

I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them. Now, therefore, go to, speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the Lord, Behold I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you; return ye now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good" (Chap. xviii. 7 *seq.*). This moral design of the prophet makes it to be a characteristic of prophecy that the actual conditions of the prophet, and the state of things and parties among the people when he lived, should be the things which he makes the basis of his words. And from the appearance of such things, from the condition of the people alluded to, and its political relations and the like, we may draw an inference as to the time when the prophet lived. He may be assumed to have been an eyewitness of the movements and a participator in the events which he describes.

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ABRAHAM'S GOSPEL.

JOHN viii. 56; GALATIANS iii. 8.

WE all, even those of us who never formulated the impression, feel very much more at home with the men of the Patriarchal than with the men of the Levitical age. Abraham, Isaac, and even Jacob, command a more intimate sympathy from us than Aaron or any of the great priests of Israel, or than any of the zealots for the Law, down even to the Pharisees and Scribes who flourished two thousand years after them. Even Moses, the great lawgiver himself, despite the romance of his life, hardly touches us so close. In these Arab sheykhs of an antique

age there is somehow a more *modern* tone than in most of their descendants. They come closer to us; they more nearly resemble us; we could talk more easily with them than with almost any of their children.

Partly, no doubt, this close sympathy arises from "the noble simplicity" of their lives, their naturalness, the striking individuality of their character. But, mainly, it springs, I think from that similarity of religious faith which breeds similarity of religious experience. Like us, the patriarchs were more broad, simple, and free in their religious conceptions than their children who were "born under the law;" their worship was more moral, less ecclesiastical—more in the spirit and less in the letter, and brought them therefore into a more immediate communion with Heaven. They thought of God very much as we think of Him, and approached Him very much as we approach Him. To them, as to us, He was a Promise-maker rather than a Lawgiver; a kindly Friend, with whom men might walk and talk, rather than an offended Judge, for ever suspecting men of crime, and for ever threatening them with the punishment due to their crimes. No cloud of injunctions and prohibitions came between their souls and the Sun of the soul, making a darkness even in the daytime. God was their Strength in every hour of their weakness, their Shield in every time of danger. He was a Light that arose in their darkness, and brought a dawn of hope even into the night of their sin and misery—changing the very punishments of transgression into a discipline of holiness.

And as with their conceptions of God, so also with their conceptions of human life and destiny. *They* did not walk, as their pious descendants walked, in a narrow round of formal duty staked out by precept and prohibition, and with no speculation in their eyes that reached beyond "the ignorant present." They walked, as we walk, by faith, not by sight; by a faith which grasped great principles and

applied them to the varying needs and demands of every new day: and hence their knowledge grew wider by experience, and the very disappointments of hope led them to cherish larger hopes, hopes that could not make them ashamed. Through its whole extent, indeed, the Bible affirms "faith" to have been the main attitude and posture of their souls—faith, and not that devotion to "work" or "works" which was the characteristic product of the law that came by Moses. And when once we understand the Biblical antithesis between "faith" and "works," it is easy to see that faith must necessarily produce a higher and larger style of life than works. Too often the antithesis is supposed to lie between belief in certain "mysteries," a belief in no necessary connexion with life and character, and an obedience to certain divine laws which must of necessity mould the character and life. But the true antithesis is between a faith in certain spiritual facts and principles which cannot but re-mould and raise the whole tenour of human life, and the observance of certain ecclesiastical statutes and forms which may leave the vital and formative elements of life untouched. Practically, "faith" *must* busy itself with the weightier matters of truth and righteousness, love and mercy; while "works"—as the great historical example, the history of the Jews, demonstrates—may be so occupied with tithes of anise and cummin as to neglect the weightier matters of the law. And who does not see that even if we take the latter at its best, if we assume that devotion to the law includes a constant reference to moral duty as well as to ecclesiastical form—which in practice it hardly ever does; yet who does not see that this obedience to mere outward precept must produce a life in every way much less free and noble than the life which is moulded on faith in great principles, and is thus drawn into an inward and vital correspondence with eternal realities? Even when the outsides of these two

lives are similar, if not alike, yet the faith which works by love must inevitably produce finer character, a nobler and more generous spirit, a wider and more enduring obedience than mere deference to command. All the Scriptures, therefore, which affirm *faith* to have been the cardinal and animating motive of the patriarchs, virtually attribute to them a far higher spiritual position and grade than any which simple deference to law could possibly have conferred upon them.

