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*THE SIN UNTO DEATH.*

## 1 JOHN v. 16.

THERE are not many passages in the New Testament which are more difficult and perplexing than this ; nor are there many which men of a delicate or an aroused conscience have so often wrested to their own hurt, if not to their own destruction. Which of us has not met some sensitive and haggard soul driven to the verge, or over the verge, of madness by the dreadful conviction that he or she had sinned the sin which is unto death, and by the horrible conclusion that from this death there is no possible issue into life everlasting ?

Quite apart from any misinterpretation or misapplication of it, too, the passage is in itself very difficult to interpret. Two difficulties are suggested by it at which the Church has always marvelled and been perplexed ; and two marvels are affirmed in it of which perhaps the most marvellous feature is that the Church has never expressed any astonishment at them, although, as I judge, these are its real difficulties rather than those which she has selected for special wonder.

The two recognized difficulties of the Verse are, (1) the sin unto death, of which the Church is still asking “ What is it ? ” conscious, apparently, that the question has never yet been answered to her satisfaction ; and (2) that for this sin—so at least the Church has assumed—St. John forbids us to pray, as though it were beyond the reach of forgiveness, as if there were at least one sin for which “ the blood of Christ, which cleanseth from all sin,” could not atone.

The two unrecognized difficulties or wonders are, (1) that the Apostle declares every departure from the Divine Will to be a separation from the Divine Life, although it is not necessarily a sin unto death ; and (2) assures us that, in every case but one, if we ask life for those who have thus

separated themselves from life, God will "give us life for them." And *these* seem to me very much more difficult than *those*.

Now, of course, our only hope of apprehending a Verse so difficult in itself, and which the misinterpretations thrust upon it have rendered still more difficult, lies in a patient study both of the Verse itself and of its connections (say from Verses 9-18 of this Chapter) in the light of St. John's habitual modes of thought and expression. Happily the Verse itself sets us on a good track for our study, since, from its very structure, it is evident that St. John is here blending two themes, one of which is subordinate to the other. His main theme is the scope and power of Prayer. But the scope of prayer suggests its limitations; and it is only as he is marking a limit which prayer cannot pass that he speaks of the sin unto death. If, therefore, we would apprehend what he has to say on Sin, we must first consider what he has to say on Prayer. We can hardly hope to follow him when he speaks of the sin which is *not* to be prayed for, until we understand what it is that we *are* to pray for, and why we are to pray for it.

I. We take, first, then, the recognized difficulty about *Prayer*. And, if we look at all carefully at the Verse, it is at once clear to us that this difficulty is purely of our own making. For, despite the assumption of the Church, St. John does not *forbid* us to pray for the forgiveness of any sin. All he does is to decline advising that we should pray for the forgiveness of a sin which he specifies, if we happen to believe that sin not to be within the scope of the Divine forgiveness: "*There is a sin unto death; I do not say that he shall pray for that;*" or still more literally, "*not concerning that am I now saying that he shall pray.*" At some other time he may, or may not, enjoin us to pray even for this sin; but, for the present at least, he does not enjoin us: and that surely is very far from *forbidding* us to pray for it.

How far his words are from a prohibition we shall understand the moment we reflect on what we ourselves mean, and wish to convey, when we say to a child, "I do not *bid*, I do not *command* you to do this or that." We may mean "I heartily wish you would do it without being told"; we cannot mean less than, "I leave it open to you, you are quite free to do it or not, as you will." And St. John did not mean less than this. He neither enjoins nor forbids his disciples to pray for a brother who had sinned a sin unto death. He expressly declines to do either; that is, he left them free to decide for themselves whether they would pray for him or would not.

