

THE ATONEMENT.—AN ILLUSTRATION.

PHILEMON 18, 19.

ONESIMUS was one of many slaves in the service of Philemon, a wealthy and generous householder of Colosse, who had himself been won to the love and service of Christ by the ministry of St. Paul. This just and kind master had been defrauded by Onesimus—robbed of money or of money's worth. To escape the due reward of his deed, Onesimus fled to Rome with his ill-gotten gains, and probably wasted them, or was himself defrauded of them, in some of the vile dens of vice with which the imperial city abounded. When he came to be in want, he was led by a gracious Providence to the hut, or shed, in which the great Apostle was imprisoned, and was there brought to repentance and faith in Christ. In due time St. Paul thought it well to send him back to the master he had wronged, that he might make some atonement for his crime; but he also thought well to send a letter by him to Philemon, in which he announced the happy change that had passed on Onesimus, besought his master to receive him "no longer as a slave, but as a brother beloved," and offered out of his own scanty means to reimburse Philemon for any loss he had sustained by the crime of his "unprofitable" slave.

This, in brief, is the story related or implied in this Epistle, which is the only *private* letter of St. Paul's that we now possess. And now, before we go a step further, let me ask my reader to consider carefully whether, in St. Paul's offer to pay the debt of Onesimus, the fraudulent but repentant slave, he finds anything worthy of blame? Was it base and wrong of

him? was it not rather very noble and generous of him, thus to put himself in the place of Onesimus, to take his debt on him, to atone for his wrong? We know that St. Paul was poor, that he had to work with his hands in order to earn a scanty wage. Suppose, then, that Philemon had *demande*d the repayment of what he had lost to the uttermost farthing; suppose that for many months St. Paul had had to work very hard, and to live very sparsely, in order to earn the required sum, and that at last he had actually paid it to the rich Philemon, in order that Onesimus might be got out of his debt: would *that* have been wrong and base? wrong *of St. Paul*, I mean. Would you, would any man, have blamed him for it? Would you not, rather, have been moved to an enthusiastic admiration of the man who was capable of so singular and so signal an act of self-forgetting generosity and compassion? Would not his name have been enrolled, by common consent, in the list of worthies who have deserved the admiration and praise of their fellows?

And what would you have thought of Philemon *if he had taken the money*? Surely you would have been as quick to condemn him as to admire Paul. "Owing even his own soul to St. Paul," you would have said, "this rich Colossian householder ought to have been ashamed to let the aged Apostle, poor and in prison, exhaust himself by working night and day in order to repay him a sum which he could very well afford to lose." You would have had nothing but contempt for Philemon, nothing but reverence and admiration for Paul. It is precisely because you have every reason to believe Philemon to have been a good and honourable man that you feel quite sure he did *not* take the

money, although you have no other proof that he refused it.

“Which things may be allegorized.” Let us, then, for our instruction in righteousness, turn this story into an allegory or parable. Let Philemon, the just and kind master, stand for God, our Father and Lord. Let St. Paul, the generous debt-assuming Apostle, stand for Christ, our Saviour. Let Onesimus, the fraudulent and runaway slave, stand for man, the sinner. And then, sinful man, fleeing from the God he has wronged, falls into the hands of Christ, and comes to know and hate his sins—just as Onesimus, fleeing from Philemon, fell into the hands of Paul, and was brought to a saving knowledge of the truth. Christ goes to the Father, as St. Paul wrote to Philemon, saying: *“If he (i.e., man) hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that to my account; I will repay it.”* And, according to one theory of the Atonement at least, God takes the money; He demands that Christ should exhaust Himself with toil and suffering in order that man’s debt may be paid, and then blots out the debt from his account.

Assuming for a moment this theory of the Atonement to be a true theory, what are we to think of Christ? Was it wrong, was it blameworthy of Him to take the sinner’s place, to pay the sinner’s debt, to atone the sinner’s offence? If we hold to our parallel, so far from thinking it wrong, we can only pronounce it an unparalleled act of generous and self-forgetting love: so far from blaming Him for it, we can but honour and admire Him for it with all our hearts, just as we honour and admire St. Paul for undertaking to pay the debt of Onesimus.

But *if God took the money*—if He would not release man from his debt till some one, no matter who, had paid the debt—what are we to think of *Him*? Had Philemon taken St. Paul's money, we agreed that in him it would have been an action almost incredibly mean and base; we agreed that we should have felt nothing for him but contempt. Are we to lower our standard, and alter our verdict, because it is God, and not man, who is called in question—God, from whom we expect, and have a right to expect, so much more than from man? No, we cannot, we dare not, either lower our standard or alter our verdict. What would have been wrong in man would have been at least equally wrong in God. And as God can do no wrong, either our parallel does not hold good, or *this* theory of the Atonement must be radically misleading and incomplete.