We may reach the same conclusion in another and a much more striking way. We are all familiar with St. Paul's thesis, that the Gospel is more and better than the Law, in every way an immense advance upon it. But probably we are not equally familiar with the thesis, that the Gospel is also *more ancient* than the Law. Yet this too was his contention. He not only attributes "faith" to the patriarchs, and so implies their possession of a gospel, since faith must have some "good news" from God on which to work; he expressly argues that they had the very gospel which we possess. In his Epistle to the Galatians he affirms that "the Scriptures, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham.*" And he goes on to argue that that gospel, or covenant, "confirmed beforehand by God," could not be disannulled by "the law which came four hundred and thirty years after," and came only because men had disabled themselves from receiving the good tidings of a universal redemption. It is true that, in this argument, St. Paul had a particular and limited end in view; but we may be sure that he would not have shrunk from any inference which his argument fairly involved. And even the particular end he had in view was nothing less than this: that from the beginning God both had, and announced to men, an intention to confer a spiritual "blessing," a spiritual redemption, on all the families of the earth. *This*

was the gospel which, according to him, was preached beforehand to Abraham; and is it not, substantially, the very gospel which is now preached to us?

According to him, too, the law was "added" only "because of transgression;" only because men had grown so ignorant, so alienated from all truth and goodness, that they needed a pedagogue to help them with their lessons, and to lead them to the school of Christ, where this ancient gospel was to be taught in all its fulness and grace.

In fine, St. Paul affirms both *the inferiority* of the law to the gospel, and *the priority* of the gospel over the law. But if the patriarchs had our gospel, what wonder that we find a more modern and kindred tone in them than in the sons of the law who lived long after them? What marvel is it that we find ourselves nearer to them, and more at home with them, than even with the Scribes and Pharisees who, in their ignorant devotion to the law that came by Moses, rejected the grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ?

No student of St. Paul's Epistles can well doubt that *he* found the gospel preached to Abraham mainly in the great promise made to Abraham; viz. that in him and in his seed all the families of the earth should be blessed; or that in this promise he saw the prophecy of a spiritual redemption as wide as the world, a redemption open to all men, men of every race and creed, a redemption actually coming upon as many as believed and by faith proved themselves to be the children of faithful Abraham. Abraham's children on the carnal side might strive, as for four thousand years the Jews have striven, to limit the scope of this great promise to themselves; but it was because Abraham saw, and rejoiced to see, in it the prediction of a universal salvation, a universal benediction, that St. Paul could say that the gospel had been preached to the father of the faithful, and that our Lord Himself could say to the Jews, when He

was reproaching their blindness : " Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad."

For what, after all, was " the day " of Christ but his reign, his kingdom, the truth and grace which came by Him ; the salvation from evil, the emancipation into the love and service of goodness, which He effected for us for all men ? When we speak of the day of any great man or teacher—Luther's day or Calvin's day, for example—we do not refer, mainly or primarily, to the general form and pressure of the age in which he lived, but to what was peculiar to it or him, to what distinguishes it from other times or him from other men. We do not approach the real meaning of the phrase unless we bear in mind the distinctive principles he taught, the special work he did, the change he wrought in the mental and moral habits of his cotemporaries. In like manner when we speak of " the day of Christ," we can only refer to what was special and distinctive in his teaching, his life, his work, his influence in his own age and on the world at large. And when we try to sum up in general terms the *differentia* of Christ, that which made Him unlike and raised Him so far above all that ever came before Him, what can we say but that He broke through all the bounds within which men had hitherto restrained the love of God ; and instead of preaching, with the Greek sages, a salvation for the wise, or, with the Hebrew lawyers, a salvation for the good ; instead, in short, of preaching a salvation for this class or that, this race or that, He proclaimed a universal religion, a universal redemption, such as Abraham foresaw ?

