

ST. PAUL ON PREDESTINATION.

PHILIPPIANS ii. 12, 13.

BOTH Calvinists and Arminians—that is to say, those who maintain the doctrine of election and predestination in the most rigid sense, and those who maintain some independent efficiency in the will of man—have claimed the passage above referred to, each for their own view ; and it has been said, sarcastically but truly, that the opposite treatment of the passage by those two schools consists simply in this, that the Arminian reads it, “ *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure.*” While the Calvinist reads it, “ *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure.*”

Now it is doing injustice to this most beautiful and suggestive passage to bring it into controversy at all. There is a real difficulty in the metaphysics of the question concerning the relation between the will of God and the will of man ; opinions are, and will continue to be, divided upon it, and it may conceivably be to some extent elucidated by careful thought, and by the examination of the inspired writings. But the passage now before us, though by its mode of expression it suggests the difficulty, has absolutely no bearing on its solution. Its purpose is not doctrinal, or rather not theoretical, at all, but practical. It follows one of the strongest assertions to be found in Holy Scripture of Christ’s former humiliation and present glory ; and it is followed by an exhortation to purity in the midst of an evil world. The difficult and mysterious question of the relation between the will of God and the will of man was not before the Apostle’s mind when he wrote it ; and the paradox and apparent contradiction—speaking in the first clause as if man’s will were everything,

and in the second as if God's will were everything—is due to St. Paul's habit of writing in a condensed and elliptical style, leaving the reader to seize for himself the connexion between the thoughts. We do not really add anything to St. Paul's thought—we only bring out what was present though unseen, as by "development" in the photographic process—if we supply the connecting link as follows; I quote the words of the Revised Version exactly, and supply the words in italics: "Work out your own salvation; for, *though it must be with fear and trembling because of the weakness of your mortal nature, yet ye know that ye work not alone, but it is God which worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure.*"

But how is it possible for the will of God to work through the will of man without superseding and annulling it? This is a mystery which man's understanding is not altogether competent to solve; but its solution is in no way necessary to faith in God; just as the somewhat similar, though lower, mysteries of the relation between the vital and the chemical forces in the processes of nutrition and organization, and between the mental forces and the unconscious functions of the nervous system—in briefer words, between matter and life, and between unconscious life and mind—must be recognized as insoluble, without, therefore, giving up all research into the laws of life and of mind. From another passage, though not from that now before us, it appears that St. Paul was aware of the existence of an insoluble mystery in the relation of the human to the Divine will, but it does not appear to have been in any degree a cause of perplexity to him.

In Romans viii. 29, the Revisers have improved the style of the passage by substituting "foreordain" for "predestinate"; "to ordain" being a common word in Biblical English, while "to destine" and "destiny" do not occur there. I shall follow their example by substituting "fore-

ordain" and "foreordination" for "predestinate" and "predestination."

Controversialists on both sides will probably agree that the question between Calvinist and Arminian may be thus formulized: "Does God's foreordination depend on his foreknowledge, or his foreknowledge on his foreordination?" The Arminian places the foreknowledge first; the Calvinist places the foreordination first. What does St. Paul say on this subject?

But let us first ask the "previous question:" Was this question ever present to St. Paul's mind at all? I think we can shew that it was not.

Every one who has mastered the rudiments of the criticism of the New Testament is aware that the thirteen Epistles of St. Paul consist of four well marked groups, distinguished not so much by the subjects treated as by the time of the Apostle's life to which they belong. They are as follows:—(1) First and Second Thessalonians. (2) First and Second Corinthians, Galatians and Romans. (3) The Epistles of the first imprisonment, namely, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. (4) The Pastoral Epistles, namely, the two to Timothy and one to Titus.

It is no disparagement to the Apostle's inspiration to say that from the first to the second group, and from the second to the third—though not, I think, further—we can trace a change and progress in his views of Divine truth; a change not consisting in contradiction, but in development and completion. The Epistle to the Philippians thus contains his most matured views; and in that Epistle he has, as we see in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay—a passage written for exhortation and "edification" exclusively—stated in the most unqualified way the two mutually supplementary truths of the freedom of man's will and the supremacy of God's will, not only without attempting to solve the "antinomy" or apparent meta-

physical contradiction, but without shewing the slightest consciousness that there is any difficulty to be solved.

A consciousness of the difficulty is, however, shewn in a passage belonging to the previous group of Epistles, namely Romans ix. 14, *et seq.* It might be said, and perhaps has been said, that in the interval of some years between the writing of the Epistle to the Romans and that to the Philippians, the Apostle had become comparatively indifferent to questions of what is contemptuously called "mere controversial theology." But this is scarcely consistent with the fact that the passage from Philippians under consideration comes immediately after an eminently theological passage, containing one of the strongest declarations to be found anywhere of the pre-existence of Christ, and of his present power and glory. Yet we must infer from the construction of the sentence, that St. Paul, at the time when he wrote the Epistle to the Philippians, regarded the question of the relation of the will of man to the will of God as one which ought to cause no perplexity, and needs no solution.

