

## ARTICLE II.

IS SALVATION POSSIBLE WITHOUT A KNOWLEDGE OF  
THE GOSPEL?

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CAN men who are without the knowledge of the gospel, and are out of the reach of such knowledge, be saved?

To this question there is one answer in which evangelical believers, in this country at least, have been so nearly agreed that to many of them it has never been a question at all. They hold that as Christ is the only Saviour of lost men, and as the gospel promise of salvation is to such as believe, and to such only, those to whom Christ is not made known are beyond the reach of his redemption. This belief is to many the chief motive for the foreign missionary work. But there has never been absolute unanimity. Cowper wrote, nearly a hundred years ago, and the sentiment has doubtless found an echo in many hearts:

“Is virtue, then, unless of Christian growth,  
Mere fallacy, or foolishness, or both?  
Ten thousand sages lost in endless woe  
For ignorance of what they could not know?  
The speech betrays at once the bigot's tongue.  
Charge not a God with such outrageous wrong!  
Truly, not I. — The little light men have,  
My creed persuades me, well employed, may save;  
While he that scorns the noonday beam perverse,  
Shall find the blessing unimproved, a curse,  
Let heathen worthies, whose exalted mind  
Left sensuality and dross behind,  
Possess, for me, their undisputed lot,  
And take unenvied the reward they sought;  
But still in virtue of a Saviour's plea,  
Not blind by choice, but destined not to see.  
Their fortitude and wisdom were a flame  
Celestial, though they knew not whence they came,

Derived from the same source of light and grace  
That guides the Christian in his swifter race ;  
Their judge was conscience, and her rule their law ;  
That rule pursued with reverence and with awe,  
Led them, however faltering, faint, and slow,  
From what they knew to what they wished to know."

Of late years, judging by various intimations in the religious literature of England, both within and without the established church, belief in the salvation of the heathen, or at least doubt of their hopeless condemnation, has become considerably prevalent. But if any writer has attempted to lay the foundation for such belief in an interpretation of Scripture, his work has not come under our notice. Appeal is more commonly made to our conceptions of the divine equity and to our emotions of human compassion. We are, in effect, asked to believe that the heathen are not in danger of the wrath to come, because it is so painful to believe otherwise. But this is an untenable position for those to hold who profess belief in the inspiration, the authority, and the sufficiency of Scripture. If the sacred writers had nothing to say on the subject, we might plausibly conclude that their silence left room for hope. But the case is otherwise ; both in the Old Testament and the New there is more or less reference to the heathen and to the judgment of God concerning them. Our concern is to interrogate the Scriptures.

It may be proper, however, before proceeding with that investigation, to notice in passing an opinion once held by a school of theologians, — that men born and instructed in different religions will be judged by their faithfulness to their respective standards of duty ; e.g. that a Hindu faithful to the Brahminical doctrines and rites, a Buddhist who lives in a hearty observance of the precepts of Sak-ya-muni, a Mohammedan who reveres Allah and his prophet, and the Christian who believes and follows Christ, are alike acceptable to God. This opinion is founded on the extraordinary supposition, that devotees of all nations and all religions worship the same God under different names — according to Pope's "Universal Prayer":

"Father of all, in every age,  
In every clime, adored  
By saint, by savage, or by sage,  
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord."

This doctrine, it is unnecessary to say, is condemned by the Scriptures throughout. The Old Testament utters burning denunciations against the idolatry of the heathen, and the New Testament pronounces equally explicit condemnation of it. "The things which the Gentiles sacrifice," says Paul, "they sacrifice to demons, and not to God":<sup>1</sup> not meaning, as ancient interpreters and some moderns have seemed to think, that the gods of the heathen were real persons, lost spirits, for we are told by the same apostle, in the same epistle,<sup>2</sup> that an idol has no real existence. But the characters ascribed to them by their own worshippers were such as befitted fallen spirits. And we do not need his authority to settle such a question. It would be as absurd as it is irreverent to say that the worship of a Moloch, with his bloody rites, of an Astarte, an Aphrodite, or of cruel and licentious monsters imagined in other mythologies, is the worship of our God and Father. Pope himself has truly said that the deities represented by the objects of heathen worship were

"Gods partial, changeful, passionate, unjust,  
Whose attributes were rage, revenge, or lust."

To dignify the service of such embodiments of depravity with the name of "natural piety" is a vain attempt to "put darkness for light."<sup>3</sup>

In entering upon our proposed inquiry, it is desirable at the outset to define it. It is not a question whether the heathen are morally responsible, or are not rather to be classed with infants and idiots. There was nothing infantile in the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. x. 20.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. viii. 4.

