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PAUL'S CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

VI. THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS—THE TRAIN OF THOUGHT.

THE theme of the first eight chapters is "the gospel of God," for the whole world, needed by all men, available for all who will receive it in the obedience of faith, and thoroughly efficient in the case of all who so receive it; a gospel which Paul is not ashamed to preach anywhere, because he believes it to be the power of God unto salvation.

The Apostle enters at once on the explanation of the nature of this Gospel. "Therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith to faith."¹ These words contain only a preliminary hint of Paul's doctrine concerning the Gospel. He does not expect his readers to understand at once what he means by *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*. He simply introduces the topic to provoke curiosity, and create a desire for a further unfolding to be given in due season. Therefore it is better, with the revised version, to translate "a righteousness of God," than with the authorised version, "the righteousness of God," for the idea the words are intended to express is by no means, for the first readers, a familiar theological commonplace, but a peculiar Pauline conception standing in need of careful explanation. Two things however are clearly indicated in this preliminary announcement: that the Gospel, as Paul understands it, is saving through *faith*, and that it is a *universal* Gospel; "a power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

Having thus proclaimed the cardinal truth that salvation is through faith, the Apostle proceeds to shut all men up to faith by demonstrating the universality of sin.² The section

¹ i. 17.

² i. 18, ii. 24

of the Epistle devoted to this purpose presents a grim repulsive picture of human depravity, and on this account it may appear a most unwelcome and uncongenial feature in a writing having for its express theme the praise of Divine grace. But this dark unpleasant excursus is relevant and necessary to the argument in hand. What more directly fitted to commend the Pauline doctrine both as to the gracious nature and the universal destination of the Gospel than a proof of the universal prevalence of sin? If sin be universal, then God's grace seems the only open way to salvation, and no ground can be found in man why the way should not be equally open to all. There is no moral difference worth mentioning, all distinctions disappear in presence of the one all-embracing category *sinner*s. However disagreeable, therefore, it may be to have it elaborately proved that that category does embrace all, however unpleasant reading the proof may be, however hideous and humiliating the picture held up to our view, we cannot quarrel with the Apostle's logic, but must be content to take the bitter with the sweet, the dark with the bright. Far from being a blot on the Epistle, this *sin-section*, as we may call it, is one of its merits, when regarded as an attempt at a fuller statement of Paul's conception of the Gospel than any supplied in previous epistles. We miss such a section in the Epistle to the Galatians. Hints of a doctrine of sin are indeed not wanting in that Epistle,¹ but in comparison with the elaborate statement in the Epistle to the Romans they are very scanty, and give hardly an idea of what might be said on the subject. For what we have here is not vague gentle allusions, but a tremendous exhaustive indictment which overwhelms us with shame, and crushes our pride into the dust, the one effect being produced by the description of Gentile sinfulness in chapter

¹ *Gal.* ii. 15, 16, iii. 10, 19.

i. vv. 18-32, the other by the description of Jewish sinfulness in the two following chapters.

Remarkable in the former of these two delineations is the exact knowledge displayed by the Apostle of the hideous depravity of Pagan morals, and also the unshrinking way in which he speaks of it, not hesitating out of false delicacy to allude to the most abominable of Gentile vices, and to call them by their true names. All who know the Greek and Roman literature of the period are aware that Paul's picture of contemporary Paganism in respect both of religion and morals is absolutely faithful to fact. Never perhaps in the history of the world did mankind sink so low in superstition and immorality as in the apostolic age; and it was fitting that the Apostle of the Gentiles should say what he thought of it in an Epistle to the Romans, for in the city of Rome the folly and wickedness of mankind reached their maximum. "The first age," writes Renan, "of our era has an infernal stamp which belongs to it alone; the age of Borgia alone can be compared to it in point of wickedness."¹ Surely it could not be difficult for men immersed in such a foul pit of senile superstition and unblushing profligacy to attain such a sense of guilt as should make them feel that their only hope of salvation lay in the mercy of God! But, alas, men get accustomed to evil, and are apt to regard all as right that is in fashion. A moral tonic is needed to invigorate conscience, and produce a healthy reaction of the moral sense against prevalent evil. This the Apostle understood well, hence the abrupt reference to the wrath of God immediately after the initial statement of the nature of the Gospel.² Here, as in reference to the whole sin-section, one's first impression is apt to be: how ungenial, what a lack of tact in thrusting

¹ *Melanges*, p. 167.