And, if they were his disciples indeed, they would determine this open question by the general principles, the theory of Christian Prayer, which he had just laid down. Of *Christian* prayer, I say, for, from Verse 13, it is evident that he is addressing himself only to those who "believe in the name of the Son of God." And if we look back to that Verse we find that he is telling his disciples for what reason, for what end, he has taken the pains of writing this Epistle to them. He has declared to them what he himself has heard and seen and handled of the Word of Life, in order that they may "know that they have eternal life";—not *hope* that they *may* have it some day in the far-distant future; but *know* that they *have* it now, already, in this present time. He would have them sure that they have already commenced the life over which change and death have no power, the very same life which they are to possess and enjoy in the world in which there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying. This, indeed, is the main theme both of his Gospel and of his Epistle,—that the eternal life which was in God from the beginning, and in which from the beginning God had intended man to share, has been manifested in Christ Jesus; and manifested in Him that all men might receive it from Him, that all men might rise to their true

and proper life, the life God intended them for, in and through Him. The *want* of this eternal life is eternal death ; and the *loss* of this eternal life is eternal death. Men are dead who have never been quickened into it ; and, even after they have been quickened into it, they may die out of it.<sup>1</sup> The “sin unto death” will cast them back into the death from which they have been delivered. And because even those who *have* eternal life may lose it, he wants them not only to know that they have it, but so to cherish it as that they may never lose it.

How, then, may they cherish it ? *By prayer*, replies the Apostle, and by that trust in the pure, kind, saving will of God which prayer implies. “This,” he says, “is the confidence we have in Him that, if we ask anything according to his will, He heareth us.” It is not God’s will that any should perish. It is his will that all should be saved unto life everlasting. When we pray for “life,” therefore, whether it be our own life or the life of our fellows, we know that what we ask is in accordance with his will ; and hence we may be and ought to be sure that He will answer us. Whatsoever else we ask, we ask with a view to life, our own life or that of others ; we do not really wish Him to grant us anything inimical either to our own life or that of the world : and, therefore, since it is his steadfast and abiding will to give us life, and all that conserves life and contributes to it, “we know that we have the petitions we have desired of Him.”

In short, the true power, the true blessedness, of Prayer lies in the fact that, as all real prayer is simply an asking that God’s will may be done in us and in our fellows, which will is our life, our salvation, we may be sure that He will give us what we ask of Him. And, of course, it is part, it is the negative aspect, of this blessedness that if we ask anything *not* in accordance with his will, anything adverse

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews vi. 4-6 ; x. 26-29.

to "life," He will not give us what we ask, though He still listens to what we say, and is no more offended with us than we are with children who ask us for that which *we* know, though they do not, it will not be good for them to have.

Now some of St. John's disciples may have believed that when a man had sinned a certain kind of sin—the sin unto death—it was contrary to God's will that he should ever be quickened into life again. They may have held that in that sin his spiritual life came to an end, just as our physical life seems to come to an end, though it does not really come to an end, when we die. And the Apostle does not pause to argue with them, or seek to enlarge their conception of "life," their sense of the scope of the Divine mercy. He does not even tell them that, in his own apprehension of it, the scope of that Mercy was far wider than in theirs; nor does he now remind them that, in itself, the Divine mercy must be of far wider scope than even he was able to conceive, though that was true too, and he must have known it to be true. All that was beside his present purpose. What he is now concerned for is that they should feel how blessed it was that there is a good, pure, redeeming Will at work behind all the changes and mysteries of human life; that this Will has been manifested as the light and life of men in the man Christ Jesus; and that therefore they might ask for "life" and be sure of getting it, since they were asking for a thing "according to his will." He leaves them to determine for themselves what the Divine Will which saves men is, and how far it extends; all he demands of them is that they will not ask for anything which they hold to be opposed to that Will.

II. And so we reach our second difficulty, the recognized difficulty about *Sin*. For while some of St. John's disciples may have held that the "sin unto death" was beyond the reach of forgiveness, and was not, therefore, to be prayed

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for, others of them may have believed that there was no limit to the Divine forgiveness ; they may have held that “the blood of Christ cleanseth from *all* sin,” even from the sin unto death. But neither with them does St. John stay to argue and explain. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. But let them all be sure of this, that whatever they asked which was according to the will of God would be granted them ; and let them all be earnest in the endeavour to ascertain what that Will was and to adopt it. At the same time he admits, par parenthesis, that there *is* a sin unto death, and will neither advise any man to pray for it or forbid him to pray for it. He only mentions this sin in passing, indeed ; and therefore we must not expect him to explain it. Whatever it was, or was held to be, it was evidently quite familiar both to him and to those for whom he wrote. It presented no difficulty to them, though it presents a difficulty so insoluble, or so nearly insoluble, to us. It fell naturally into its place in their creed and convictions, though it is all but impossible to give it its due place in ours.