<sup>3</sup> It may indeed be conceded that if a heathen did conceive of the Deity, though under the name of Zeus, as the Supreme Being, with attributes worthy of the Creator, the name under which he revered him would be of no consequence. But the adoration of an imaginary being conceived as having a malevolent or impure character is what is condemned as "changing the glory of the incorruptible God into an image like the corruptible man, and to beasts," etc.

intellectual character of Plato or of Cicero, of Julius Caesar or of Marcus Aurelius. The civilization of Greece, of India, or of China does not appear likely to have been evolved from the brains of idiots. The heathen do evil because they prefer evil to good, not because they do not know the difference between them. On the contrary, they recognize moral duty and "show the work of the law written upon their hearts." They have all the faculties necessary to constitute them moral and responsible agents, and they have at times given evidence of having reflected to very good purpose on questions of moral duty. Some professedly Christian moralists might to their great advantage have taken lessons in ethics from Aristotle and Cicero.

Nor is it a question whether, having thus complete moral responsibility, the heathen are condemned by the moral law. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." All men, whether Jews or Gentiles, are alike "under sin."

Nor yet is it a question whether the heathen are condemned by so much of the moral law as their consciences recognize. Many things are obscure, no doubt, to their minds which are clear and evident to such as live under the light of revealed religion. But, trying them by that knowledge of moral duty which they possess, they are still sinners. They do not pretend that they do as well as they know how. They cannot be excused on the ground that they live up to their imperfect standard of obligation. They do evil not only in the sight of the Lord, but in their own sight. They are condemned by their own consciences, imperfectly enlightened as their consciences are.

The heathen are degraded, but not below moral accountability; they are ignorant, as compared with Christians, but their knowledge is sufficient to convict them of guilt. The law of God as revealed in his word and the moral consciousness of the heathen themselves agree in pronouncing their condemnation. "As many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law; and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom. ii. 12.

From this state of condemnation in which all men are involved, there is no escape but through the saving grace of God. That grace is mediated through Christ, through whom alone peace with God is attainable. It is ministered to us through the gospel, and this, we have reason to believe, is the ordinary means through which grace is communicated to men. But to multitudes of mankind the gospel is not and never has been preached. Is there any way of salvation for men in that unhappy condition? In other words, Is the grace mediated by Christ ministered to any persons in any other way than through faith in the gospel?

To the question thus generally stated, we think, an affirmative answer is given by all; for, otherwise, we must believe in the damnation of all who die in infancy. Yet infants are not supposed to be saved because morally pure. There is no specimen on earth of immaculate human nature. They are supposed, therefore, to be saved through Christ, but not by believing on Christ, an act of which they are incapable. That is to say, in the terms of our question, grace is ministered to them otherwise than through faith in the gospel. The only alternative to this conclusion would seem to be the supposition of a probation and a hearing of the gospel in another world, — a supposition so nearly destitute of even apparent support in the testimony of Scripture as to call for no consideration in a biblical inquiry. We therefore conclude that, if such as die in infancy are the objects of renewing grace, the grace works effectually in some manner independently of faith in the gospel.

The heathen, it has been already admitted, are not to be classed with infants in respect to moral responsibility, or the want of it. In one respect, however, both stand upon a common footing; neither is capable of exercising faith in Christ, — not infants, because the capacity for knowing Christ has not been developed, — not the heathen, because Christ has not been made known to them. “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom. x. 14.

But if infants were the only example that could be adduced of a class of persons who must without doubt be supposed to receive salvation in another way than through faith in Christ, it must be admitted that an argument to the same conclusion in the case of adult heathen would be too precarious to be trusted. Let us then inquire whether there is no scriptural warrant for the application of the principle to others.

We are given to understand in the New Testament that righteous men who lived before the advent of Christ are of the same household of faith with believers in Christ. They were justified by faith on essentially the same principle upon which we are.<sup>1</sup> Christ died for them as truly as for those who have lived since his advent.<sup>2</sup> His death was, in the counsel of God, the ground upon which salvation was conditioned in every age of the world, from the first promise in Eden to the end. But this faith of the saints of the ages before Christ, how far did it look forward, and what amount of truth did it embrace? The seed of the woman, that should bruise the serpent's head<sup>3</sup>—the seed of Abraham, in whom all the families of the earth should be blessed<sup>4</sup>—the Prophet, like unto Moses<sup>5</sup>—the seed of David who should reign forever<sup>6</sup>—the mysterious sufferer whose agonies and shame and consequent triumph David was inspired to utter as if they had been his own<sup>7</sup>—the King ruling in righteousness and the suffering servant of Jehovah in the prophecy of Isaiah<sup>8</sup>—these and the like prophetic representations seen in the light of the New Testament are recognized as predictions of Christ. But did those who uttered and those who heard or read these prophecies gain from them any clear conception of the person and work of Christ, of his incarnation, his obedience unto death, his resurrection and ascension, his intercession and dominion? There is no direct evidence that they did or could have done so. We are expressly taught, on the contrary, that unto the prophets "it was revealed that not unto themselves but unto us they did minister."<sup>9</sup> It is certain

<sup>1</sup> Gal. iii. 6, 7.<sup>2</sup> Heb. ix. 15.<sup>3</sup> Gen. iii. 15.<sup>4</sup> Gen. xii. 3; Gal. iii. 8.<sup>5</sup> Deut. xviii. 15; Acts iii. 22.<sup>6</sup> 1 Chron. xvii. 11, 12.<sup>7</sup> Ps. xxii.<sup>8</sup> Isa. xxxii., liii.<sup>9</sup> 1 Pet. i. 12.

