul usually called Him by the double name or else by the title Christ which, with or without the article, soon became a proper name in his usage as in ours.

² As I construe this ambiguous and strangely unbalanced sentence, the infinitive *βεβαιώσαι* has a double object connected by the conjunction *δέ*: first the substantive *επαγγελίας*, then the infinitive clause *τὰ ἔθνη δοξάζει κ.τ.λ.*: establish the promises and establish the fact that . . .

³ Eddington suggests, in *The Expanding Universe*, p. 115f, that the cosmic rays of recent discovery are rays of light that have been travelling around closed spherical space since the world's earliest ages, "when the Universe was close to its initial Einstein state", before the bubble had burst (*Id.*, p. 106) or begun to burst (*Id.*, p. 128). Using a word which Thornwell liked and Warfield loved, there are pregnant possibilities in the comparison of the first three or four verses of Genesis with this suggestion from the very foam on the first wave of contemporary science.

By His command rain falls and flowers bloom. By His command earth spins on its axis and whirls around the light-giving sun. By His command the star Arcturus at unimaginable distance sent rays of light, while the Columbian Exposition was open in Chicago in 1893, that reached the same city a few months ago and opened the Century of Progress. By His command all the world of nature, they tell us, from atom to far-distant star, obeys certain mathematical laws with calculable quantities so small that one writes the basic quantum with a decimal point followed by about two dozen zeros and then three real numbers. But that is not why we should glorify Him. Glorify God for His mercy.

He is Wise, and Powerful, and Just, and Infinite, and True. But these are not enough reasons why we should glorify Him. Glorify God for His mercy.

What is mercy? Mercy is what a sinner needs. If you are reading these pages with the spirit of worship in your heart, open your English Bible at Luke xviii. 9-13. There you will find Jesus' commentary on the statement that mercy is what a sinner needs.¹

What is mercy? Shakespeare describes it in the words of sweet Portia as doctor of laws :

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd;
 It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes:
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown:
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 It is an attribute to God himself,
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's,
 When mercy seasons justice
 . . . consider this—
 That in the course of justice none of us
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy.

What is mercy? Jesus described it in the story of the Lost Son in Luke xv. Read what mercy is in verses 14-24. Then in

¹ For our English "mercy" in that passage there is a different Greek word which sends the student on to Rom. iii. 25, or rather to iii. 23-25, where the words "freely" and "grace" show us the answer to the sinner's need. Cf. note 3 above. Had Luke or Paul issued an annotated edition of this epistle, he might have indicated these cross-references. Cf. Moffatt, *Grace in the New Testament*, p. 126; also pp. 78f, 116-120, 37-39 *passim*.

the following verses of the chapter read what mercy is and what mercy is not. In this parable and the two others grouped with it, Jesus is justifying His own conduct as merciful and as the mercy of God; the abrupt conclusion before the elder brother answers the father's tender plea asks a pointed question of us: is there mercy in our attitude to sinners?

What is mercy? Jesus described mercy in purely human relationships, completely applicable to the world to-day, as you may re-read in Luke x. 25-37. In the last verse the lawyer recognizes the mercy of the Samaritan. Paul says that for the sake of God's truth the Son of God became a Jew that we Gentiles might give glory to God for His mercy.

Therefore let us glorify God for His mercy. Mercy is the chief characteristic by which the Incomprehensible God is made known to us. Mercy is the chief reason for which we should praise His name. Mercy is the colour and shape by which we are to thank God. Mercy is the frame in which we ought to be likened to God. If we think mercifully we have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus. After all this whole passage is part of an appeal, not merely for mercy (xv. 1), but also for the most delicate kind of voluntary merciful consideration even for our brethren who differ from us on specific ethical details (xiv. 1, 13, 15). It is not enough to chant praises to God for His mercy. We must love mercy and show mercy. Then our hearts may shout the Hallelujah of the 117th Psalm, and our lips may sing:

Oh, Christ, He is the fountain,
The deep, sweet well of love,
The joys on earth I've tasted,
More deep I'll drink above.
*There to an ocean fulness
His mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.*

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