

THE SADDUCEES' QUESTION.

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OUR Lord gave, it would seem, little explicit teaching about the life of the world to come. We may wish that He had said more, or, at least, that more had been recorded. But to Him, nevertheless, it is "a postulate of the moral order," to use a modern thinker's phrase, and it underlies all His teaching. He does not, however, enlarge upon it, or enter, willingly at least, into controversy about it. One reason may be that He regards it in foretaste and quality as a thing of "here and now." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven"—the whole sum, that is, of Divine privilege and blessing. This, in essence, they enjoy already, but in this present time the tale is never complete, the measure never permanently overflows, the board of life is often sadly chequered, and in the face of problems and mysteries we have to be content again and again to hear the Master say, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt come to know hereafter." Another reason may be that He did not want His disciples to be so curious about to-morrow as to forget the duties of to-day, or even to waste time in argument about a matter of which they could form no really true or perfectly adequate conception. Better for the training and growth of Christian men that they should "embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope" of immortality than have it as a thing proved and known—"a map correct of heaven"; better, too, far better for them to repose quietly on the certainty of future life than to be conversant with a hundred speculations on the "How" and "Where." For us, belief in immortality is fundamental: it is bound up with faith in the Risen Christ. In Him our "labour is not vain"—an assurance due, may we say, to Him alone. We may read Plato to our good, but it is He, after all, who has "lit up" life and immortality through the gospel. Provided that our hunger for immortality be a hunger for God—and it is no small proviso, for what we wish usually is the prolongation of to-day's more or less trivial enjoyments—no particular theory or mode of it is essential. The hope of heaven and of our personal share in it is necessary, we think, for the removal of doubts and fears, and the encouragement of weary hands, and the consolation of many a sad and sorrowing heart: but the "heaven" of some popular hymns is a place (it has been said) which the plain man does not believe to exist and which he would not want to go to if it did. Yet he may have a very stout and earnest faith in immortality all the same.

And now let us approach the question of the Sadducees. It was constructed with no little care and ingenuity by men who knew what they were about. For the Sadducee was not a dunce, but a man of some learning and critical faculty, though thoroughly

sceptical in attitude and outlook. In life he was worldly, and the frivolous and worldly spirit is always (we know) the real foe of faith. "Begin by being a better man," said Pascal to the dissolute youth who blamed loss of creed for remissness of life, "begin by being a better man, and you may come to believe in my creed." Compare with this a confession recently made, "My views of the after-life, my certainty of hope in the life to come, get paralysed if I do not pray regularly." Yes, probably that would be true of most of us. Theologically of course the Sadducee professed attachment to the law: the traditions, however, which had gathered about the law he entirely rejected. So it was that he repudiated any doctrine of resurrection, for he said that that only came in the traditions. All he had to comfort him was that prospect of a dreamy ghost-like existence in "sheol," or "hell" or "the pit," which is found in Homer and Vergil, and underlies a good deal of the Old Testament, and accounts for the melancholy and far from Christian feeling which pervades one or two even of the Psalms. "Shall Thy loving-kindness be shewed in the grave, or Thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall Thy wondrous works be known in the dark, and Thy righteousness in the land where all things are forgotten?" No, it was not a very cheerful prospect. Not that the Sadducee was as a consequence specially gloomy. He made the best of things, got all he could *now*, enjoyed it, and chanced the rest. There are many Sadducees.

But perhaps he was not altogether without excuse, and for this reason: there was something wrong with that doctrine of Resurrection and restoration which was held by not a few of his fellow-countrymen. For it implied a return from the land of ghosts and forgetfulness to a comfortable full-fed replica of this present life. "Blessed is he" (said they) "that shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God." "Eat bread": they meant it, not as our Lord meant His references to the consummation of the Kingdom under the figure of a banquet to be understood, namely, of spiritual joys, heavenly treasures, vision, contemplation, utter and noble self-surrender to the service of the Good and True and Beautiful, but in the most crudely literal and material sense.