that the apostles, with the Scriptures in their hands and with the positive instructions of Jesus to aid their apprehension of the truth, failed utterly to grasp it. They saw the meaning of prophecies only as the prophecies were fulfilled. Is there any reason to suppose that righteous men generally in the ages past had had a prevision of the gospel history? Our Saviour clearly intimated the contrary: "Verily, I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them, and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them."<sup>1</sup>

Faith in Christ — in his life, death, resurrection, and mediation — we must conclude, was not to the ancient people of God the subjective condition of salvation. Doubtless, in the mind of God, the purposed redemption was the ground of pardon. But those who then received forgiveness could have known nothing of this. They believed whatever God was pleased to make known to them, and sought to conform their life to it, and this faith was counted unto them for righteousness. They were assured of the clemency of God and of his readiness to forgive the penitent. Though unable to "stand" before him, should he "mark iniquities," they knew that with him there was forgiveness and "plenteous redemption," sufficient to "save Israel from all his iniquities."<sup>2</sup> And there was before them the promise of a great deliverer, human, yet doing superhuman things. Of his being and of his acts and sufferings, they could have had no just conception. That they were strangers to the idea of salvation through the sacrifice of Christ and to the peace which is shed abroad in the soul through faith in his atonement is intimated in that passage of the Epistle to the Hebrews<sup>3</sup> which contrasts the perfectness and efficacy of that great sacrifice with the offerings under the law, which "could not take away sin," nor "make the comers thereto perfect in respect to the conscience."

Not alone, then, to infants dying in infancy, but also to men who lived before our Lord's advent, the grace of God

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xiii. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. cxxx.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter ix. and x. 1-23.

was ministered otherwise than through faith in the gospel. Their faith saved them on the same principle upon which our faith saves us, but our faith contemplates facts and truths — the facts and truths specifically styled “the gospel” — of which they had no perception, and from which they derived no conscious spiritual benefit.

But these, it will be said, had divine revelation. The promises and prophecies, the types and shadows of the earlier dispensation were means provided by God expressly to engage and to educate their faith; whereas the heathen were and are without any such divine communication. There is force in this distinction, but it is easy to exaggerate its importance in our conception of the facts. To the Jews alone God gave in old time a written revelation and an institutional religion. But shall we say that they and their patriarchal ancestors were for four thousand years the exclusive possessors of the revealed knowledge of God? This has been said, and it is a very common version of the biblical history. “To see,” says John Foster, “a nature created in purity, qualified for perfect and endless felicity, but ruined at the very origin by a disaster devolving fatally on all the race, — to see it in an early age of the world estranged from truth, from the love and fear of its Creator, from that, therefore, without which existence is a thing to be deplored, — abandoned to all evil till swept away by a deluge, — the renovated race revolting into idolatry and iniquity, and spreading downward through ages in darkness, wickedness, and misery, — *no Divine dispensation to enlighten and reclaim it, except for one small section,*” etc.<sup>1</sup> President Hopkins thus puts it: “We see it [revealed religion] pursuing *its solitary and threadlike way through the Patriarchal and Jewish dispensations.*”<sup>2</sup> But it seems to us that an attentive examination of the Old Testament will show us something more than that slender line of light, barely visible amid surrounding darkness. The question of the extent to which the human race

<sup>1</sup> Letters to Dr. Harris.

<sup>2</sup> Miscellaneous Essays and Discourses, p. 271. The italics in these quotations are our own.



has enjoyed the benefits of revelation scarcely belongs to our subject, but stands in a sufficiently near relation to it to justify a brief digression.

From the promise in Eden to the larger promise received by Abraham, the world was not destitute of the knowledge of God, nor without a succession of his worshippers. The primeval revelation was doubtless handed down by tradition, enlarged and enforced by prophecies, as of Enoch,<sup>1</sup> and preaching, as of Noah,<sup>2</sup> and by such impressive events as the translation of Enoch, the deluge, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The original revelation, thus augmented from time to time in volume, and made increasingly clear, was conveyed by tradition down to the time of Moses, in connection with whose history we first find a written revelation of the will of God. But was the posterity of Shem, through Abraham, the only line by which the revelation could have been transmitted? A curse was pronounced upon Canaan, but the exegesis which extends the curse to Ham and all his posterity is mainly a sectional exegesis, reference to which is perhaps barred by the statute of limitations. It is not to be assumed as beyond doubt that Ham was reprobate. Japhet, for aught that appears, was a pious man — he was the fellow of Shem in filial piety, at any rate — and his memory has a claim for charitable judgment. Through him, doubtless, the primeval revelation was handed down to posterity. We are told in the New Testament that the knowledge of God was withdrawn from the heathen because they did not like to retain it.<sup>3</sup> In all probability, then, that knowledge faded out by a gradual process. Generations may have passed before the worship of God was supplanted by that of idols. How long true piety survived in the Gentile world we have no means of knowing. Melchizedek, priest and king, seems to have held those relations to a people or tribe, and he was a “priest of the most high God.”<sup>4</sup> The glimpse we get of Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in connection with the history of Abraham,<sup>5</sup> shows him praying to God — evidently

