

PAUL'S GREAT DOXOLOGY

(Ephesians 1. 3-14: A Meditation.)

THIS portion of God's word which I have chosen as the subject of a brief Meditation is commonly spoken of as Paul's Great Doxology. In other words, the verses selected constitute a uniquely exalted song of praise to God ; uttered, in this case, in prose, not in verse.

Not many of Paul's Epistles proceed immediately after the Salutation after the manner exemplified in this Epistle to the Ephesians. In fact, the only Epistle of Paul that, in this respect, resembles Ephesians is 2 Corinthians.

One is not surprised, in view of all the circumstances, that Paul should voice a song of praise to God as he enters upon an exposition of the several themes that occupy his mind at the time of his writing 2 Corinthians. Paul had written 1 Corinthians towards the end of the great ministry in Ephesus (Acts xix. 1-xx. 1), and he sent that Epistle by Titus to Corinth. That Epistle partook largely of the nature of a censure upon the Corinthians, and, naturally, as one that sincerely wished to edify the Church of God in Corinth, he felt very anxious as to how the Corinthians would take his rebuke. The fact of his being inspired of God to write the rebuke, did not leave him less, but rather more truly, human in his anxieties respecting the reception in Corinth of the remonstrance administered. He was on this account very anxious to see Titus returned, so that Titus might tell him how it fared with 1 Corinthians at the hands of the Corinthians.

The uproar in Ephesus, due to Demetrius, the silversmith, was the principal providential sign that the time had come when he should leave Ephesus, but it is quite evident that a factor in the situation urging him to quit Ephesus, and to move northwards towards Troas, was the hope that Titus, on his return journey from Corinth, would meet him there. When, however, Paul reached Troas, Titus was not there and so, notwithstanding that great opportunities for usefulness offered themselves to him in Troas, he had there no rest in his spirit, "because he met not with Titus his brother." The result was that he soon said goodbye

to the Church in Troas, and again crossed the Ægean Sea, and soon again, for the second time, found himself in Macedonia.

He was not long in the Province of Macedonia when Titus turned up. Titus gave Paul a very encouraging report relative to the Church in Corinth, and assured him that, so far as the great body of the people were concerned, the rebuke was taken as Paul had intended it (2 Cor. vii. 11). Paul's heart overflowed with joy at the hearing of this news, and, out of that overflowing heart, the Second Epistle to the Corinthians issued.

One is not surprised that a Doxology follows immediately in 2 Corinthians after the Salutation. Yet in 2 Corinthians the Doxology is comparatively brief. At the time that Paul wrote Ephesians he was a prisoner in Rome: that is to say, although he lived in his own hired house, he was constantly bound to a Roman soldier by a chain (Col. iv. 18), feeling, as one has put it, like an eagle in a cage. Yet out of that condition of things there issued, among other things, this Epistle to the Ephesians—the crown of all Paul's Epistles, as Dean J. Armitage Robinson puts it—and, with the Epistle, this almost incomparable song of praise to God.

The Salutation (i. i. 2) is among the briefest found in Paul's Epistles, yet it consists of the three members whereof Salutations are always constituted: the name of the writer, the people addressed,¹ the greeting.

Immediately after the Salutation we enter, as we have said, upon the Great Doxology (vv. 3-14). In a sense, the Doxology is summed up for us in a single phrase—"Blessed be the God and

¹ The view that here we have a circular letter has commended itself to students of the Epistle of all schools. Without speaking too dogmatically in this reference, one is bound to say that the "Circular Letter" idea evokes sympathy in one's mind for the following reasons: (a) It harmonises well with the whole atmosphere of an Epistle wherein the subject of the Church Universal, as the body of Christ, has a place larger than in any other of Paul's Epistles. (b) It enables us to account for the absence of Salutations to individual members of the community addressed, a circumstance somewhat difficult to account for in the case of such a man as Paul, if, indeed, he were really writing exclusively to the Ephesians, a people among whom he laboured for three years. (c) It would explain the circumstance that the words *ἔφ' ἑσῶν* are absent from some of the best authorities for the text of the New Testament. (d) It would enable us to give an account of what became of the Epistle which (Col. iv. 16) is said to be meant for the Laodiceans to read, and after that to be read of the Colossians too. That Epistle is not, of course, the well known Epistle to the Colossians. In all probability it is the Epistle to the Ephesians, an Epistle which ought to be read along with that to the Colossians, for Colossians is related, in doctrine, to the Ephesians, as the Head is to the Body. (e) Finally, if the words *τοῖς ἑσῶν ἔφ' ἑσῶν* be taken as a parenthesis, it makes the construction of the remaining clauses in Ephesians i. 1 identical with the corresponding grammatical constructions in Colossians, an Epistle, we take it, written at the same time as that to the Ephesians and, in fact, carried into Provincial Asia by that same messenger that carried the Epistle to the Ephesians into the same Asia.