Obviously our only hope of framing a reasonable, an admissible and helpful, conception of it lies in our acquaintance with the leading thoughts and convictions of St. John, which were also those of the men to whom he wrote and who understood him so well that he did not need to explain his meaning to them. And perhaps, if we seek to recover his leading thoughts, or even the leading thoughts of this Epistle, we may arrive at a conception of this sin unto death which will at least lessen the perplexity and distress it has occasioned us.

These thoughts are summarized—sufficiently for our purpose—in Verses 11-18 of this Chapter. “This is the record” which St. John felt himself specially called to bear, “that God hath given us eternal life ; and that this life is in his Son.” In other words he held and taught that the

very life of God—*eternal life*—was manifested to men in Christ Jesus, and was manifested in Him that they might lay hold upon it and share it. If they believed in Him, they became of one heart, one nature, one spirit with Him. The “life” that was in Him passed into them. In St. John’s peculiar idiom, “they *had* the Son,” and therefore “they had *life*,” the only life worthy of that name. But if he who had the Son had life, “he that had not the Son of God had not the life” of God. He was dead to God, dead in sin. In St. John’s view, the proper life of man is life in God, the life manifested in Christ Jesus, and imparted by Christ Jesus to as many as believe on Him. All who had not this life were dead. All who *lost* it died. Any act which separated a man from Christ, which cut him off from the communion of life in Christ, was “a sin *unto death*”: for how should a man lose life, and yet not die? Like his brother apostles, St. John held that it was possible for a man, even after he had been quickened into life and called into the fellowship of Christ, to fall away from it, to deny and renounce “the Life indeed,” to apostatize from Him, to sink back into the death from which he had been delivered. How could they doubt it when one of themselves, Judas Iscariot, had thus fallen away from Christ, lapsed from the life of fellowship with Him into the death of separation from Him?

“There is a sin unto death,” then. But it does not inevitably follow that the communion thus broken can never be renewed, that those who have fallen from life into death can never be delivered from the death into which they have fallen. So long as a man exists repentance may be possible to him, faith may be possible, and therefore life may be possible. “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin,” even from sins against Himself, and against the life we have in Him.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, no doubt, as in that of

<sup>1</sup> 1 John i. 7-9.

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Iscariot, men pass out of this world impenitent and therefore unrenewed. And it may be that they can only be redeemed from death by the ministries of death itself, only taught to hate and renounce their sins by being delivered into the hands of their sins. We who trust "the larger hope" do not altogether lose hope even for them, though we sigh and tremble as we think of the miseries they must inevitably endure before they can come to have any hope for themselves.

The sin unto death must involve all the horrors of death here or hereafter. But it is not even inevitable that these horrors should be postponed to a future state. Even those who can cherish no hope for the impenitent who die in their sins need not add to their burden the sorrowful conviction that all who sin the sin unto death perish everlasting. Here, at least, in the life that now is, the gulf between death and life is not impassable. It has been crossed. "That wicked person" at Corinth, for example, whom St. Paul bade his brethren solemnly excommunicate from the Church, as one who had adjudged himself unworthy of eternal life, had manifestly sinned a sin unto death. He had cut himself off from life in Christ, and was to be cast out "as one dead." By his own act he had declared himself to be no longer a member of the body of Christ, because no longer animated by his spirit. And he is formally handed over to Satan "for destruction." But it is for the destruction "of the flesh" and of the fleshly mind. And the flesh is to be destroyed only "*that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*"<sup>1</sup> That happy day soon came. For, within a few months, St. Paul declares that the punishment of this wicked person is "sufficient"; that he is in danger of being swallowed up and swept away by the swelling waters of the very sorrow that has wrought

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians v. 1-5.

