

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ROMANS.

ROMANS VII. 24, 25.

O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. THE experience which St. Paul describes in this chapter is probably personal, something through which he himself had passed. It is true that sometimes, as in his Epistle to the Corinthians, he speaks of himself while he really denotes others. As he says, 'Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes.' But in the present instance he had no motive for adopting this device. And the vivid lights and shadows which now brighten and now darken his description, the expressive touches which disclose so much of the writer's personality, the tragic earnestness of it all, seem to demonstrate that we have here an excerpt from the Apostle's autobiography, the history of his own spiritual conflict.

2. But here arises a question which has been very stoutly debated: Is Paul describing his Christian or his pre-Christian experience? It is easy to find forcible arguments on both sides. But, as Dr. Denney has well said: 'The much discussed question, whether the subject of this passage is the unregenerate or the regenerate self, is hardly real. The distinction in its absolute form belongs to doctrine, not to experience. No one could have written the passage but a Christian; it is the experience of the unregenerate, we may say, but seen through regenerate eyes, interpreted in a regenerate mind. It is the Apostle's spiritual history, but universalised.' This, then, is St. Paul's confession. As compared with the confessions of Augustine and Bunyan and others it is unique for its sincerity, and self-knowledge, and spiritual insight, and power.

A by no means incompetent judge has declared his own conviction that this seventh chapter of Romans is 'most certainly the most terrible tragedy in all literature, ancient or modern, sacred or profane.' 'Set beside the seventh of the Romans,' he says, 'all your so-called great tragedies—your Macbeths, your Hamlets, your Lears, your Othellos—are all but so many stage-plays; so much sound and fury, signifying next to nothing when set alongside this awful

tragedy of sin. . . . The seventh of the Romans should always be printed in letters of blood. Here are passions. Here are terror and pity. Here heaven and hell meet, as nowhere else in heaven or hell; and that, too, for their last grapple together for the everlasting possession of that immortal soul, till you have a tragedy indeed; beside which there is no other tragedy.¹

I.

ST. PAUL'S DISCOVERY.

It was not the intention of the Apostle to relate in chronological order the various phases of his experience. He refers now to one, now to another, as they recur to him, without any attempt to classify them, or to show the sequence which linked them together. It is, therefore, only in a rough way that it is possible to trace the successive stages of it. But it is not difficult to disentangle his rapid transitions of thought and to see that he made three discoveries.

1. The first was *the reality of sin*. Through the working of the Law in his heart, sin revived, and it appeared in its true colours as sin. How natural is the tendency of the human heart to excuse sin; to regard it not as sin at all, but only as weakness, or quite venial—a peccadillo, neither disapproved of God nor worth troubling oneself about. Even writers of high moral tone like Matthew Arnold speak of it as mere infirmity, or ascribe it to defects of blood—a standpoint which is in sharp contrast to that which St. Paul took and which has been taken almost without exception by Christian thinkers. No discovery is more radical than that wrong-doing is sin against God, not merely injurious to the offender or to others implicated in his acts, but an affront to the majesty of heaven. The ancient saints thus regarded their transgressions, especially the psalmists who poured out their heart-felt confessions; but none saw it more clearly, or had deeper views of it, than the Apostle Paul, who counted himself the chief of sinners.

2. Again, the Apostle, through the Law, discovered *the exceeding sinfulness of sin*: 'that

¹ J. H. Jowett, *The Transfigured Church*, 107.

sin,' he writes, 'by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.' While he ascribes this discovery to the Law in its holiness and purity, he owed it chiefly to the Cross of Christ. He was reading his past experience from the standpoint of the gospel. It was in Christ, not under the Law, that he attained to adequate views of what sin is in its spirit, and what it led to when wicked men under its influence crucified the Lord of life and glory. And it is ever at the Cross that these profound impressions are produced.

3. He discovered, also, that *sin had a deep root in his sinful self*. He had not only committed sinful acts, but he had a sinful heart, which made the case more desperate. He became conscious of an inward schism, 'a law in his members, warring against the law of his mind.' In him, as in us all, there was a higher and a lower self, and the lower self had gained ascendancy, and had brought him into captivity. He spoke of himself as though composed of two separate and opposite personalities. Xenophon mentions a certain Persian who said of himself, 'Certainly I must have two souls, for plainly it is not one and the same which is both evil and good, and at the same time wishes to do a thing and not to do it. Plainly, then, there are two souls; and when the good one prevails, then it does good, and when the evil one prevails, then it does evil.' In some such way St. Paul seems to be speaking of himself. He tells us that the good he would—that is, willed or determined to do—he did not; but that the evil he willed or determined not to do, that he did. He then explains that this state of things was owing to two opposite natures or laws in him, one good and the other bad, which were, so to speak, like two persons of opposite characters. The one he calls 'I,' which is the good nature or the good person; the other he calls 'sin,' or the law of sin,' which is the bad nature or bad person.