At the same time, the title "To the Ephesians," the reading of the Traditional Text, is not a misnomer, for Paul was, at the time of writing, a prisoner in Rome; and a messenger, carrying an Epistle from Rome into Provincial Asia would, most naturally, proceed by what was known as the Central Route, which meant going by *Brundisium and Corinth to Ephesus*.

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"; the remaining part of this great section of Ephesians giving the reasons for this brief ascription of praise to God. The subject, in this terse phrase, is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"; this exact phraseology being adopted because thus the revelation of the King Eternal, Invisible, is seen at the zenith. The predicate—"blessed be"—gains in emphasis, at once through position, and through the weight and extended form of the subject.

When we bless God we do not confer a benefit upon Him. We simply apprehend His glory, and acknowledge Him, in heart, and tongue, and life, as the source of all the good things, whether they be in nature or in grace, that we enjoy. It is instructive to observe that the word rendered "glory" (*δόξα*) is of one root with *δοκέω*, which signifies "I seem," "I am reputed"—in itself, as Lightfoot says, a term of honour, conveying no shadow of depreciation. Thus, at bottom, God's glory is His appearing, His Self-manifestation, His Self-revelation, His name. He never reveals Himself, whether it be as Creator, or Lawgiver, or Saviour, save in a manner that is worthy of the Highest. His self-revelation is His glory. The praise of His glory is, therefore, the response which His Self-revelation and, most of all, His Self-revelation in the form of the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ, evokes in our hearts. This response is, essentially, always a Doxology.

In the broader sense, of course, Paul's Doxology includes both the Doxology in the stricter sense, and the reasons for that ascription of praise to God. We are here dealing with the Doxology in this larger sense.

The Apostle blesses God. Why? Because God hath blessed us; "us" being used not without discrimination, but, certainly, as embracing of all believers in the Lord Jesus, and of all lovers of all the saints. We bless God "because (*v.* 3b) He hath blessed us with all manner of spiritual blessings, in the heavenlies, in Christ." When God blesses us, He bestows upon us real benefits. He changes our relation towards Himself, and He changes our inward dispositions. He enriches us. Now, Paul did not depreciate bodily comforts, earthly kindnesses, temporal blessings, all of which to Paul, as to Jesus before him, have their source in God. But he recognised that those are not the things that are the most desirable of all nor the things to be most grateful to God for. The benefits that are worthiest of that name are such as are in

their nature spiritual, heavenly, and eternal. It is because of the bestowal of these spiritual blessings upon sinful men that Paul blesses God in this Doxology.

There is, in our own time, a world-wide school of politicians that would make man's supreme good consist of benefits that are physical, earthly, and enjoyable only for life's short span. Over against that construction of what constitutes true happiness, the Church of God ought, with Paul, to emphasise the benefits that are spiritual, invisible to the physical eye, heavenly, and everlasting.

When Paul says that we are thus blessed "in Christ" (v. 3b) he means that this is the goodly heritage upon which every believer enters, at the moment of his union by faith with Christ, that is, as Christ is made known to us in the Gospel. Yet this is but a station, a vantage ground, from which Paul teaches us to survey, not only what God is doing for us in the present, but also what preparations He contrived for us in the past, as well as what good things we may justly anticipate from Him in the never ending future. What that past, present, and future mean is the theme of this extension of Paul's Great Doxology (vv. 4-14).