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life in him ; and that, as he has once more found life in Christ, he is at once to be restored to the fellowship of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The sin unto death I therefore judge to be any sin which so separates us from the life of Christ that, before we can be restored to it, we must pass through the pangs and terrors of death, must be compelled to feel that we have lost *Him*, and, in *Him*, our life ; that we have placed obstacles in the way which make it impossible for us to reach *Him*, and very hard for *Him* to reach us. If this terrible conviction should breed godly sorrow in us, we may hope that Christ will break through every obstacle, that He will forgive us and comfort us even in this world. But if it breed in us only a proud and self-willed remorse, or, worse still, if it should leave us hard and cold and indifferent, we shall then have condemned ourselves to the horrors of “the second death,” and, if saved at all, can only be “saved so as by fire.”

On the whole, then—though I would be understood to speak on this mystery with the modesty and reserve which it demands, and am very far from supposing that I have reached a complete solution of it—I think we may assume that the sin unto death is not any single and enormous act of wickedness taken by itself; but that it is rather a state of the soul, a state of separation from the life of God, which is the proper life of man, into which even those who have been quickened and redeemed may sink, and which is likely to reveal itself in their general bent and course of conduct, though it *may* come to a head in some decisive act which the Church cannot overlook. I think, too, we may be sure that those who are overwhelmed with grief and shame at the thought of having fallen into this sin are precisely those who have not committed it; or that, at least, they are precisely those who, like the wicked person

<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians ii. 6-11.

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at Corinth, are being cleansed from it. Their sorrow, like his, is an omen of life, of life everlasting.

III. But, besides the recognized difficulty, the Verse contains an unrecognized difficulty about *Prayer*. And did we not dread God more than we love Him, and care more to pry into the darkness than to walk in the light, I really do not see how it has come to pass that the threatening of this Verse has made so deep an impression upon us, while, so far as I can discover, its promise has absolutely made no impression at all.

Ever since St. John wrote his Epistle all the Church, if not all the world, has been anxious to know what the sin unto death is; but who has pondered and wrestled with *the prayer unto life?* Who has studied and acted on the wonderful and gracious words, “If any man see his brother sin a sin not unto death, *he shall ask, and God shall give him life for them that sin not unto death*”? Nay, which of us has so much as marked that there was any wonder in these most wonderful words, or any rebuke in them, or any encouragement? And yet what astonishing words they are! how pregnant both with encouragement and with rebuke!

When *we* see our brother sin, we are commonly stirred up to suspect, to censure, to dislike him; but which of us is stirred up to pray for him? And even if we do pray for him—pray that he may be taught to see and feel and confess his sins, or even pray that his sins may be forgiven him—yet which of us is bold enough to ask that he may have “life”—a life so full, so pure, so potent, that it will conquer and purge away all his sins; and to believe that, in answer to our prayer, God will give him life, or, in St. John’s still more emphatic idiom, give *us* life *for him*?

This, surely, is the true wonder of the passage, that it should hold so great a promise and that, nevertheless, we should have overlooked it; that God should have put so

gracious and singular a power into our hands, and that we should have made so little use of it, or even no use of it !

When we see our brother sin a sin of conceit, for example, or of self will, or of ill temper, or any one of the thousand sins which we admit not to be unto death, because, though inconsistent with the life of Christ, they do not wholly separate him from it, we are hurt and offended ; we hope that he will know better and do better some day ; and even to reach this point is held to be a stretch of Christian charity. But such poor charity as this leaves us far below the mark at which St. John would have us aim. According to him, the first and natural effect produced on us by the faults and sins we find it so hard not to resent should be to drive us to prayer—prayer, not for ourselves, but for our offending brother. He would have us ask that the life of Christ may so grow and unfold itself within him as to deliver him from his faults and sins. But which of us does that ? Which of us believes even that it is in our power to get life—more life and fuller—for him ?