Now at such a conception as that it was not difficult to poke fun. That of course was the object of the Sadducees on the present occasion—to make the doctrine look ridiculous, and to laugh it out of court. And, by their invention of this extreme case of a poor woman who was married seven times over, they must certainly have succeeded, had their Opponent only held this, the doctrine of the day. What they never anticipated was that He did not. The future life, to Him, was safe enough: what was wrong was their conception of it. "The life of the world to come" was not a mere return to the old life. In that case the woman might have been in perplexity, and the brothers landed in a pretty quarrel. As it was, the Sadducees' argument collapsed. "When they rise from the dead they are neither married nor given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven." Sex, the one thing that is of interest to many writers

nowadays, both serious and flippant, is gone altogether. The new life is not the old life, but a stage higher. Doubtless the old is (in a sense) carried up into it. Good earthly relationships—I am paraphrasing a sentence of von Hügel's—will continue substantially in heaven, in so far as they have become the essential material of our supernatural life here on earth, and are thus the substratum of what is to be perfectly and completely transfigured. Yes, probably that is true, just as our mortal frame is also a "substratum" of that which shall be. Only, we do not know precisely how much of the nature of man will be thus preserved, and it may be safer to keep simply to our Lord's word—"they are as angels in heaven." It is a great saying. But it warns us off strange and foolish doctrine rather than gives positive evidence, for about angelic life itself little has been revealed. But a few things we do know—they "stand before the Father's Face," they "excel in strength and hearken unto the voice of His word," they wait upon His bidding, they minister to needy souls, they rejoice when sinners return. Thus "personal" they must be: everything that exists that is higher than man, must, we feel, be at least that. God Himself is "personal," though the word (as some one has said) "reeks with limitation" in our common use of it, and He is illimitable: but the fact that there are well-nigh infinite steps on the way up from the humblest worm to the life of man, suggests similar gradations on the way up from men towards Deity itself. "They are as angels." Their life is "heavenly," no longer dependent on purely physical conditions, and marriage is therefore no longer necessary.

But as for cherubim and seraphim, so also for the saints out beyond, there will be (we feel sure) delight in beauty of every kind, and in obedience, and in discovery, and all the other "good things which God hath prepared for them that love Him": a feast that really enriches, a fellowship that really refines, a concert, not of all musical instruments, but of all minds and of all activities. Aye, and there will be service too: for in this magnificent and infinite universe with its myriads of souls, in all and every stage of being and growth, God will have much for His servants to do—for many souls may yet need helping—and, in any case, idleness would be unbearable. As Tennyson says of his friend who had gone before,

And doubtless unto thee is given
A life that bears immortal fruit
In those great offices which suit
The full-grown energies of Heaven.

But you ask "How?" In what "body"? Or, more sceptical still, Is such life even possible? For answer we return to our Lord's words, "Do ye not therefore err, inasmuch as ye know not the scriptures, nor yet the power of GOD?" God, He means, can do even this if He so wills, make "bodies" fit for such conditions of work and existence. We use the word "bodies"—we can scarcely help it: but it is not "flesh and blood" that we are thinking of, but the form which spirit-life will take in a new world. True, the

Resurrection body is connected in some mysterious way with our present body: so is the brilliant daffodil with the unsightly bulb: but it is no longer, like our present outfit, a "body of humiliation," marvellous as this is in the eyes of the devout physiologist, but a body that is transfigured and glorious, like the Lord's own.

And where are we to find evidence that such a "body" can ever exist? All around us, in what exists already, the splendour of the world, the endless variety of created life, the marvel of the Universe. God made it: to deny Creation would cut away the ground from beneath all real religion. But having made it, can He do no more? Has He made a million forms of life, taught them (shall we say?) to "move on and to move up," and is one more beyond His power? Is His arm shortened, or His creative faculty exhausted? No, our Lord says: it is our unbelief, or our want of imagination, that is to blame. We err, we make a great mistake because we do not remember the power of God, and recognize that, unlike ourselves, He is not tied to one kind of world, and one type of existence. We need to take a hint from the Psalmist and exclaim, "O Lord, how *manifold* are Thy works!"

But some one may say, "Yes, I recognize God's power and the fertility of His creative wisdom, but is power enough? Power alone might toss us aside when it has done with us, as a child does his playthings. Power may be brutal, cynical, anything, like Hardy's Immortals who had finished their sport with poor Tess. Your argument needs *love* in God as well, and are you so sure about that? Is it there?"