Is the parallel at fault, then? Look at it again. Philemon was a just and kind master. And does not God Himself claim to hold a similar relation to us? Does He not expostulate with us, "If I be a master, where is mine honour?" Is not He most just, and yet most kind—"forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin," yet by no means "sparing the guilty," lest they should sink into still deeper guilt and misery?

Onesimus was an "unprofitable" servant—running away from a master he had robbed. And have not *we* again and again robbed God of his due, and left his service to walk after our own lusts? *Are* we not, even the best of us, but unprofitable servants?

St. Paul loved Onesimus "as his own heart," "as himself" (Verses 12 and 17); and, in his love, he even put himself in the place of Onesimus, assumed his debt,

interceded for him with his justly offended master, and raised him from the status of a slave to that of a "brother beloved." Are there any words, even in the Bible itself, which more accurately and happily describe Christ's relation to us? Did not He love all men, even the worst, as Himself, as his own heart? Did He not take our place, bear our burden, assume, and even pay, our debt? Did He not intercede with our Master for us, and bring us to a better mind, and raise us, who were but servants, to be his brethren and friends?

The parallel holds good then. We *may* take Philemon as setting forth God's relation to us, Onesimus as setting forth our relation to God, and St. Paul as setting forth Christ's relation both to God and man. But as the parallel does hold good, must not that theory of the Atonement to which I have referred be radically misleading and incomplete?

No doubt *any* theory of the Atonement must be incomplete, for the Atonement is the reconciliation of man to God; and which of us fully comprehends either God or man? How, then, can we comprehend and express that Divine act or process, "that miracle of time," by which the relations of God with man and of man with God were, or are being, drawn into an eternal concord? No theory of the Atonement conceived by the human mind, and expressed in human words, can possibly be perfect and entire, lacking nothing. The great "mystery of godliness" must ever remain a deep, "in which all our thoughts are drowned." And any man who assumes that he can comprehend it, and crush it into some narrow and portable formula, does but prove that he pertains to that well-known category

or class which presumes to "rush in where angels fear to tread."

Still we may refuse to hold any theory of the Atonement which is obviously untenable. We may know, we may learn from Scripture at least enough of the Atonement for faith to grasp, and for the salvation that comes by faith. And, surely, it is impossible to deny that in sundry places Scripture does teach what is known as the vicarious or substitutionary theory of the Atonement; that it speaks of Christ as taking our place, paying our debt, suffering in our stead. St. Paul himself speaks again and again of our debts or sins as being counted or imputed to Christ, and of the grace of Christ as being imputed to us for righteousness. And to many minds this language, not unnaturally, gives grave offence. Men say, it is natural that they should say: "Every man must bear his own burden, and answer to God for himself. No man can by any means appear and answer for his brother. It is a mere verbal juggle to talk of our sins as being laid on Christ, and of his righteousness as being imputed to us. Sin and righteousness are moral qualities, or conditions, inherent in the very nature of a man, inseparable from him, except by his own act and will. The innocent cannot take the place and assume the responsibilities of the guilty, nor can the guilty be acquitted for the sake of the righteous." And yet the very men who say this, and say it with sincerity, are often the first to admire such an action as that of St. Paul. They find no moral impossibility in his putting himself in the place of Onesimus. They attach no moral stigma to his request that the debt of Onesimus may be charged to his account. They would have no word of blame for Philemon if they knew that,

at first, he forgave and loved Onesimus for Paul's sake, rather than for his own. Often they would be the very first to laud and admire any man who, moved by a fine generosity like that of the Apostle, should sacrifice himself to serve, or save, a neighbour. Does, then, that which was noble in the man Paul become ignoble in the man Christ Jesus? If we admire St. Paul, and are bound to admire him, for taking on himself the offence of *one* man, may we not admire Him who took on Himself the offences of *all* men? If we hold the self-sacrifice of love to be the very top and crown of human virtue, are we to carp at the Cross, and to question the love which led Christ to sacrifice Himself for the sin of the world? Is St. Paul to be commended for saying to the master of Onesimus, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that to my account;" and Christ to be condemned for saying to the Master of us all, "If they have wronged Thee, or owe Thee ought, put *that* to *my* account; I will repay it"?