² *Rom.* i. 18. The idea of a revelation of wrath will be discussed at a later stage.

in such unwelcome thoughts in connection with the good tidings of salvation! But Paul knows what he is about, and his usual tact is not likely to have deserted him at the very outset of so carefully considered a writing. He knows that his Gospel will be welcomed only by those to whom the prevalent life of the age appears utterly black and abominable. The first thing therefore to be done is to call forth the slumbering conscience into vigorous action. For this purpose he prefaces his description of Pagan manners by a blunt down right expression of his own moral judgment upon them, pronouncing them to be the legitimate object of Divine wrath.

In his indictment against the Gentile world Paul has no difficulty in making out a case, his only difficulty is in making the picture black enough. But when he passes from Gentiles to Jews his task becomes more delicate. He has now to deal with a people accustomed to speak of Gentiles as "sinners," and to think of themselves by comparison as righteous, and who could read such a description of Pagan morals as he has just given with self-complacent satisfaction. Therefore he makes this very state of mind his starting point in addressing himself to his countrymen, and begins his demonstration of Jewish sinfulness by a statement amounting to a charge of hypocrisy. In effect he says: "I know what you are thinking, O ye Jews, as ye read these damning sentences about Pagans. 'Oh,' think ye, 'these wicked Gentiles! thank God, we are not like them.' But I tell you you *are* like them, in the essentials of conduct if not in special details, and to all this you add the sin of hypocritical censoriousness, judging others while you ought rather to be judging yourselves." It is noticeable that, though plainly alluded to, the Jew is not named. The reason may be that the Apostle wishes absolutely to deny the right of any man to judge others; as if he would say: "the heathen are bad, but where is the man who has

a right to cast stones at his brother man?" He knows very well where the men who claim such a right are to be found. He does not at first say where, but it goes without being said, every Jew reading the Epistle would know, for he would be conscious that he had just been doing the thing condemned. Having denounced the Jewish vice of judging, Paul goes on by a series of interrogations to charge Jews with the same sins previously laid to the charge of the Gentiles.¹ These implied assertions may seem a libel on a people proud of their God-given law; but doubtless the Apostle was well informed as to the state of Jewish morality, and spoke as one conscious that he had no reason to fear contradiction.

It is important to notice that Paul's purpose in this section is not simply to prove that both Pagans and Jews are great sinners, but to show that they are such sinners in spite of all in their respective religions that tended to keep them in the right way. He pronounces a verdict not merely on men but on systems, and means to suggest that both Paganism and Judaism are failures. He holds that even Paganism contained some elements of truth making for right conduct. He credits the Gentiles with some natural knowledge of God and of duty.² His charge against them is that they held or held down³ the truth in unrighteousness, and were unwilling to retain God in their knowledge. It may be thought that Paul's judgment of the Pagan world is too pessimistic, and that there was a brighter side to the picture which he did not sufficiently take into account. But in any case it is to be observed that his pessimism does not take the form of denying that the Pagans had any light, but rather that of accusing them of not being faithful to the light they had.

To the Jew the Apostle concedes a still higher measure of

¹ *Rom.* ii. 21-23.

² i. 19-21, ii. 14, 15,

³ i. 18, *κατεχούτων.*

light, representing him as having the great advantage over the Pagan of being in possession of the oracles of God.¹ But he is far from thinking that in this fact the Jew has any ground for assuming airs of superiority as compared with the Gentile. He alludes to the privilege with no intention of playing the part of a special pleader for his race.² On the contrary, he holds that the people who were in possession of the law and the promises and the Scriptures were just on that account the more to be blamed for their misconduct. For the benefit of such as made these privileges a ground of self-complacency he points out that the very Scriptures of which they were so proud brought against the favoured race charges not less severe than he had just brought against the Pagan world.³

Paul concludes his sombre survey of the moral condition of the world with a solemn statement, declaring justification by works of law impossible.⁴ It is the negative side of his doctrine of justification based on his doctrine of sin. It applies in the first place and directly to Jews, but by implication and *a fortiori* to Gentiles.

Having reached the negative conclusion, the Apostle proceeds to state his positive doctrine of salvation in one of the great passages of the Epistle, chapter iii 21-26, which must occupy our attention hereafter. Here let it be remarked that we get from this great Pauline text more light on the expression we met with at the commencement of "a righteousness of God." We now begin to understand what this righteousness is, which Paul regards as the burthen of his Gospel. He evidently feels that the expression in itself does not necessarily convey the meaning he attaches to it, for no sooner has he used it than he hastens to add words

¹ iii. 1, 2.

² iii. 9. Such seems to be the meaning of *προεχόμεθα*, "are we making excuses for ourselves?" that is, for the people who had the *λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ*. *Vid.* the elaborate discussion on this word in Morison's monograph on *Romans* iii.