The language Paul here uses is difficult of explication. One thinks of what that great divine, W. G. T. Shedd, says relative to the interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "The great characteristic of this Epistle is the *closeness* of the reasoning. The line of remark is a concatenation like that of chain-armour, of which each link hooks directly into the next, without intervening matter. The process of an exegete must, consequently, be somewhat similar to that by which a blind man gets a knowledge of a chain. He must do it by the sense of touch. He must handle each chain separately, and actually feel the point of contact with the preceding link, and the succeeding."

It seems to me, however, that the figure that corresponds with the situation that faces an interpreter of Paul's Great Doxology in vv. 4-14 is not that of a single chain, but of a series of concurrent and inter-connected chains. In this Meditation we shall feel obliged to trace out the course of each line of the series from beginning to end; distinctly, but not separately, for, indeed, all the lines hang together.

I

Let us then, first, concentrate distinctly upon those spiritual, heavenly, and eternal *blessings* as a chain in a series of concatenated

chains, even as Paul, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, stretches them out in a line before our gaze, so that we may behold them as extending from everlasting to everlasting.

(a) First, we are invited (*vv.* 4-5) to regard and view those blessings, which mean our salvation, as they lay hid, or were kept silent, in the mind of the Eternal God, through eternal ages. Paul speaks (*v.* 4a) of an eternal election. "God," says he, "made choice of us in Christ, before the foundation of the world," an expression in which the verb *ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς* (made choice of us) is, in Warfield's happy phrase, significant, both for its Voice (the Middle, meaning that in some sense He did it for Himself), and its composition (*ἐκ* and *λέγομαι*), implying a sovereign choice. This choice, we are told (*v.* 4b) was made with the view of conferring blessings such as sinful men do not naturally much care for, to wit, "that we should be holy and blameless in God's sight." When Paul adds, "in love," I take the meaning to be that this perfecting of our character and state will carry with it much of the sweetness of its source—to wit, the Fatherly love of God.

The idea suggested through the term, "in love," is more fully developed in the following clause (*v.* 5a) "having predestinated us to be adopted by Himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Weymouth's rendering). *προορίσας ἡμᾶς* (having predestinated us) and *ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς* (He made choice of us) are contemporaneous events, the reference being, in both cases, to what was done in the depth of a past eternity. The idea is that it was impossible for us as sinners to inherit life as servants, or on the basis of the natural covenant, and that God resolved upon saving us after another, a more gracious method, in virtue of which He takes us into His own family, making us His sons by adoption.

If the question be now put (*v.* 5b), Why did God resolve to reveal Himself in this particular way? Paul has no answer to give to that question save that that was God's will; not, of course, an arbitrary will, but a will all the reasons of whose determinations we shall never know. That He should, before the foundation of the world, have made choice of us in order that we should be holy, that He should have determined to receive us into His own family, have been movements in the Divine mind of which we can only say—that that was according to the good pleasure of His will.

On the other hand, if the question be put (*v.* 6a), With what result has God thus visited us? the answer is, that it results to the praise of the glory of His grace. "Grace" means God's favour

towards the unworthy, yea, His infinite love to those who were deserving of punishment at His own hands. Of course, this love must reign through righteousness, but of that more by and by. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ delights to reveal Himself as infinitely gracious and merciful (*cf.* Exod. xxxiv. 6, 7). That revelation is what is meant by His glory. The redeemed Church of God apprehends this glory and voices it forth in heart and life, even as Paul does through his Great Doxology. That is the praise of the glory of His grace.

(*b*) Thus far we have gazed upon God's salvation as it lay hid in the mind of God through eternal ages, or, as those benefits entered into God's great universe-embracing plan. We now come (*v.* 6*b*) to contemplate this salvation as a plan carried into execution in the fulness of the times. Our salvation, as thus achieved, is capable of analysis, and is analysed on the part of Paul.