The Jewish rabbis, with the narrow pedantry which seems native to them, explain our Lord's saying by conjecturing that, when Abraham fell into a deep sleep at the foot of the altar on which he had laid his sacrifices (Genesis xv.), he dreamed, and that in his dream the whole subsequent history of his descendants passed before him, down

even to the days of the Messiah. And many Christian divines, as they brood over this difficult Verse can find no rest for the sole of their foot until they alight on some specific occasion on which Abraham looked through the ages with prophetic eyes, and saw the Son of Man as He went about doing good, or even as He expiated the sins of men upon the tree. But if we have any touch of that largeness of heart which was common both to Abraham and Paul, we shall refuse to limit our thoughts to any one point of time or occasion. We shall say that *whenever* he believed in the promise which God made and confirmed to him again and again, and found in it the hope and assurance of a spiritual benediction which was to extend to all the families of the earth, Abraham embraced a veritable gospel; and that so often and so long as he recognized this gospel in the promise, "he saw the day of Christ afar off, and was glad."

Nor would I for one limit his perception of the gospel and day of Christ even to this recognition of a universal blessing and redemption, though, in all probability, it was this chiefly which St. Paul had in his mind when he spoke of Abraham as having the gospel preached to him centuries before the law was formulated by Moses. There was *much* in the religious conceptions of Abraham—and indeed in those of the patriarchs in general—which is of the very stuff and substance of that gospel which is being preached in all the world to-day. He cherished many thoughts that were ampler and nobler than those bred by the law; so that as we pass from the Book of Genesis to the Books of Exodus and Leviticus we cannot but feel that we sink to a lower plane of spiritual life, and that by consequence the horizons of our thought are narrowed in.

For example; Abraham saw in God *the Friend* of men, whereas the law set Him forth, or was understood to set Him forth, as their Ruler to whom they must pay tribute,

or as an austere Judge whose anger must be appeased by offering and sacrifice. So profoundly did this conception of the Divine Nature enter into and mould his creed and conduct, and so deep was the impression it left on his followers, that to this day Abraham is known as "the friend of God." So familiar is this title in myriads on myriads of minds that almost every Arab, almost every Mahomedan indeed, abbreviates it, and will think you strangely ignorant and unlettered if, when he speaks simply of "the Friend," you do not at once take him to mean Abraham, the friend of God.

So, again, Abraham conceived of God as *the Saviour* of men. It is not simply that on one occasion he could say, "The Lord himself will provide the lamb," and had his faith justified when he was taught to substitute the ram caught in a thicket by his horns for his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved. Throughout his career we can see that he believed in the forgiveness of sins as an act of pure grace on the part of God, and not as a concession purchased by costly offerings and penances of loss and pain. We can see that he conceived of God as demanding self-sacrifice rather than sacrifice, the self-sacrifice of love, and as Himself *sharing* the love and self-sacrifice which He demanded of men. But no mere devotee of the law ever rose to such a conception of God as that. *They* believed that the sacrifices of the law *could* take away sin; and hence, having offered their sacrifices, they trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others. Themselves more prone to exact than to bestow, to take than to give, they made out God to be altogether such an one as themselves, and never dreamed that in his love and pity, so far from sparing Himself or his Son, He would freely give Him up for us all.

And, once more, Abraham, in common with the other patriarchs, saw the *life and immortality* which Christ was

afterwards to bring to light from the darkness into which it had been dropped by the law. The rewards of the law were but promises for the life which now is. No Jew, unless indeed he listened with an open heart to the teaching of the prophets, *who preserved and developed the gospel preached beforehand to Abraham*; no Jew who confined himself strictly to the law had any stedfast and certain hope of life eternal. But the fathers, the patriarchs, came to understand, from the very disappointment of their earthly hopes, that God had some better thing in store for them; that He was leading them toward and fitting them for glory, honour, and immortality by all the changes and experiences of time: "These all *died* in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen and greeted them from afar, and having confessed that they were but pilgrims and strangers on the earth"; proving, by that very confession, that they "desired a better country, even a heavenly."