We have most of us read Stevenson's thrilling book in which this thought is worked into a story—the story of a man with two names, living in two different spheres as opposite to each other as light and darkness. And the power of the story, apart from the graphic way in which the conception is developed, is derived from the fact that it awakens a response in the reader and compels him to say to himself, 'Thou art the man.' Without intentional or conscious hypocrisy, there is contrariety between our better and our lower nature which is answerable for many glaring inconsistencies.

II.

HIS MISERY.

'O wretched man that I am!'

1. St. Paul may be thought by some to be here describing himself in figure for others; but, if so, we may drop the disguise and treat the words as revealing his personal experience. Why was he wretched? It was not through a harrowing fear of consequences, either near or remote, a looking for of judgment and fiery indignation. Not that, but the slings and arrows of an accusing conscience enlightened by the Spirit of God. It was the hell, not of future punishment, but of wrong-doing, the sense of God's displeasure, the hidings of God's face, the self-loathing of an awakening soul—this it was that cast its awful shadow over his spirit, and extorted the cry, 'O wretched man that I am!'

That nothing in life gives a man so much trouble as himself is generally allowed. In this sense, better than in any other, the old saying holds good, that a man's foes are they of his own household. To be wounded in the house of friends is distressing, but to be beaten down and baffled by the persistent refusal of our own heart to submit to discipline, to find faults still surviving in vigour and cropping out unexpectedly after the efforts of years to subdue them, is amongst the saddest of mortal experiences. No one is spared from this universal lot, yet fellowship therein brings no comfort. It is the standing background of every life, but no familiarity and no degree of repetition make it tolerable. Such seemingly helpless captivity under the law of sin may well provoke the hopeless groan, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?'

In Christian experience, however, such despondency can never be more than a passing mood. The proper attitude for a soul, against which the battle seems to be going is, 'When I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me' (Mic 7⁸).¹

2. But many men, and women too, who are wretched to-day are so from a far different cause. It is not the hell of an accusing conscience that disturbs them, but the hell of ill-success, or loss, or some effects of sin.

The word Hell is still frequently in use among the English people: but I could not without difficulty ascertain what they meant by it. Hell generally signifies the Infinite Terror, the thing a man is infinitely afraid of, and shudders and shrinks from, struggling with his whole soul to escape from it. There is a Hell therefore, if you will consider, which accompanies man, in all stages of his history, and religious or other development: but the Hells of men and

¹ Dr. Waddy Moss.

Peoples differ notably. With Christians it is the infinite terror of being found guilty before the Just Judge. . . . And now what is it, if you pierce through his Cants, his oft-repeated Hearsays, what he calls his Worships, and so forth,—what is it that the modern English soul does, in very truth, dread infinitely, and contemplate with entire despair? What *is* his Hell, after all these reputable, oft-repeated Hearsays, what is it? With hesitation, with astonishment, I pronounce it to be: The terror of 'Not succeeding,' of not making money, fame, or some other figure in the world,—chiefly of not making money! Is not that a somewhat singular Hell?¹

III.

HIS HELPLESSNESS.

'Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?'

1. It is when the imperative of duty, the voice of conscience, begins to make itself heard, when the degradation and misery, the shame and guilt of a life of sensuality or self-indulgence begin to be felt, and the moral will is roused to assert itself—it is then, in the effort to be free, to escape from spiritual bondage, that we become aware of the fatal strength of the power that masters us. For it is to be remarked that at the stage indicated in the text the conflict is always an unequal one.

If the will were simply an unbiassed umpire between contending claimants, between the right and the pleasant, between the lower or carnal and the higher or spiritual nature, the conflict would be waged on equal terms and the issue at worst uncertain. But it is not so. The life of impulse long precedes the other and claims, so to speak, a prescriptive right to rule. When the struggle comes, the will is no impartial arbiter. A thousand acts of selfish indulgence have woven themselves into its very essence and given it an evil bias against the unfamiliar demands of duty. No wonder then, in such circumstances,—with emotion, passion, inclination, and the ingrained force of habit on the one side, and only the authoritative voice of a law we respect and fear but have not learnt to love on the other,—that the endeavour after a better life should issue only in a profound and painful sense of impotence and baffled service.