(*a*) We have set before us, in the first instance, the direct fruit of the Coming and Death of Christ. "Which grace" (connecting with *v.* 6*a*), he says, "God freely bestowed upon us in The Beloved," referring doubtlessly to God's Son, the Beloved, or, the Messiah Jesus, Who upon the cross of Calvary said: "It is finished," "In Him we have" (*v.* 7), as something now fully realised, "that redemption, which is through His blood, even the forgiveness of our trespasses." A tacit comparison, or a comparison in which one member of the parallelism is submerged, appears to be here instituted between that freedom which God, through the instrumentality of Moses and Aaron, conferred upon Israel according to the flesh, and the freedom which God, through the death of His own Son, confers upon the Israel of God. The latter is, by an infinite grade, the greater. It is *the* redemption. Milton's Ode—"On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"—comes to one's mind as giving expression, in almost incomparably beautiful language, to Paul's thought in the present connection. We quote the first stanza:

"This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's Eternal King,
Of wedded maid and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages oncc did sing,
That He our deadly forfeit should release,
And with His Father work us a perpetual peacc."

When Paul had (*v.* 7b) made mention of "trespasses," and "the forgiveness of trespasses," the thought, of mountains passed over, seems to have come into his mind. Therefore does he, in this connection, now speak not merely of grace, but (*v.* 7c) of "the riches of God's grace."

(*β*) Paul advances another step illustrative of God's grace when he makes mention of the proclamation of God's great salvation through the instrumentality of Apostles and Prophets of the New Testament, and that among both Jews and Gentiles. This (*v.* 8a) is as the overflowings of God's grace towards us, when (*v.* 8b), to the accompaniment of that insight and practical understanding which God bestowed upon us, He (*v.* 9a) made known to us what through eternal ages was kept silent in the heart of the Trinal God, but is now an open secret (*μυστήριον*), meaning thereby a salvation so marvellous in depth and width that no other account can be given thereof, save (*v.* 9a) that it was God's will to bestow this upon undeserving men. Nor did aught of this happen through haphazard. It came to pass according to a plan (*v.* 9b) upon which God had set His heart, and (*v.* 10a) according to a dispensation of the covenant of grace, which came to function just at the time that had been prearranged and planned of the Father.

(*γ*) Paul now relates this proclamation of God's great salvation to the exaltation of Christ; for Christ, in whom, and through whom, and for whom, as the Son of God, the universe (*Col.* i. 16) was brought into being, is now, in reward of His humiliation, exalted, in our very nature, to the throne of the universe, and the entirety of God's plan for the universe of things is (*v.* 10b) focussed (*ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι*) in Him. In Him, too, it was that we, Jews and Gentiles, were (*v.* 11a) chosen as God's portion, and that meant the carrying out of a plan (*v.* 11b) which, although it may be subsumed (*v.* 11b) under God's all-comprehensive plan, is yet itself the very heart of all God's purposes.

(*δ*) In verses 4 and 5, we have gazed upon the great salvation as it lay hid in God's purpose; in verses 6-11, we have thought of that salvation as it stands organically related to the fulness of the times in which the Living One that died, and is now alive for ever more, appeared. We may now interpret verses 12-14 as occupied with the themes of the application of this great redemption, and with an inward experience of the sweetness,

and the power, and the sense of the everlastingness, of God's great salvation. The proclamation of the Gospel is not all that is needed to secure the salvation of sinful men. There is a secret operation on the part of God's Spirit in the hearts of men that makes the preaching effectual unto salvation. But with these two factors present, God's saving process comes into the clear light. This fruit of the Gospel in the hearts of men is what in the end redounds to the glory of God. Therefore does Paul (*v.* 12) point, first, to the believing Jews as persons in whom this glorious fruit of the Gospel is to be seen and extolled. That is what Paul means when he says—"that we—(believing Jews)—who were the first to put our trust in the Messiah, should be to the praise of God's glory." And he points next (*v.* 13a) to sinners of the Gentiles who had believed in the same Messiah, as to persons in whom this glorious fruit of the Gospel was also illustrated. For they, too, not only, by the grace of God, believed, but (*v.* 13b), with their believing Jewish brethren, they were sealed as God's portion by the Holy Spirit of promise. This seal is also (*v.* 14), for Jews and Gentiles, comparable to earnest money, that is, it is a part of the inheritance given in advance as a security that the entire inheritance will all in the end be ours.