Now it is to this, the love of God, that our Lord is in reality making His appeal when He refers to the Scriptures, though, in form, He is only pointing to a passage in Exodus. We perhaps should not think of going to the Pentateuch for an argument—that part of the Bible has suffered much (they tell us) at the hands of the doctors: but our Lord does so, partly because this was an authority which the Sadducees acknowledged, partly because, rightly and fully understood, it contained all that was necessary. "That the dead are raised even Moses shewed in the passage about the Bush when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. He is not a God of dead men, but of living, for all live unto Him." What does that imply? Is it merely an *argumentum ad hominem*, such an argument as the Sadducees in their day and generation were compelled to accept? No, it is larger than that, vastly larger and wider-reaching. Given the existence of God and the love of God—and Christ guarantees both—it is an argument of undying worth, indeed the supreme argument for immortality. "All live unto Him."

I am not disposed to inquire too closely into the meaning of that "all," certainly not to narrow the range of its hope: it includes, anyhow, all who were previously mentioned—"those who are accounted worthy to attain to that world and the resurrection from the dead"—God grant they be many! Not, then, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob only, but all who are "His." He values life,

individual life. To Him every one of them counts. Each has his name in the Divine register. God is in touch with him in this life—indeed the relation may reach a high degree of friendship and intimacy. But if so, what follows? Surely that it must be permanent. It is impossible that in a Universe where He is supreme God can really be bereft of any of His children. So then immortality is not at bottom a question of the nature of Man: it is rather a question of the Nature and faithfulness of God. It is inconceivable that God should lose His friends, and Abraham was His friend, and so are Abraham's spiritual children: such friendships once made must be eternal.

It is here, then, that the real appeal to the Scriptures comes in, as records of human experience, and testimonies to the Divine Shepherding. It is not exactly a case of "proof" texts—my friends tell me that their day is over, though my meditation on this passage (and our Lord's example) rather encourages me to think that their case is not really quite so desperate: but what do the Scriptures teach, on page after page, about the Being of God and His dealings with men? What is the meaning of Providence as therein illustrated? Is there evidence that He *cares* about us? Is the *Love* of God a reality? Well, if it is, we need not vex our souls about the rest. No one of us would consent to the extinction of a child whom we really loved, and why not? Because of the quality of love in our own hearts. Can *we* hold on to what is precious, and shall God who put the love into our hearts not do the same?

And so we return to the point from which we started.

There are points of Christian doctrine which are fundamental to us if we are to be disciples indeed. One of them is faith in immortality. But this or that theory, and certainly this or that description of it, is not one of the essentials. The connection even between it and Resurrection may be difficult to adjust. In First Corinthians, S. Paul seems to be all for Resurrection, we might say: in Philippians he is ready to depart and be with Christ to-morrow. Well, the latter is the easier faith, for sceptical inquiries on the former come readily to hand and can only be very slowly answered, if at all. For complete immortality, according to the New Testament, Resurrection is necessary, and we will not seek to be "wise above that which is written." Meantime, if it helps you, believe in "Jerusalem the Golden," and "Halls jubilant with song," or else look forward, as did Socrates, to discourse with the wise and good of all ages. Believe, if you will, in the philosophic doctrine of the soul's inherent immortality, dear to Plato and to many another up and down the centuries, or modify this, if you are so minded, by asserting that Man is "immortable" rather than immortal, and can only realize this, his true destiny, as he fulfils his place in the moral order. Or, if you like, reject all these, and more. The hope itself, I would assert, still remains unimperilled, for, in the last resort, it rests upon the Love of God. That it was that entered into covenant with Abraham: that it was that inspired psalmists and prophets of olden time to write for our learning: that it was that issued in "the Grace

of Jesus Christ our Lord," and the illuminating radiance of His Person, and the comfortable words of His Message, and the companionship of His Holy Spirit. Accordingly, a Christian disciple may say: For these and other reasons, for these above all other reasons, I believe in the Love of God, and believing in that, I try to live "unto" Him: and I hope to live unto Him even when, for me, the things of time are over. For love that is real does not forget, and He will not forget: and therefore, in humble faith and quiet assurance, "I look for the Resurrection of the dead, and the Life of the world to come."