It would be easy to multiply points of religious thought and experience at which Abraham rose high above the sons of the law, and grasped principles and hopes which were beyond their reach. But those already mentioned will suffice to indicate in how true and deep a sense he anticipated the gospel which came by Christ, and how large and comprehensive his gospel was. Conceiving of God as the Friend of man, whom he was to trust, love, and obey; confiding in Him as the great Saviour of men, who demanded self-sacrifice of them because self-sacrifice was the law of his own being and the condition of his own blessedness; believing that by all the changes and crosses of time God was preparing him for a better, even a heavenly and eternal life; and, not content with life and salvation for himself and his seed, looking forward to a day on which all the families of the earth should share that supreme blessing with him and with them: what essential element

in the gospel in which we believe was wanting in him? Substantially he was of one faith and of one hope with us.

But what we have specially to mark is, that so often as Abraham's tried and heroic spirit rested in any one of the great hopes and truths comprised in his gospel and rejoiced in it, he saw the day of Christ afar off and was glad. For that surely is the largest and noblest interpretation of our Lord's words concerning him, and infinitely more satisfactory than any attempt, however successful, to find some one occasion on which Abraham looked through the ages with prophetic eyes, and saw in the remote distance some dim shadow of the Son of Man. Taking the Verse thus, we feel it to be true not of a single moment in his life, and fulfilled not in some distant and dubious vision, but in the very substance of his faith and in the whole spirit and tenour of his life, in the glad fruition of his daily experience. *Whenever* he felt God to be his friend, whenever he looked up to Him for forgiveness and salvation, whenever he looked forward to the better country, whenever he cherished the hope of a redemption for the whole family of man, Abraham saw—Abraham lived in—the day of Christ.

More than once I have spoken of the Gospel of Abraham as the very gospel in which we believe. But do we believe in it? Do we believe, even when all things seem to be against us, that God is our Friend, and that He is compelling all things to work together for our good? Do we believe that He is our Saviour, and that He will utterly redeem us from all evil, even when the sense of personal evil is strongest upon us? and that He asks us to share in his strife against sin, and all the miseries involved in that strife, only that we may become perfect even as He is perfect and share in the joy of his love and self-sacrifice? Even when death seems nearest to us, even when those whom we love pass into its darkness, do we sincerely and heartily believe in that—

“ grand recoil
Of life resurgent from the soil
Wherein we drop this mortal spoil ”?

If we do, we share the faith, as well as the gospel, of faithful Abraham. If we do not, it cannot but shame us to reflect that, even now that Christ has come to shew us the saving love of a friendly God and to despoil the grave of its terrors, we have not risen so high as the patriarch who rejoiced in the day of Christ forty centuries ago.

EDITOR.

THE EPISTLE TO TITUS.

IV.—THE FALSE TEACHERS OF CRETE. *Chapter i. 10–16.*

IT is not “naked truth” which meets us in the New Testament, but truth armed at all points and doing battle with manifold error. From this there results a great advantage for the student of revelation. The truth of God is all the better understood when it is beheld in divergence and conflict with untruth. Nor is this an advantage which is wholly lost when religious controversy changes its form through lapse of time. Such a passage as this, for example, ought not to be deemed obsolete, because the exact type of teaching prevalent in Crete has long since passed away. Not only must the truth itself remain identical in every age, although it assume various forms; to a large extent the same may be said of error. For though each generation has its own warfare to wage with new shapes of falsehood and mistake, yet all these will be found to spring out of a few roots which are constantly present in human nature; so that the same radical error tends to crop up afresh in successive periods, and the foes we have to contend with to-day are “old foes with a new face.”