The question in St. Paul's time was not felt as a practical one. Jews who were rejoicing that the promised Saviour had come, and Gentiles who knew that they had been saved by the Gospel of Christ from "abominable idolatries," were not likely to worry themselves and shew mistrust of their Saviour by asking, "How can I be certain of my own individual foreordination and election to eternal life?" But if this question, which has perplexed so many minds ever since the period of the Reformation, had been asked in St. Paul's time, we can see plainly enough from his writings how he would have answered it. Nine out of his thirteen Epistles are addressed, not to individuals but to congregations, and he always addresses the congregations as consisting of men whom God has called and chosen. Had such a question been addressed to him, we consequently cannot

doubt that his reply would have been something to this effect: "The fact of your Christian profession, and of your seeking salvation, is proof enough that you are of God's elect. God is your Father, and 'as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him' (Psalm ciii. 13). You are already in possession of all Christian privileges, and we have a right to be confident that 'He who has begun a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians i. 6). But these privileges may be lost by neglecting or abusing them; 'wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall'" (1 Cor. x. 12).

It is in this, and not in any absolute, sense that St. Paul habitually speaks of election. Probably the most signal passage of the kind is 1 Thessalonians i. 4, 5: "Knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election; how that our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance." Although St. Paul had heard the voice of Christ after his ascension, and had been caught up into the third heaven, he did not pretend to know more than the newest of his converts about the secret decrees of God; it was not a matter of revelation to him that the Christians of Thessalonica were of God's elect; and it is not possible that during his sojourn in Thessalonica he could have acquired such an intimate acquaintance with every individual member of the congregation as to be able to say that he felt a moral certainty of the final perseverance unto salvation of them all.

In one well-known passage, however, St. Paul departs from this his customary use of words, and speaks of calling, not only to Christian privileges, but to eternal glory. I mean Romans viii. 28, 30: "To them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose. For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, that

he might be the firstborn among many brethren; and whom he foreordained, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified." It is in no way strange, but quite consistent with all the analogies of language, that the Apostle should in this one passage speak of "God's calling" in a somewhat higher sense than the usual one. "Election" is not mentioned here, but this is a mere accident, not at all surprising when we remember that the technical language of the subject had not yet been formed. But we do injustice to this magnificent passage if we understand it as a revelation of the secret purposes of God. It goes on: "What shall we say then to these things? If God be for us, who is against us?" And from the 28th verse to the end of the Chapter, the entire passage is a hymn of confidence, triumph, and praise, such as would be impossible if, in the Apostle's belief, there were any reasonable ground for the fear that those who are really serving God and following Christ may not after all, in God's secret purpose, be elected to eternal life.

It is further to be remarked that St. Paul's language concerning the relation of the will of man to the will of God is uncertain, and what might be called wavering by those who demand a certain utterance on all controverted questions. In the passage from Philippians with which we began, we have seen that he forgets, or refuses to see, that there is any such question at all. In that from Romans which we have just been examining, he says: "Whom God foreknew, he also foreordained," from which expression, taken alone and interpreted by logical rules, we should infer that St. Paul regarded foreordination as depending on foreknowledge. But in another Epistle belonging to the same group, he says: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. xv. 10); and in the same Epistle, "Who maketh to differ? and what hast thou that

thou didst not receive?" It would be possible to answer this without logical absurdity, "I made myself to differ; and wherein I have made myself to differ, I have that which I did not receive." But St. Paul does not contemplate this as a possible answer; for he immediately goes on to say, "But if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Cor. iv. 7.) From a comparison of these passages, then, we arrive at the same conclusion as that forced on us by the passage in Philippians, namely, that St. Paul did not regard this question as one on which it is necessary to have any decided and formulated opinion.

I shall now endeavour to shew that the same conclusion is warranted by the passage, Romans ix. 6, *et seq.*, which has so often been quoted in proof of the most rigid predestinarianism. It is the only passage in which St. Paul shews any consciousness of moral or metaphysical difficulty arising out of the question of God's foreordination.

It is a digression, in the middle of a chapter that begins with a lamentation over the rejection of Christ by the mass of the people of Israel. He justifies the action of God in permitting this, by recalling that the promises to the children of Abraham were not to all the children, but only to the elect ones; to Isaac and not to Ishmael; to Jacob and not to Esau. And this election, to use a human mode of thought and speech, is purely arbitrary. The Apostle says of the sons of Isaac: "The children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth; it was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. Even as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." It would be impossible to assert more distinctly the unconditionalness of God's election. But to what were Jacob and Esau respectively elected? There is here nothing whatever about election to any position, good

or bad, in the eternal world. Jacob was loved by God, and was elected to be a prince of God, and an ancestor of David and of Christ. Esau was loved less; this is all that "hated" can mean here; for, in the usual sense of the word, hatred seeks to destroy (this is Aristotle's definition); and so far was God from destroying Esau, that he was permitted to receive a blessing, though an inferior one to his brother's, and to become the ancestor of a nation. "The elder served the younger;" but service, even the lowest, is not reprobation, and is scarcely compatible with it.