II

Thus far, concerning the first of Paul's concurrent chains of thought. As we gazed we tried to follow the thought of Paul as he stretches out, for our admiration, those spiritual, and heavenly blessings which God is assuredly in process of bestowing upon all believers in Jesus Christ, so that they may be seen to extend from everlasting to everlasting. In other words, we have been contemplating God's salvation (*a*) as it lay in the mind of God through eternal ages; (*b*) as the blessings of salvation were procured for us, through the coming into the world of Jesus Christ, and through the interpretation which Apostles and Prophets put upon that coming of the Son of God into this sinful world, and through the exaltation of Jesus Christ to the throne of the universe; and (*c*), finally, as Jews and Gentiles are, by the Gospel as an instrument, and by the Spirit as the Agent, made trophies of God's power to save, so that they are already the happy possessors of that earnest money, the foretaste and assurance of

eternal bliss. These are links in what we have spoken of as a first chain in a series of inter-connected chains.

We now, therefore, contemplate, but with greater brevity, our second chain. Of course, we have continually been in contact with this second chain as we followed out the line of our first chain, for the first chain is ever dependent upon another, that is, in a word, upon a Christ, who is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.

The spiritual, heavenly blessings, wherewith God hath blessed us, are all in Christ, that is, in Christ as we have known Him (*v. 3*). Yet, like those blessings of which we have spoken, this Christ must be contemplated under various aspects, indeed, practically under as many aspects as the blessings themselves, for the blessings are, not only related to Christ, but are dependent upon Christ. Thus :

(*a*) Christ is here brought before us in His preincarnate state. It was in Christ (*v. 3b*) that God blessed us ; in Him (*v. 4a*) He made choice of us before the foundation of the world. We must thus think of the eternal, essential Son of God, the brightness, the essential brightness of God's glory, the impressed image of His substance, by whom the worlds were created, by whom this vast universe is sustained, as He existed, as the Second Person of the Adorable Trinity, in the bosom of the Father. It was in Him the Father made choice of us. It was impossible, because of the nature of divine justice, that God, the Judge of all, should have contemplated forgiveness, or, putting it more fully, justification, or, putting it more fully still, a perfect salvation, for us, apart from a Mediator. That Mediator is God's own Son. In Him, in His preincarnate state, were we chosen of God. But this very choice implies that in God's purpose the Son must have been, from the foundation of the world, the Lamb slain. Thus Paul can speak of the essential Son of God under the name, the Anointed, the Christ.

Similarly (*v. 5*) when God determined to give us the place of sons in His own family, in other words, to adopt us, He contemplated doing this, only through the Mediation of that Son, whose existence is not to be reckoned from the Incarnation ; whom only the Father fully knows, and whose knowledge of the Father is co-extensive with the Father's knowledge of Him. (*Matt. xi. 27 ; Luke x. 22.*) The servant, we are assured by the Son Himself, abideth not in the house for ever, but the Son abideth ever. If then, the Son make us free we shall be free

indeed, free because sons ourselves, and joint heirs with Christ of God (John viii. 35, 36). Thus as we think of salvation as something that was kept silent in the mind of God through eternal ages, so we think of the historical Christ as one that existed, and that stood out before the eye of God, the Father, as the very heart of all His plans and purposes, and as the foundation upon which He should build a Church against which the gates of hell should not prevail, from all eternity. He was, in the language of John, in the beginning, He was with God, and He was God.

(b) But we must go forward, and think of that Trinitarian Son of God as, in the fulness of time, becoming incarnate, and as obeying and dying in our room and stead. That is the thought of *v.* 6b—"which grace He hath freely bestowed upon us in the beloved." Through that term "the beloved" one's thoughts go back to those places where, according to the Gospels (Matt. iii. 18, xii. 18, xvii. 5; Mark i. 11, ix. 7, xii. 6; Luke iii. 22, ix. 35, xx. 13), Jesus is addressed from heaven as God's incarnate Son, the Beloved, that is (we speak it in the light of Isaiah xlii. 1), the Messiah. It was His death that made the great redemption a possibility, or rather a reality (*v.* 7). Through this death, the grace of forgiveness has been more than manifested, it has now abounded unto the many (Rom. v. 15).