The agitation which such a state of mind involves has often found a poetic expression for itself, as in many of the

hymns used in Public Worship; or, for example, in the following lines:

How to sate the deep sin-sorrow waked with each returning morrow,
As the longing after Right yields to Evil's matchless might,
While the thronèd Self is speeding downwards to the Fiend's onleading,
Deaf to warning voice, or heeding as a dreamer to the cries,
Phantomlike, that call Arise!

Father, ah! my soul is dreary, chilled my hopes, my feet way-weary;
And o'er-matched in the sore strife, though I know the way of life,
Yet my resolutions fail me, and my will can but bewail me,
And my night is cold and starless, and no gleams of rising morn
O'er the eastern clouds are borne.²

2. One peculiarity of this experience is that it compels us to look away from self, upward to God. Speak to a man under this consciousness of the power of sin and the weakness of his own nature to resist—speak to him about finding help to resist, through studying the laws of that nature of which he is himself a part, and through exercising that will, whose feebleness appals him, and you mock him, as if you spoke to a man in a raging fever of the necessity of studying his own temperament and constitution, and of the duty of keeping himself cool. He would do it were the fever not burning in his veins. What is wanted in either case is help from without—from some source of life, and health, and energy, outside himself—from some one 'mighty to save,' who should restore the wasted strength from his own fountains of life—who should say to the internal conflict 'Peace, be still.'

In a letter to Alexander Cunningham, Robert Burns wrote:

'There are two great pillars that bear us up amid the wreck of misfortune and misery. The one is composed of a certain noble, stubborn something in man, known by the name of courage, fortitude, magnanimity. The other is made up of those feelings and sentiments which, however the sceptic may deny them or the enthusiast may disfigure them, are yet, I am convinced, original and component parts of the human soul, those senses of the mind—if I may be allowed the expression—which connect us with and link us to those awful, obscure realities: an all-powerful and equally beneficent God, and a world to come, beyond death and the grave.'

¹ Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 125.

² J. H. Moulton, *Visions of Sin*, 219.

3. The consciousness of sin is so far a universal fact of human nature that, if any one of us is without it, it is because of some disease, a defect in his own mind. 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.' The conviction of sin may be stifled within us, it is so stifled every day; and yet it is universal. As light is universal, although some may shut their eyes close and admit none of it, so is the consciousness of sin universal, although many believe that they have got rid of it altogether. For this very absence of conviction only proves the incompleteness of their nature. They deceive themselves, and the truth is not in them. They have lost the feeling of sin that was given them as a safeguard. It burns them like a fire; but their skin has lost all sensation. They are sleeping steeped in cold mists and poisonous dews, but they know not the poison because they are asleep. Yet fire burns, and poison destroys, not the less when the senses, which are sentinels against them, desert their posts.

Every man whose nature is complete, and awake, and active, knows that there is such a thing as sin, and that he is a partaker in it. The man who has tried for a quarter of a century to pare off from his mind all that does not minister to one chosen worldly pursuit will be able to deny that he is convinced of sin. But you appeal from such maimed and crippled spirits to the general sense of more complete minds. And the result is the admission that there is a better law, which our conscience admits the authority of, warring against the law of pride and self-will and appetite within us, and that the worse prevails against the better, and that the sense of guilt accompanies that wrong decision in every case. So then the sense of sin is not something abnormal, exceptional, that begins in superstition and mental depression, and is kept up by religious teachers by artificial means; it is the fair and natural result of facts. We know the better way, we choose the worse, and we are ashamed of it; these are three plain facts, which contain all that we contend for. Not those who sorrow for sin are deceiving themselves, but those who deny its existence.

4. These two natures will never cease to struggle so long as we are in this world. The old nature will never give up; it will never cry truce, it will never ask for a treaty to be made between the two. It will always strike as often as it can. When it lies still it will only be preparing for some future battle. The battle of Christian with Apollyon lasted three hours; but the battle of Christian with himself lasted all the way from the Wicket-gate to the River Jordan. The enemy within can never be driven out while we are here. Satan may sometimes be absent from us, and get such a defeat that he is glad to go howling back to his den, but the old Adam abideth with us from the first even to the last. He was with us when we first believed in Jesus, and long ere that, and he will be with us till that moment when we shall leave our bones in the grave, our fears in the Jordan, and our sins in oblivion. So it is ours ever to keep our eyes fixed, as Paul did, upon the Christ of God, and daily we shall receive of His fulness, grace upon grace.

My faith burns low, my hope burns low,
Only my heart's desire cries out in me
By the deep thunder of its want and woe,
Cries out to Thee.

Lord, Thou art Life, tho' I be dead,
Love's Fire Thou art, however cold I be;
Nor heaven have I, nor place to lay my head,
Nor home, but Thee.¹

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¹ Christina G. Rossetti.