³ iii. 10-18.

⁴ iii. 20.

explanatory of his meaning. "By a righteousness of God," he says in effect, "I mean a righteousness through faith of Christ, unto all believers in Christ." God's righteousness, in Paul's sense, does not appear to signify God's personal righteousness, or our personal righteousness conceived of as well pleasing to God, but a righteousness which God gives to those who believe in Jesus; an *objective* righteousness we may call it, not in us, but as it were hovering over us. It seems to be something original the Apostle has in mind, for he labours to express his thought about it by a variety of phrases: saying, *e.g.*, that it is a righteousness apart from law, and yet a righteousness witnessed to both by law and by prophets, how or where, he does not here state. Further, he represents it as given to faith. Faith is its sole condition, therefore it is given to *all* who believe, Jew and Gentile alike. Again he speaks of men as made partakers of God's righteousness, *δικαιούμενοι*, "justified," *freely*, by His *grace*, which is as much as to say that the righteousness in question is a gift of divine love offered freely to all who believe in Jesus.

Apart from law this righteousness of God is revealed according to the Apostle, who lays great stress on the doctrine, as he feels that otherwise God and salvation would be a monopoly of the Jews.¹ Yet one cannot but note that he is very careful in this Epistle to avoid creating the impression that he undervalues law. Significant in this connection is the twice-used expression "the obedience of faith,"² also the curious phrase the "law of faith,"³ by which boasting is said to be excluded; also the earnestness with which the Apostle protests that by his doctrine he does not make void the law through faith, but rather establishes

¹ iii. 29.

² i. 5, xvi. 26.

³ iii. 27. Compare the expression *νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος τῆς ζωῆς* (chap. viii. 2). These various expressions seem to indicate a desire to dissociate the idea of law from legalism, and to invest it with evangelic associations.

the law.¹ The proof of the statement is held over for a more advanced stage of the argument, as is also the proof of the thesis that by the law is the knowledge of sin.² The point to be noticed is the Apostle's anxiety to prevent the rise of any prejudicial misunderstanding. It is explained in part by the irenical policy demanded by the situation in view of the writer, in part possibly by his recollecting that he writes to men who as Romans had an inbred reverence for law.

What follows in chapters iv. and v. may be summarised under the general heading of support to the doctrine of justification by faith. The support is threefold, being drawn (1) from the history of Abraham (chap. iv.); (2) from the experience of the justified (chap. v. 1-11); (3) from the history of the human race (chap. v. 12-21). The first two lines of thought are anticipated in *Galatians* (chap. iii. 6-9, 3-5), the third is new, though texts in 1 Corinthians xv. concerning Adam and Christ show that such sweeping generalisations do not occur here for the first time to the Apostle's mind.

“What of Abraham our forefather?”³ so begins abruptly the new section. Is he no exception to the rule, that no man is justified by works? The Jews thought he was, and Paul seems willing to concede the point out of respect to the patriarch, but not in a sense incompatible with his thesis.⁴ Abraham as compared with other men might have in his works a ground of boasting, but not before God, not so as to exclude need of Divine grace, not in the sense of a full legal justification. He was justified before circumci-

¹ iii. 31.

² iii. 20.

³ iv. 1. *εὐρηκέναι* is omitted by Westcott and Hort.

⁴ So Lipsius, *Die Paul. Rechtfertigungslehre*, p. 35, with which cf. the same author in *Hand-commentar*. According to Weber, *Die Lehre des Talmuds*, p. 224, the Jews of the Talmudic period thought that all the patriarchs passed through life without sin, also other great saints, such as Elijah.

sion, and by faith; and so he was not merely the fleshly father of Israel, but the spiritual father of all who believe, circumcised and uncircumcised. In the discussion of these points, there comes out in a remarkable degree a feature of Paul's style on which critics have commented, viz., the tendency to repeat a word that has taken a strong hold of his mind. "A word," says Renan, "haunts him, he uses it again and again in the same page. It is not from sterility, it is from the eagerness of his spirit, and his complete indifference as to the correction of style."¹ The word which haunts his mind here is λογίζομαι, which in one form or another occurs eleven times. The repetition implies emphasis, implies that the word is the symbol of an important idea in the Pauline system of thought, that it denotes a certain feature of the righteousness of God given to faith. It is an *imputed* righteousness, though strictly speaking Paul's idea is that *faith is imputed for righteousness*. So it was in the case of Abraham, according to the Scriptures; so in like manner, the Apostle teaches, shall it be in the case of all Abraham's spiritual children.² For he regards the patriarch's case as in all respects typical, even in respect of the nature and manifestations of the faith exercised, as when he believed in God's power to quicken the dead, even as we do when we believe in the resurrection of Jesus.³ Who, adds the Apostle, in one of his pregnant sentences: "*Who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised again for our justification.*"⁴

The way of justification by faith exemplified in the history of Abraham, is, the Apostle goes on to show, still further commended by its results in a believing man's experience. The style at this point passes out of the didactic into the

¹ *St. Paul*, p. 233.