Yet St. John assures us that it *is* in our power. If we ask life for the brother who has trespassed against us, God, says the Apostle, will give him life, nay, give us life for him ! Astonishing as the promise is, how could St. John but hold it to be true ? It is but a plain inference from the principles on which we have already heard him insist. This eternal life has been manifested to men that they may have it. It is God's will and intention that they should share in this life. Plainly, therefore, in asking life for an offending brother, we are asking a thing “according to his will.” “And this is the confidence we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to his will, He heareth us.”

Wonderful as the promise is, therefore, it is a fair and simple deduction from the first principles of the Gospel, at least of the Gospel according to St. John. And one thing is quite certain ; viz., that, if we believed it and

acted on it, it would give a strange vitality to that Christian "fellowship" on which the Apostle lays so much stress, though in our hands it is in no small danger of degenerating into a pretentious unreality. For if when we saw any member of the Christian community sin, instead of breaking out into censures and rebukes or cherishing toward him a silent ill-will and suspicion, we all with one consent began to pray for him, to ask life for him; and if in our whole manner to him we shewed that we believed God to have heard and answered our prayer, our fellowship with him in Christ would become a vigorous and sustaining reality both to him and to us. How could we but feel that "he had fellowship with us, and that our fellowship was with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ"?

This, indeed, might be one of the chief ways in which the promise would be fulfilled. For if the brother who had sinned, and was haunted by the consciousness of his sin, felt that the whole Christian community was praying for him; if he saw them behaving as if they knew they were answered, knew that God had given him life and expected to see him use it, might he not be constrained "to match the promise in their eyes," to meet their expectation, to respond to their love, to renounce and abandon his sin, and to rise into the very "life" they had asked for him?

The answer to prayer, the fulfilment of the gracious promise, would not, of course, be immediate and direct in every case. In some cases, no doubt, that answer would come through the very punishments which chastised the sin and quickened a longing for deliverance. But life, eternal life, is worth waiting for, worth suffering for. No answer to prayer is, in every case, immediate and direct. And if we believe it to be God's will that none should perish, but that all should have life everlasting, how can we doubt that, when we ask God for life, sooner or later, directly

or indirectly, “we shall have the petition we have desired of Him”?

IV. Another unrecognized difficulty of this Verse is that the Apostle declares every departure from the Divine Will to be a separation from the Divine Life, and yet admits that many of the sins which sever us from life are, nevertheless, not sins unto death. He bids us ask for life—as though life had been lost—for the very man whose sin he admits not to be fatal; and yet how should a man lose life and not die?

The difficulty meets us again in Verses 17 and 18, while here it is complicated by one of St. John’s habitual idioms, and rendered still more difficult. “All unrighteousness is sin;” “whosoever is born of God doth not sin;” and yet “there is a sin not unto death.” Taken together, these three phrases—which succeed one another in the Verses just cited, though in a different order to that in which I have arranged them—imply, that every wrong or unrighteous act separates us from the life of God—for “he that is born of God doth not sin;” and yet that every such separation from eternal life does not involve eternal death.

Now it would be easy to evade this difficulty, while seeming to remove it, by saying that just as there are many things which injure our physical life, which lower its power and lessen its scope, but which nevertheless are not fatal to it, so also, if there are some wounds which are fatal to our spiritual life, there are others from which it may and does recover. That, so far as it goes, is quite true, no doubt; but it does not really explain St. John’s peculiar terminology, nor does it meet the difficulty his terminology suggests frankly and fully. He says, “whosoever is born of God sinneth not,” and the phrase is not an exceptional, or even a rare, one in his writings. It recurs again and again, especially in Chapter iii. of this Epistle, and takes even such a positive and absolute form as this: “Whosoever is born

of God doth not commit sin ; for *his* seed remaineth in him ; and *he cannot sin*, because he is born of God.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the Verse before us, he speaks of those who have been born of God as sinning sins not unto death, and even as sinning sins which are unto death. But how should those sin who “cannot” sin ?