But, say some, "Consider the bad moral effect of your doctrine. If you go to a man, and say to him, 'You need not strive to be quit of sin, nor need you fear that you will receive the due reward, the natural consequences, of your sins. *Christ* suffered for them. He paid your debt, and atoned for your transgressions. And if you believe that, you will be accounted righteous for his sake.' If you say that to a man, you lower his moral tone, confuse his moral conceptions; you obscure and teach him to disregard the eternal distinctions between right and wrong; you make him careless, or less careful, whether he do evil or good. Why should he oppose himself to evil with all his force, if his sins are to be forgiven him in virtue of the sacrifice of Christ?"

Consider it! It is precisely because I *have* considered it, and found it untrue to the facts of human life and experience, that I recognize without reluctance the presence in the New Testament of this vicarious and substitutionary view of the Divine Sacrifice of the Cross. Whether we like it or not, there it is: the writings of St. Paul are full of it. Whatever the moral effect of it were, candour would compel us to confess that this aspect of Christ's work and ministry of reconciliation *is* set forth in the Scriptures of the Apostles—not as the *only* aspect, only, indeed, as one of three or four, but still as a true aspect, as demanding our acceptance. Nevertheless, I confess that I for one should hesitate to accept it, were I unable to see and to shew that the proper moral effect of it is not evil, but good; that it does not tend to weaken our hatred of sin, or to relax our struggle against it, but tends rather to strengthen our hatred of it, and to brace us for new endeavours to overcome it. And I value this story of Onesimus very highly because it suggests a reasonable and a complete answer to this common difficulty and objection.

For, consider: Was St. Paul's offer to pay the debt of Onesimus in the very least degree likely to confirm Onesimus in his knavery? Suppose the offer accepted; suppose he had seen the busy and weary Apostle toiling night and day, suffering many additional hardships, in order to clear him of his debt—would Onesimus, after having thus seen what his crime had cost, have been the more likely to rob Philemon again? Would that have been *the natural and proper effect* on his mind of the Apostle's generous and self-sacrificing love for him? We know very well that it would not. We

know very well that Onesimus, touched and melted by the love St. Paul had shewn him, would rather have starved than shew himself wholly unworthy of it. Why, then, if we believe that Christ Jesus, in the greatness of his love, took our place, paid our debt, toiled and suffered for our sins, and so reconciled us to the God we had wronged—why should *that* have a bad moral effect upon us? Why should it obscure the eternal distinctions between right and wrong in our minds? Why make us careless how often we repeat our sins? If we are men at all, and have discourse of reason, and any touch of pure and noble emotion in us, or any susceptibility to it, we shall rather hate the sin for which He suffered more because *He* has suffered by it than because we ourselves have also suffered by it; we shall rather resolve to bear any pain, to make any sacrifice of passion and appetite, than shew ourselves wholly unworthy of a love so tender and yet so strong, so human and yet so Divine. If Christ so loved us as to give Himself for us, the just for the unjust; if we clearly and honestly believe that, surely its proper moral effect on us will be that we shall love Him who so loved us: and how can we love Him, and yet not hate the evil that caused Him so much pain?

But here we come back to a still graver difficulty. As St. Paul, to Philemon, for Onesimus, so Christ says, to God, for us, "If they have wronged Thee, or owe Thee ought, put that to my account; I will repay it." Let it be granted, as I have tried to shew, that this assumption of our place and debt by Christ Jesus was an act most noble and generous and divine. Let it be granted, as I have also tried to shew, that by our faith

in his great love we are incited to more strenuous efforts after moral purity and righteousness, instead of being degraded and demoralized by it. Grant both these points : and, then, what are we to think of *God* if He took from Christ the money which paid our debt ? We agreed at the outset that had the wealthy Philemon suffered the poor Apostle to work out the debt of Onesimus, he would have shewn a nature so sordid and base as justly to expose him to our contempt. And there are many who say : “ This vicarious theory of the Atonement, even though it be found in the New Testament, renders God Himself contemptible, and therefore we cannot but reject it. It is wholly incredible to us that a Being so just and good should permit the substitution of the innocent for the guilty—that He should take the obedience of Jesus Christ the Righteous as a quittance for the disobedience of an unrighteous world. Had Christ ever said to Him, ‘ Put that to my account ; I will repay it ; ’ God, like Philemon, would have refused to accept payment ; He would have freely forgiven the sinful world.”