<sup>1</sup> Jude 14 sq. <sup>2</sup> 2 Pet. ii. 5. <sup>3</sup> Rom. i. 18-29. <sup>4</sup> Gen. xiv. 18. <sup>5</sup> Gen. xx. 4.

the God of Abraham — and speaking of himself and people as “a righteous nation.” We do not know the exact location of the land of Uz or the date of the life of Job. The doubt that hangs over the authorship and date of the *book* of Job need not debar the conclusion, drawn from its contents, that the patriarch whose trials are described in it flourished before the ordinary duration of the life of man had been reduced to threescore and ten years ; and that he lived somewhere to the east of Palestine, and could not have been a Jew. But he is described as an eminent servant of God. His friends also, greatly as they misjudged him, are represented as having been worshippers of God and as having uttered some excellent religious sentiments. Their general views of the divine perfections and of human character and duty are sound. Eliphaz the Temanite has the honor of being quoted by the apostle Paul, with the formula, “It is written.”<sup>1</sup>

Remembering now that the Bible does not profess to be a history of the world, but only of the preparation for Christianity, of its institution and first promulgation, and that these few references to persons and events aside from the direct course of the history are incidental to its main purpose, may we not reasonably conclude that other persons and events, of the same general character, found place in the world and a record in the book of remembrance to be disclosed in the last day ? Is it forbidden us in our thoughts to lighten thus the gloom of secular history ?

It was the common belief of the Jews, in the time of our Lord, that the selecting of their nation as the depositary of the written word and ritual worship of God was meant to confer on them an exclusive title to the divine favor. But this belief finds no countenance in the Scriptures. On the contrary, the privileges of the chosen people were given in trust for the whole world. Provision was accordingly made for extending the benefit to Gentiles. Their law insists on their duty to the stranger dwelling among them.<sup>2</sup> And not to

<sup>1</sup> Job v. 13 ; cf. 1 Cor. iii. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ex. xx. 10 ; xxii. 21 ; xxiii. 9 ; Lev. xix. 33, 34 ; xxii. 18 ; xxv. 6, al. sæp.

those only who became inhabitants of the Holy Land, but to all nations, the knowledge and worship of God were to be open. In several psalms we find exhortations to declare his glory among the heathen,<sup>1</sup> and others addressed directly to Gentiles, calling upon all nations to praise him.<sup>2</sup> It is commonly held, we believe, that these passages refer to the times of the gospel and predict the calling and conversion of the Gentiles; and this application of them is authorized by the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> But that we are not at liberty to limit them to that prophetic reference may be fairly inferred from the language of Solomon, in his prayer at the dedication of the temple: "Moreover, concerning a stranger that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name's sake; (for they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched-out arm;) when he shall come and pray toward this house: hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee as do thy people Israel." We are entitled, therefore, to receive not exclusively as prophecy the triumphal exclamation of the psalmist: "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined."<sup>4</sup> How this effect was enhanced by the wide and permanent dispersion of the Jews in other countries need not be dwelt upon.

In one instance, at least, a prophet was sent to a heathen people, and some of them were converted. "Men of Ninevah," said our Lord, "shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah."<sup>5</sup> They repented (*μετενόησαν*), a term that in the New Testament is used almost invariably to describe repentance unto life. The effect produced on Nebuchadnezzar and Darius in connection with the prophetic ministry of Daniel, and the proclamation by them of the name and the mighty works of God, together with such incidents as the conversion of Naaman, are confirmations of the truth

<sup>1</sup> Ps. lxxvii., lxxii., xcvi., etc.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. c., cxvii., etc.

<sup>3</sup> Rom. xv. 9-11.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings viii. 41-43; Ps. l. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. xii. 41.

that God was not the God of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.<sup>1</sup>

There were Gentiles, however, to whom the prophetic declaration of the will of God, we have reason to believe, was never made. Were they therefore out of the reach of divine mercy? Paul, in his address to the Athenians, intimates the contrary: "God, who made the world and all things that are in it, . . . . made of one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation: that they should seek God, if haply they might grope after him, and find him."<sup>2</sup> It was not intended that they should grope after him in vain, in a fruitless, baffled search; but the purpose of God was such, the divine arrangement of the world was such, as to make it possible for the heathen to *find* him. To find God, in the meaning of Scripture, is to gain a saving knowledge of him.<sup>3</sup> The heathen were in darkness, but they were not out of the reach of salvation.