² *Rom.* iv. 24.

³ *iv.* 24.

⁴ *iv.* 25. This text will come under our notice hereafter.

emotional. The writer expresses himself as one who has known what it is to enter into a state of peace, hope and joy, from a miserable state of fear, doubt, uncertainty and depression, the sad inheritance of legalism. So in cheerful buoyant tone he begins: "Justification being by faith, let us have peace with God,"¹ insisting that it is now possible and easy as it never was or could be for the legalist. And he continues in triumphant strain to exhibit the mood of the believer in Jesus as one of constant many-sided exultation. The keynote of this noble outpouring of an emancipated heart is *καυχῶμαι*, occurring first in *v. 2*, and recurring in *vv. 3* and *11*, and presenting in its growing intensity of meaning a veritable Jacob's ladder of joy reaching from earth to heaven. "We exult in hope of future glory; not only so, we exult in present tribulations; not only so, we exult in God. The future is ours, the present is ours, all is ours because God is ours; all this because we have abandoned the way of works and entered on the way of faith." Such is the skeleton of thought in this choice passage, well hidden by a massive body of superadded ideas crowding into the writer's mind and craving utterance.

The famous parallel between Adam and Christ comes in partly as an afterthought by way of an additional contribution to the doctrine of sin, and therefore to the argument in support of the doctrine of justification. But it may also be viewed as a continuation of the foregoing strain in which Christian optimism finds for itself new pabulum in a larger field. "It is well not only for the individual believer that salvation comes through faith in Christ, but for the human race. Christ is the hope of all generations of mankind. Through one man at the commencement of history came sin and death, and through this second Man come righteousness and life. The law did nothing to help sin- and death-

¹ *v. 1*, *ἐχωμεν* suits the emotional character of the passage. In didactic meaning it comes to the same thing as *ἐχομεν*.

stricken humanity, it rather entered that sin might abound, so enhancing rather than mitigating its malign power. But that was merely a temporary evil, for the abounding of sin only called forth a superabundant manifestation of grace. Thus Adam and Moses, each in his own way, ministered to the glory of Christ as the Redeemer from sin." Such is the gist of the passage.

The Apostle's thought is grand, bold, and true, but like all bold thought it brings its own risks of misunderstanding. What if this eulogium on the righteousness of God given to faith, or on the grace of God the more liberally bestowed the more it is needed, should be turned into an excuse for moral license? Why then Christianity would prove to be a failure not less than Paganism and Judaism; nay, the greatest, most tragic failure of all. Paul has judged Paganism and Judaism by their practical fruits, and he cannot object to the same test being applied to the new religion he proposes to put in their place. Obviously it must be a matter of life and death for him to show that the Gospel he preaches will stand the test. That, accordingly, is the task he next undertakes, with what success the contents of chapters vi.-viii. enable us to judge.

Chapters vi. and vii. deal successively with three questions naturally arising out of the previous train of thought. It is not necessary to suppose that they had ever been put by any actual objector—the dialectics are those of Paul's own eager intellect; but conceived as emanating from an unsympathetic reader they may be stated thus: The great matter, it seems, is that grace abound, had we not better then all play Adam's part that grace may have free scope? ¹ The law too was given to make sin abound, and having rendered that questionable service retired from the stage and gave place to the genial reign of grace. Are we then

¹ *Rom.* vi. 1.

at liberty now to do deeds contrary to the law? ¹ Finally, if the function of the law was to increase sin, is not the natural inference that the law itself is sin? ² The Apostle's reply to the first of these questions is in effect this: "Continue in sin that grace may abound! the idea is abhorrent to the Christian mind; the case supposed absurd and impossible. Ideally viewed, a Christian is a man dead to sin and alive in and with Christ. That this is so, baptism signifies. The Christian life in its ideal is a repetition of Christ's life in its main crises; in its death for sin and to sin, and in its resurrection to eternal life. And the ideal becomes a law to all believers. They deem it their duty to strive to realise the ideal in their life." At this point in the development of Paul's thoughts we make the acquaintance of that "*faith-mysticism*" which is a not less conspicuous feature of Paulinism than the doctrine of objective righteousness, or justification by faith. We met it before for a moment in the Antioch remonstrance, in those stirring words, "I am crucified along with Christ"; ³ and again, just for a passing moment, in the pregnant saying: "if one died for all, then all died along with Him." ⁴ But here we are brought face to face with it so that we cannot escape noting its features, and are compelled to recognise it as an organic and essential element in the Pauline conception of Christianity.