There is much force in this objection, and some truth. For, beyond all question, we do dishonour God when we degrade the Atonement into a mere mercantile transaction, a mere affair of debt and credit. All that series of Scriptural figures which represents our sins as debts, and the Father Almighty as keeping a book in which they are entered, and as blotting them from that book when they are paid, may be necessary, and may once have been still more necessary than it is now, to set forth certain aspects of spiritual truth. It *must* have been necessary, or we should not find it in the Bible. But we need not conceive of God’s book

as though it were a ledger, nor of God Himself as a keen hard-eyed merchant, still less as a peddling huckster, indifferent where his money comes from so that He gets it, and gets enough of it. All *this* is not in the Bible, though it may be in certain creeds and systems of divinity which, although they "have had their day," have not even yet altogether "ceased to be." And even the mercantile and forensic metaphors which *are* in the Bible are but metaphors after all; *i. e.*, they are but human forms of Divine truth adapted to the weakness and grossness of our perceptions. Nor do they stand alone. Lest we should misinterpret them, they stand side by side with figures and words which set forth other aspects of the self-same truth in forms we cannot easily mistake. Recall and consider, for example, such sayings as these:—"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him might have eternal life:" and again, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself:" and again, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that *he* loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Are not *these* words sufficiently simple and clear and direct? Are they not instinct—charged and surcharged—with a Divine tenderness? Do *they* call up in our minds the image of a merchant, with lowering brows and greedy eyes, demanding his ducats or his pound of flesh, and for ever crying out, "My bond, my bond! Is it not written in the bond?"

But if these sacred and tender words be true; if God *was* in Christ, if He against whom we had sinned *Himself* took our debt upon Him, that He might frankly forgive us all, is there any lack of love and

kindness in Him then? “It was noble in St. Paul,” you admit, “to take the debt of Onesimus upon him; but it would have been ignoble of Philemon to let the Apostle pay it.” Granted. But suppose—for even impossibilities are supposable—that St. Paul had been both himself *and* Philemon. Suppose that when, in the form of Philemon, he had been robbed at Coösse, he forthwith posted to Rome in order that, in the form of St. Paul, he might bring Onesimus to repentance, in order that, at any cost of toil and suffering to himself, he might wipe out his debt and atone his wrong. Would not that have been nobler still?

And if God, the very God whom we had defrauded, from whom we had fled, *Himself* came down into our low and miserable estate, to toil and suffer with us and for us, in order that He might bring us back to our better selves and to Him, in order that He might wipe out the debt we had contracted, convince us that He had remitted it, and raise us to a new life of service and favour and peace—what was that but a love so pure, so generous, so divine, that the mere thought of it should melt and purify our hearts?

We are to think of God, then, not simply as *taking* the money offered Him by Christ on our behalf, but also as *paying* it; not as exacting his due to the uttermost farthing, but rather as Himself discharging a debt we could never have paid. In the terms of our parable, He *is* Paul as well as Philemon—not only the Master we have wronged, but also the Friend who takes the wrong upon Himself. And we owe to Him both whatever service and duty the forgiven Onesimus owed to Philemon, and whatever gratitude and love he felt for St. Paul. If we think thus of God, assuredly

our view of the Atonement will neither degrade Him nor demoralize us, but will rather impel us to devote ourselves with new fervour to his service. For just as the once unprofitable but now penitent slave, on his return to Colosse, would strive to become very profitable to his master, both because he had once wronged him, and because he would thus please the Apostle who had reclaimed and befriended him; so we, if we believe in the forgiving love of God as revealed in his Son, cannot but give ourselves with new ardour to his service, both because we were sometime sinners against Him, and because we know that we shall thus please Him who died for our sins that we might be reconciled unto God.

In this simple story, then, we find an argument which clears away some of the perplexities which obscure our poor and partial conceptions of the Atonement wrought by Christ. But we ought also to find in it an appeal that shall touch and move our hearts. For if God *so* loved us, then surely

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands our love, our life, our all.

S. E. C. T.

BRIEF NOTICES.

WHEN the first volume of *Bishop Ellicott's NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY FOR ENGLISH READERS* (Cassell and Co.) appeared, we hailed it as the very best of its kind, as the greatest boon yet offered to unlearned students of the Word of God. With natural disappointment and reluctance we have now to report that the second volume is not, on the whole, up to the high level of the first. In parts it is as good as heart could wish. Professor Plumtre has evidently found his true vocation. His expositions of Scripture shew that he is never so happy as when tracing an author's meaning from word to word, from clause to clause, from sentence to sentence, through a long and