The language of Peter to Cornelius,<sup>4</sup> "God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness is accepted by him," states the same principle. Cornelius was probably not a proselyte, as in that case Peter would have had no scruple about going to him. He had no knowledge of the gospel, though he had heard something concerning the ministry of Christ. But he was a devout and an accepted worshipper, and Peter concludes that every one in every nation is accepted who in like manner fears God, and works righteousness. It is sometimes argued that Cornelius, before he heard the gospel from Peter, was not in a state of salvation. This is thought to be supported by Peter's version<sup>5</sup> of the angel's message to Cornelius: "Send to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; who shall tell thee words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved." But this inference is not certain.

<sup>1</sup> Rom. iv. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Acts xvii. 24-27.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Isa. lv. 6; Jer. xxix. 13; Matt. vii. 7; John vii. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Acts x. 34, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Acts xi. 14.

Cornelius, we may suppose, though he was accepted by God, had no sufficient witness of it in his own breast. He needed the assurance which was given him by the angel that his prayers were heard. But he received something better,—a consciousness of salvation through the revelation of Jesus Christ. Before the coming of Christ and the mission of the Holy Spirit to testify of him,<sup>1</sup> there is reason to believe that the people of God suffered often and deeply from an uncertainty of their salvation. As intimated in a passage before cited, the sacrifices they offered could not make them perfect as pertaining to the conscience, could not possibly take away sin. In express contrast with them Christians are said to have boldness of access to God, and are invited to draw near with full assurance of faith, having their hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience. The ancient believers looked for, but received not, the promise, God having provided some better thing for us.<sup>2</sup> Hence our Lord is said to have come to deliver them who through fear of death were all their life-time subject unto bondage.<sup>3</sup> For Cornelius to be privileged to come out from such dim and uncertain light and from the bondage of fear, and to be permitted with unveiled face to behold the glory of the Lord,<sup>4</sup> might well be called salvation. He was already essentially saved, for the favor and mercy of God were his. But he was not consciously saved. In that respect we are saved by hope, and that he might hope it was necessary that he should hear the gospel.

To the question, then, Can the grace mediated by Christ be ministered to any persons in any other way than through faith in the gospel? we find an affirmative answer, first, in the case of infants dying in infancy; and secondly, in the case of such—if there be such—as, having not the light of revelation, notwithstanding their privation seek God, grope after him, and, finding him, fear him, and work righteousness. He that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened, whether the seeker have ever heard of the promise or not.

<sup>1</sup> John xv. 26

<sup>2</sup> Heb. ii. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. ix. 9; x. 1-4, 19-22; xi. 40.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor. iii. 18.

It is not asserted, it will be observed, that the possibility of salvation being attained under conditions such as have been supposed has ever been realized. To say that heathens ignorant of the gospel may be saved is one thing; to say that any have in fact been saved without a knowledge of the gospel is another thing. On the question of fact, or rather of probability, something shall be presently said. But if it be allowed to be only a bare, abstract possibility, it is not of slight consequence. Those who deny, or are unable to see, the possibility believe, of course, not only that the many generations of the heathen that have lived on the earth have gone in unbroken succession to eternal death, but that this result has been made necessary, in respect to most of them, by the providential ordering of the conditions of their earthly life. Such persons do not conceal from themselves that this is a mournful, a frightful view of human history, and they confess that the reasons for such an administration of the government of this world are hidden from them. The whole matter is left by them to the sovereignty of God, and it may be suspected that, if the truth were known, very many would be obliged to say, as a Christian friend not long ago said to us, that it is a subject they cannot bear to think about. "I hope," writes John Foster to Dr. Harris, "indeed may assume, that you are of a cheerful temperament; but are you not sometimes invaded by the darkest visions and reflections while casting your view over the scene of human existence from the beginning to this hour? To me it appears a most mysteriously awful economy, overspread by a lurid and dreadful shade." To be permitted to believe that the lost had opportunity to be saved relieves our conception of the divine government from a dreadful pressure. It is of no small importance to have a form of doctrine which we can believe thoroughly, and teach without misgiving.

It may be objected to our conclusion that all true fear and love of God, all real repentance and right living, are the fruit of regeneration, and that the Holy Spirit regenerates "with the word of truth."<sup>1</sup> But by "the word" cannot be meant

<sup>1</sup> James i. 18.

exclusively the Bible, for how, then, could the patriarchs who lived before the Bible was written, have been regenerated? The believers to whom the Epistles were written, whose faith was before the writing of a single gospel, believed a "word" no pen had recorded. We do not know the extent nor all the conditions of the Spirit's activity. "The Son quickeneth whom he will."<sup>1</sup> The work of the Spirit is wrought in connection with the knowledge of divine truth. But a man destitute of revelation is not in entire spiritual darkness. He has, first, his own moral nature, through the action of which he becomes conscious of the distinction between good and evil, and of duty. He has the capacity of so cultivating his moral faculty as to make its decisions continually clearer and his sense of obligation more constraining. He has evidence in his own constitution and in the outward world of the being of God, and the spontaneous judgment of men has connected with this belief a consciousness of responsibility to God. Men everywhere and always have had the belief in some form that their actions would be followed by retribution. This conviction is strengthened by the providential government of the world. God has so presided over the course of events as to impress the belief that wickedness, however concealed, will be sooner or later discovered and punished. He has not left himself without witness. His power and divinity are revealed in the works of his hands; his justice speaks in the voice of the soul to itself, and is solemnly confirmed by the sanctions of his providence, in the experience of individuals and in the history of the race. And as a matter of fact men generally confess themselves to be sinners. The conviction of sin is a call to repentance, and the soul that repents will assuredly be saved. From a soul that sincerely seeks him God will not hide himself.