The simple fact is that St. John, like St. Paul, held that in every one of us there are two natures, two selves, two men striving together for the mastery ; the one born of God and walking after the spirit, the other coming of evil and walking after the flesh. St. Paul<sup>2</sup> called them the inward man and the outward man, and, again, the spiritual man and the carnal man, and spoke of them as fulfilling “the law of the mind” and “the law in the members.” St. John distinguished between that in us which is, and that which is not, born of God ; between that in us which walketh in the light, and that which walketh in the darkness. Even we ourselves speak of the true self in us and the false self, or of the better nature and the worse, or of the ideal man and the actual man. The fact which underlies all these various terminologies is one and the same : viz., that as there is that in us which loves evil and does it, so also there is that in us which loves good and clings to it even when it cannot do it. Even when we are at our worst, even when we suffer the lower or baser self to rule in us, and do that which we know to be wrong, we are conscious of “a will to do good,” conscious at least of a something in us which protests against the evil while we do it and mourns over it when it is done, which will never consent to it or take part in it. And this we call our true self, our best self—*this* that will bear no part nor lot in any sin we commit. St. John and St. Paul word our conception in a different way indeed ; but all that they add to it is (1) the affirmation that, when this inward and

<sup>1</sup> 1 St. John iii. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Romans vii.

better self, or man, has been impregnated with the life of God, when it has laid hold of that eternal life which was manifested in Christ Jesus, it becomes capable of subduing, absorbing, transforming the lower nature which wars against it ; and (2) the warning that, even when this eternal life has been quickened within us, unless we cherish it and walk by it, we may lose it—may grow hard and cold and indifferent, may even suffer the lower nature to conquer the higher and hold it in bondage, if not utterly and for ever to destroy it by subduing it to its own base quality or likeness.

Whatever contradiction, or apparent contradiction, there may be in the terms they employ, therefore, or whatever allowance we may be disposed to make for the terms and idioms of their age, the fact which they set forth is quite familiar to us ; it constitutes the very secret and mystery of our human nature. We feel in ourselves, the very strife which they describe ; we recognize the victory they promise us, if we are true to the better self and to God, in them themselves and in thousands of our neighbours who share their spirit and are treading in their steps ; and we see the terrible defeat and ruin against which they warn us, not only in Iscariot, in Demas, and in the excommunicated sinner of Corinth, but also, alas, in many of our fellows who did once walk well and stoutly in the ways of Christ, but have now fallen away from their life in Him. Even in those who have won the victory, and won it most conspicuously, while we recognize a nature or self that never gave consent to sin, we recognize also a nature which only too effectually moved them to do the thing they would not, so that even a Paul bemoaned himself as the very chief of sinners, and even a John, long after, he was “born of God,” could write, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

And it is in these experiences of our own, and of those

who were in Christ before us, that we find our best explanation of the sins which *are* unto death and of the sins which are *not* unto death, and come to understand how an inspired Apostle could affirm that that in us which is born of God cannot sin, and yet in the same breath confess that “if we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar.” The better self, the better man in us—*this* is that in us which cannot sin, because it is born and quickened of God; the worse or lower self, the outward man of the flesh—*this* is that in us which commits sin, because as yet it is not redeemed from vanity and corruption, so that “the good we would we do not, and the evil which we would not, that we do.” So long as this better self is gaining on, so long even as it is striving against, the lower unregenerate self, our sins are not sins unto death; but so soon as we cease from the strife with evil, and suffer the lower self to usurp an undisputed authority over us, we sin the sins which are unto death; we are no longer trying to obey the law of the mind; even the will to do good is no longer present with us.

S. Cox.

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*THE HISTORICAL CHRIST OF ST. PAUL.*

II. FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS.

1 CORINTHIANS xi. 23–26.—We have now come to what has always appeared to us the most vital question in the whole field of apologetics—the genuineness of that narrative which St. Paul gives of the Last Supper. As we have already said, it is a test case; on our verdict upon it will depend our admission, or our denial, that the Christ whom St. Paul proclaimed was recognized by the Apostle himself as a Christ of history. But it is not merely, nor even mainly, on this ground that we attach apologetic importance to the Pauline