(c) Further, we go along and realise that *v.* 10 invites us now to contemplate Him who, as the brightness of the Father's glory, existed from all eternity, and who, in the fulness of the seasons, became incarnate, as now in our very nature exalted to the throne of the universe. It is now an open secret that it long lay hid in the Father's mind and purpose to make His incarnate Son not only the Head of the Church, but Head of the universe (*ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ χριστῷ*) for the benefit of His Church. In that Son, we repeat, God's universe-embracing plan is focussed, in Him His plan respecting the Church is focussed, and that plan which is embrative of the Church is the heart of hearts of all God's purposes.

III

We have traced out the several steps, which according to Paul's delineation here constitute the salvation of which God is the author, and we have seen that it is comparable to a chain of several links which extend from everlasting to everlasting.

We have also traced out another chain upon which the former chain is dependent, and we have found that that underlying chain is, in a word, Paul's doctrine of Christ, who, in correspondence with the several steps seen of us in the salvation of God, is regarded as (1) pre-existing, and also destined from all eternity to be the Lamb of God; (2) as in a state of humiliation; (3) as now found in an inconceivably exalted state. But there is in Paul's thoughts something still more fundamental than all that of which we have spoken. It is the Trinity; Paul's doctrine of the Trinity.

The truth of the Trinity is given us in terms in at least two places in the New Testament (Matt. xxviii. 19; 2 Cor. xiii. 14). But the practical value of that great doctrine is most clearly seen when the doctrine comes to light, as in the passage before us, as constitutive of the very rock of our salvation. Thus Paul's thoughts of God are discovered to be, through and through, Trinitarian.

(a) Here, in particular, what we find is that when Paul thinks of the great salvation as it lay hid in the mind of God (*vv.* 3a-5), he relates that which was hidden through eternal ages, that which existed only as a plan and purpose in the heart of the Eternal, to God in the Person of the Father.

(b) When, again, he thinks of that plan as in process of execution, he relates that process to the Person of the Son, both as He once existed in a state of humiliation and as He now exists in a state of exaltation (*vv.* 6-12).

(c) When, finally, he thinks of this salvation as applied to individual men, and as already comparable to earnest money in our possession, thus assuring to us eternal bliss, he relates that helpful experience to the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is called the Spirit of Promise, both because the Old Testament prophets associated the coming of the Spirit, in measure like floods upon the dry ground, with the accomplishment of a great task on the part of the Messiah, and also because the Messiah Jesus Himself said that the sequel to His again ascending to the Father would be the coming of the Spirit in order to abide as an invisible presence with the Church to the end of time. In *v.* 13, the participle *πιστεύσαντες* may intend an action anterior to the action intended by the verb *ἐσφραγίσθητε*, or it may intend an action contemporaneous with that of the finite verb; i.e., the words may be rendered either "after ye

believed ye were sealed," or "at the time of your believing ye were sealed." But both ideas may be combined. The Holy Spirit is, according to the Biblical view, given to men both in order to faith, and also upon faith, and here it may be safest to take this complex view of the work of the Spirit, as that lay in Paul's mind. In any case, if Paul relates the beginning of salvation to the Father, and the middle of salvation to the Son, he relates the end of salvation to the Holy Spirit. That is, salvation as terminating upon sinful men is of the Father, is through the Son, is by the Spirit. When we think of salvation as a revelation of God, we must regard it as redounding to the glory of the Trinal God, and as being to the praise of His glory.

We have said that Paul's great Doxology was difficult of interpretation. This difficulty is not due to any confusion of ideas on the part of Paul. But through the grace of God, in nature and in regeneration, his was a unique mentality. I have read somewhere concerning the late W. E. Gladstone that, in summing up figures, he carried three lines with him at once. Most of us must be content, in computations of that kind, to count in units, or to take a single line at a time. This figure I am carrying over to Paul; what he carried along in a single line of thought, I have found it prudent to distribute into three distinct lines of thought: as these concern (1) the actual salvation in its several steps; (2) Christ's several states; and (3) the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is a practical doctrine; apart from it the process of redemption cannot be interpreted.

We have thus discovered three distinct strands in Paul's Great Doxology.

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