It may still be urged that our conclusion, however plausibly drawn from the passages of Scripture referred to, does after all contradict an express declaration of God's word.

<sup>1</sup> John v. 21.

“For whosoever,” says Paul, quoting the prophet Joel, “shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?”<sup>1</sup> Here, it has been said, the apostle (1) conditions salvation on “calling upon the name of the Lord,” (2) conditions “calling” on faith, and (3) conditions faith on hearing. Thus where the word of salvation is not heard salvation is not attainable. But we do not understand this passage to express a conclusion of the apostle. It is the language of a supposed objector, which Paul proceeds to answer: “But I say, Have they not heard? Yes, verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Those to whom the good news of Christ had not been preached had nevertheless heard the testimony of God’s works. To them the heavens had declared his glory, the firmament had shown his handiwork; day unto day had uttered speech, and night unto night had shown knowledge—knowledge that had gone to “the ends of the world.”

Whether as matter of fact men have ever been brought to repentance under the light of natural religion alone it is of course impossible that we should know. Whenever we come sufficiently into communication with them to know their spiritual state, we become able to impart to them the gospel, and the only experience with which we become acquainted will be that of persons to whom the gospel is known. If ever one of our race, destitute of the light of revelation, exercised repentance unto life, we shall not know it until the fact is disclosed in the day of judgment. If such persons exist we owe no duty to them, and the question of their existence or non-existence has and can have no effect on the sum of our duty to make it less or more. We are debtors to the world of mankind, and none the less so because some who are out of our reach may be believed to be not out of the reach of God’s saving mercy.

But while certainty on this matter is for the present unat-

<sup>1</sup> Rom. x. 13, 14; Joel ii. 32 (Sept.).

<sup>2</sup> Rom. x. 18; Ps. xix. 4 (Sept.).



tainable by us, there are facts which have some value in support of the probability that such instances have occurred. Missionaries frequently assert that there are no such facts. The virtuous and virtue-loving heathen, they say, does not exist. They sometimes use language that seems to us unjustifiably strong. A member of the American Baptist mission in China in a late newspaper publication declares that the whole adult population of China—say three hundred millions—are liars. This, with all respect be it spoken, is not testimony, for it transcends his possible knowledge. We have often met the assertion that the language of Paul in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans (vs. 22-32) is a faithful description of the heathen under the most favorable circumstances. But we cannot suppose that the apostle meant to give that appalling representation as true of all or even of the average heathen. It is rather a statement of some of the extreme results of paganism, the state of things to which there is a steady and accelerating tendency under every form of heathen society. But if we could conceive of a people a majority of whom answered that extreme description we could not conceive the possibility of the survival of civilization, under such conditions, for the life-time of a generation.

But when our missionary brethren pass from general assertions to particular facts, among the facts they communicate are some that lend support to a more favorable inference. Most of us have probably heard, for it used to be one of the stock pulpit anecdotes, the story of a Hindu who was found by a missionary making a painful pilgrimage, with nails in his shoes inflicting torture at every step, who said he was seeking relief from his sense of sin. The missionary disclosed to him the truth concerning the only sacrifice for sin, upon which the man threw away his shoes, exclaiming, "This is what I want!" and went on his way rejoicing. But as we are not able to give authority for the incident we will merely treat it as a case supposed, and remark that it illustrates what has been suggested as a possible state of mind in one wanting the knowledge of revealed religion.

A case better authenticated is that of the reigning king of Burmah at the time of Dr. Judson's first residence at Rangoon. He came to doubt the truth of Buddhism. The priests began to whisper that he was a *paramat* (infidel). At length, he declared his doubts and inquired if there was not some other and better religion. He conversed with Brahmins, Roman Catholics, and Parsees, and concluded, with some show of reason certainly, that the system of neither was any improvement upon Buddhism. (It is related that a French priest once complained that the devil had invented Buddhism as a parody upon the Catholic faith and worship.) The king was unsatisfied, and asked if there was no other religion. He was informed that the English had something different. An Englishman was sought and found. But he was unhappily one whose Christianity was only nominal, and who had so nearly forgotten all he ever knew of the Bible that he could only, with some prompting by a Portuguese priest, repeat the ten commandments. The king felt compelled to fall back upon Buddhism. But he was a *strict* Buddhist, drove the priests from the court to their monasteries, and enjoined upon them a life conformed to their self-denying professions. Dr. Judson, while these things were going on, was painfully and tentatively working his way among the rudiments of the Burmese language. The facts were communicated to him, years afterwards, by a fellow prisoner in the dungeon at Ava.