The second suggestion, that we may sin because we are not under law, the Apostle boldly meets by the assertion that just because we are not under law but under grace therefore sin shall not have dominion over us. The announcement of this to a Jew startling, but to a Christian self-evident, truth conducts the Apostle at length to his doctrine as to the function of the law which he has once and again hinted at in the course of his argument. He uses

¹ vi. 15.

² vii. 7.

³ Gal. ii. 20.

⁴ 2 Cor. v. 15.

for his purpose the figure of a marriage. The law was once our husband, but he is dead and we are married to another, even Christ, through whom we bring forth fruit to God; very different fruit from that brought forth under the law's influence, which was simply fruit of sin unto death.¹ In so characterising the fruit of marriage to the law Paul is simply repeating his doctrine that the law entered that sin might abound. This doctrine, therefore, he must now explain and defend, which he does in one of the most remarkable passages in all his writings, wherein he describes the conflict between the flesh and the spirit and the function of the law in provoking sin, while holy in itself, through the flesh.² It is the *locus classicus* of Paul's doctrine of the flesh as also of his doctrine of the law, and as such must engage our attention hereafter. It is altogether a very sombre and depressing utterance, ending with the cry of despair: "Wretched man, who shall deliver me!"

The exposition of the Gospel cannot so end. To let that be the last word were to confess failure. The exclamation: "Thanks to God through Jesus Christ" must be made the starting point of a new strain in which despair shall give place to hope, and struggle to victory. This is what happens in chapter viii. The Apostle here returns to the happy mood of chapter v. 1-11. "There is now no condemnation" is an echo of "Being justified by faith, we have peace," and the subsequent series of reflections is an expansion of the three ideas, rejoicing in hope, rejoicing in tribulation, rejoicing in God. Yet along with similarity goes notable difference due to the influence of the intervening train of thought. In the earlier place the ground of joy and hope is *objective*, the righteousness of God given to faith, faith imputed for righteousness. In the latter it is *subjective*, union to Christ by faith, being in Christ, *having*

¹ Rom. vii. 1-6.

² vii. 7-24.

Christ's spirit dwelling in us. The great Pauline doctrine of the spirit immanent in believers as the source of a new Christlike life here finds adequate expression, after having been hinted in the Epistle to the Galatians,¹ and also in an earlier place of this present Epistle.² Here the indwelling Spirit is set forth as the source of several important spiritual benefits: (1) victory over sin, power to do the will of God, to fulfil the righteousness of the law³ (the law is not to be made void after all, but established!); (2) filial confidence towards God;⁴ (3) the sure hope of future glory as God's sons and heirs;⁵ (4) comfort under present tribulation, the spirit helping us in our infirmities.⁶ Along with this doctrine of the immanent Spirit goes a magnificent doctrine of Christian optimism which proclaims the approach of an era of emancipation for the whole creation, and the present reign of a Paternal Providence which makes all things work together for good.⁷ Here Paul's spirit rises to the highest pitch of jubilant utterance, illustrating what he meant when he spoke of glorying in God (v. 11), "If God be for us, who can be against us . . . I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord."⁸

Thus, on eagle wing does Paul soar away towards heaven, whence he looks down with contempt on time and sense, and all the troubles of this life. But such lofty flights of faith and hope seldom last long in this world. Something

¹ Gal. iv. 6, v. 5.

² Rom. v. 5.

³ viii. 4-10.

⁴ viii. 14-16.

⁵ viii. 17.

⁶ viii. 26.

⁷ viii. 18-25, 31-39.

⁸ viii. 31, 39. In this brief analysis of chapter viii. no reference has been made to a very important Pauline word in *vv.* 3, 4: "God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." Other opportunities will occur for discussing this passage.

ever occurs to bring the spirit down from heaven to earth, back from the glorious future to the sad present. Even such was Paul's experience in writing this letter. What brings his thoughts down to the earth, and back to the disenchanting realities of the present is the prevailing unbelief of his countrymen. In the peace-giving faith and inspiring hope of Christians few of them had a share. The sad fact not only grieved his spirit, but raised an important apologetic problem. The nature of the problem has been indicated in a previous paper, as also the gist of the Apostle's solution as given in chapters ix.-xi., the further exposition of which is reserved for a future occasion.

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