Now we are far from presuming that this king sought and found God — that he was penitent — that he was saved. We know not and need not conjecture his spiritual state. But he is an example of the restlessness of the heathen mind and of the irrepressible reaching out after something truer and better that must have been experienced by many who grope in spiritual darkness, a darkness that is felt.

Similar, but more fully known, and with a happier result, was the experience of Myat Kyau, the first Talaing — or Peguan — preacher of the gospel, who died at Maulmain in 1852, at the age of seventy-six. Being acquainted as well

with the Karen as with the Burmese language, he was the medium of communication between the Rev. Dr. Wade and the Karens, at the beginning of the work among that people, and he assisted Dr. Wade in reducing the Karen language to writing and in translating the Scriptures. The sermon preached by Dr. Wade on occasion of his death, extracts from which were published in the "Missionary Magazine,"<sup>1</sup> embodied a narrative of thrilling interest; the principal facts we will give in the language of the sermon slightly condensed:

"By birth he was a Buddhist; but as he and his family were persons of rank among their countrymen, he had, of course, superior advantages of education and also of being well acquainted with the claims of Buddhism. His elder brother, at the time of the first Burmese war with the English, was governor of Shwaygyeen under the Burmese government. And he himself held at the same time the office of collector among the Karens of Shwaygyeen district.

"Having an inquiring and thoughtful turn of mind, Myat Kyau entertained strong suspicions that the religion of his ancestors was a baseless fabric. Not unlikely, his acquaintance with the Karens and their traditions about an eternal God who created all things, and who is not subject, like the gods of Buddhism, to change, — to sickness, old age, death, and annihilation — may have contributed to shake his confidence in the religion of his ancestors. Be that as it may, he was dissatisfied with the alleged proofs of its truth, and sought for a creed on which he might more safely trust the interests of his undying soul . . . .; and though the darkness of heathenism still lowered, heavy and cheerless, over every point of his moral and intellectual horizon, he began to grope this way and that, if haply he might find some path that would lead him to truth and light. . . . . He first became a disciple of a Brahmin ascetic, and for some two or three years practised various austerities. But, convinced by his conscience that he was still a man and, from what he saw,

<sup>1</sup> September, 1854.

that his gooroo was also a man, and not only a man, but a degraded, brutish man, he fled from him with disgust and returned to his friends.<sup>1</sup>

“ But he could not rest. The principles of natural religion had too strongly impressed his reflecting mind. ‘ There must be somewhere a revealed religion,’ he said; ‘ I will inquire of the Mohammedans.’ He had not then seen a Christian teacher, nor heard the name of Christ. He went to a mosque and there heard of one God and ‘ Mohammed his prophet.’ The idea of one eternal, uncreated, unchangeable, omniscient Being, the Creator of all things, struck his mind with great force. . . . . He listened eagerly to the Koran. He hoped to find in it a system of doctrines on which he could securely rely, and a system of morals by the observance of which he could obtain the divine favor. But he was disappointed. It was but a single ray of light that the Koran reflected, — ‘ There is one God.’ He left the mosque dissatisfied, yet resolved to inquire further after a revelation of this Eternal Being.

“ He next went a few times to a Roman Catholic place of worship. There he obtained new evidences of the existence of an eternal God, and heard the name of Christ as a Saviour; but he was directed to pray to and worship ‘ the Virgin Mary, Mother of God,’ and Peter and the other apostles, and an endless succession of saints. This seemed to him but another variety of heathenism. The worship of the Virgin was particularly offensive. ‘ If I must worship a human being as God,’ he said, ‘ I would rather worship Gotama, a man, than this woman. And as for Roman images, I cannot see that they have any more claim to divine honors than Burman images.’

“ For a long time after this, Myat Kyau was in a depressed state, nearly despairing of ever finding that which his soul longed for. Meanwhile, the results of the war of 1824–27

<sup>1</sup> We cannot forbear remarking that this narrative justifies our hope that the description in Romans i. 24–32, is not applicable to *all* the heathen, without exception.

brought him and his friends to Maulmain. Similar causes had directed thither Messrs. Judson and Wade, who had [each] a preaching zayat at what were then the northern and southern extremities of the new city. Myat Kyau resided in the vicinity of Dr. Judson's zayat. He entered it, and soon became an interesting inquirer. The previous workings of his mind had prepared it to receive readily a deep and permanent impression of the seal of truth. He drank in the gospel as a thirsty man water. He had long thirsted;—having now found the water of life, he seemed unwilling that the cup should be removed from his lips, even for a moment. Day after day he would tarry in the zayat from morning till night. One prejudice after another gave way; cloud after cloud broke from his horizon; the Day-star arose; he felt like a new creature in a new world. The Holy Spirit had touched his soul with his quickening influences. He needed no set arguments of philosophy or logic to prove the truths of Christianity; he *saw* them, he *felt* them."

The case of this inquirer remarkably corresponds in reality to what has been argued as possible, with only this difference,—that the seeking, which was begun in the absence of gospel light, ended in full discovery through the coming of that light. But if God in his providence had ordered that he should die in darkness, is it forbidden us to believe that though without the *hope* of salvation he might yet have found that he had the *substance* of the hope? When Cowper had passed his later years in despair of the divine mercy, and died under the cloud, a biographer<sup>1</sup> says that his countenance after death wore an expression of "holy surprise." Perhaps we may hope that others who in death were hopeless have—as we hope Cowper did—awaked with "holy surprise" in the light of the world to come. Suppose a man in a state of mind that would lead him to receive Christ, if Christ were made known to him, would he not, within the veil, joyously recognize the Redeemer as the Lord whom he had been seeking?

<sup>1</sup> His kinsman, Dr. John Johnson, quoted by Southey.

The facts cited, it may be needful to repeat, are not offered as evidence that heathen *have been saved* without the knowledge of Christ, but only that what the apostle Paul told the Athenians God had provided for—that the heathen “should seek God, if haply they might feel after him”—has in some instances come to pass; and with the possibility, also included in his revealed purpose, that, thus seeking, thus groping, they might “find him.” The realizing of that possibility, if it has taken place, is at present beyond the sphere of human intelligence, but we have evidence of the taking place of some of the facts which, it is reasonable to suppose, would occur in connection with such seeking.

The example just considered of serious inquiry by a heathen and its happy result forcibly suggests that a person who under the light of natural religion alone is brought to repentance, should he come to know the gospel, would undoubtedly embrace it. He who rejects Christ is presumably not fearing God. He who lives in impenitence and sin may have intellectual curiosity on religious subjects, but as he is not working righteousness is evidently not accepted of God. But there may be an apparent rejection of Christ which does not involve the sin of unbelief. When Myat Kyau heard the doctrines of the incarnation and redemption from the lips of a Roman Catholic priest his heart was moved; but when the priest set forth as a part of Christianity the superstitions and traditions of the papacy these were justly offensive to his moral sense, and he was not to be blamed for his inability to decompose the mixture, and to separate the truth to which Rome witnesses from the falsehood with which she adulterates it. And not Roman Catholic missionaries only are liable to misrepresent the gospel. Those who preach it to the heathen cannot be too careful to keep close to its divine simplicity, and to make their utterance true to its spirit as well as to its letter.

Although the possibility we have contemplated of repentance through faith in a God who is groped for in the dark cannot be ascertained as a fact in our present state of being,

enough is known to compel the belief that if any adult heathen are thus saved the number is at best very small. They are exceptions,—most probably rare exceptions. Even in Christian lands a lamentably large number out of all that live and die live without God and die without hope. How much more true must this be of those whose religion itself too often ministers to sin. All that we know of the moral state of pagans confirms the implication of the apostle of the Gentiles that as a body they are notorious sinners.<sup>1</sup>

It is very evident, therefore, that the conclusions we have reached do not diminish the weight of obligation that rests on us to give the gospel to the heathen, or weaken the motives which enforce that obligation. The mass of the heathen are perishing. The exceptions, if any exist, are very few. We know that they are lost in sin. We know that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth. We have our Lord's command to go with this gospel into all the world, with the promise of his presence unto the end,—a promise that has been gloriously verified in our own day by the conversion of thousands in heathen lands, and by the evidence the converts have given of the transforming might of the gospel they believed. The danger to the missionary spirit arises not from any definite conclusion on this subject that can be scripturally verified, but from vague hopes not tested by Scripture. There are many, it is likely, who say to themselves that it is not certain the heathen are lost; somehow, they do not know nor conceive how, but somehow their final perdition will be averted. It is such undefined and unverified hopes that make men doubt whether, after all, the unevangelized heathen are so very much worse off for being unevangelized. Let this conjectural hope be brought to the test of God's word; let it be seen that, on the most charitable judgment, on the most favorable estimate of probabilities, only here and there one out of myriads (of adults) can be supposed to be saved without a knowledge of Christ; and it would seem that in

<sup>1</sup> Gal. ii. 15; Eph. ii. 8.

the mind of any thoughtful person the conviction would be strengthened that we are verily debtors to the heathen. A faint gleam of light makes the surrounding darkness deeper and more sensibly felt.

Whether the view of the subject that has been presented, if it were accepted by our missionary brethren, would modify in any way the spirit and effect of their teaching is a question on which it would be presumptuous in us to offer an opinion. We do not know enough of missionary preaching to criticise it, nor enough of the people to whom they preach to judge of its adaptation. Motley tells the story of the Frisian chief Radbod, who was conquered, and consented to receive baptism. He "had already immersed one of his royal legs in the baptismal font, when a thought struck him. 'Where are my dead forefathers at present?' he said, turning suddenly to the bishop. 'In hell, with all other unbelievers,' was the imprudent answer. 'Mighty well,' replied Radbod, removing his leg, 'then will I rather feast with my ancestors in the halls of Woden.'" There may not have been much to choose between the nominal Christianity he had intended to profess and the heathenism he was going to renounce. But a too confident and sweeping dogmatism may do harm in cases more critical than this. It is well to refrain from adding unnecessarily to "the offence of the cross."