In this case there is no moral difficulty whatever. But we cannot say the same of the instance of Pharaoh, which is the one which the Apostle mentions next. He says—I quote the entire passage, Romans ix. 17–24, inserting remarks of my own, and marking them [thus]—

"The Scripture saith unto Pharaoh, For this very purpose did I raise thee up, that I might shew in thee my power, and that my name might be published abroad in all the earth. So then he hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardeneth."

[It is to be observed that in Biblical language "hardness of heart" does not mean cruelty, but judicial blindness; and to say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, means that he was abandoned to his own pride and obstinacy, just as the men of the Gentile world generally, according to St. Paul in this same Epistle, were "given over to a reprobate mind," as a punishment for "refusing to have God in their knowledge" (Rom. i. 28). In the ordinary Divine administration, the rejection of the means of grace is punished by their withdrawal; a truth which all systems of religious philosophy alike must accept as part of their data.]

"Thou wilt then say unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? for who understandeth his will?" [That is to say, Does not God's sovereignty, then, supersede and annul man's responsibility? If human actions are foreordained,

how can any man be judged guilty?] “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why didst thou make me thus? Or hath not the potter a right over the clay, from the same lump to make one part a vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known” [an allusion to Verse 17, where “the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, For this very purpose did I raise thee up, that I might shew in thee my power”], “endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted to destruction;” [fitted by what agency? This question is not asked nor answered here; but there can be no doubt of the Apostle’s belief that they are fitted to destruction, not by God’s will, but by their own fault. He does not say that God *makes* them so, but that God *endures* them. Compare 1 Timothy ii. 4: “God our Saviour, who willeth all men to be saved, and come to a knowledge of the truth”] “and that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy which he afore prepared unto glory, even us?”

To the question, “Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why didst thou make me thus?” it would be possible to reply, “When the thing formed has received from him that formed it a power to sin and a capacity to suffer, it may reasonably say, Why didst thou make me thus?” St. Paul, however, does not contemplate such a reply as this.

The illustration of the absolute sovereignty of God from the power and right of the potter over his clay, is an allusion to Jeremiah xviii. 6. But does St. Paul mean this as a full account of the matter? Does he really mean that the relation of God to his creatures is fitly and fully symbolized by the relation of a potter to his vessels? The present writer well remembers, during early life, being repelled from the study of St. Paul’s writings by the belief that

such was his doctrine. But the rest of his writings contain ample proof that he did not regard this argument as exhausting the question; and the passage before us, even if taken alone, contains proof that he does not regard this argument, or illustration, as containing a full account of the matter. The inconsistency of the metaphorical language shews his consciousness that the illustration is incomplete.

Has not the Divine Potter a right over the clay of human nature, of the same lump to make one vessel for an honourable and another for a dishonourable use, but each for its own use? (Compare 1 Cor. xii. 22, 24.) Moses was a vessel of honour; he honoured God, and was honoured by God. Pharaoh was a vessel of dishonour; he is remembered in history for his tyranny, cruelty, and infatuation. But God had his own use for each. Moses, willingly and gladly, served God by leading Israel out of Egypt and founding the Israelite nation. Pharaoh also, but unwillingly and blindly, served God, by expelling Israel from Egypt; for had the Israelites been treated by their masters with kindness and friendliness, they would have been certain, so far as man can see, to be merged and lost in the Egyptian people, and there would have been no Israelite nation.

But though the Divine Potter makes at his own pleasure vessels of honour and vessels of dishonour, there is no suggestion in this passage, nor anywhere else in St. Paul's writings, that He makes vessels in order that they may be

"Destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void."

The forming of vessels for different and opposite uses is no doubt directly referred by St. Paul to the sovereignty of God's will; but this does not answer the further question concerning vessels which, so far as man can see, are of no use whatever, and fitted only to destruction. In a more abstract form, this is the question of the relation of the

Divine will to human sin;—not particular acts of sin like Pharaoh's refusal to let Israel depart, but sinfulness generally. On this subject, St. Paul has absolutely nothing to suggest; he only speaks of the longsuffering of God; but where he speaks of vessels of wrath, he is careful not to mention the potter.¹ Whether conscious or not on the Apostle's part—and I believe it is perfectly conscious—this failure to carry the metaphor consistently through the passage is a confession that he cannot give a full account of the matter—that the difficulty cannot be fully solved.

At the end of the digression on election, the Apostle goes back to the more familiar subjects of the unfaithfulness of Israel, the calling of the Gentiles, and the salvation offered to those who will believe in Christ. These occupy the rest of Chapter ix. and the whole of Chapter x. But in Chapter xi. he goes on to a prophecy of the ultimate restoration of Israel to God's favour. This is one of the most remarkable passages in all his writings. It is a difficult passage, partly because the Apostle does not keep to the main thread of his argument, but goes off into digressions; and it may help us to understand it if we read it with the omission of all that is not essential to the main argument, as follows:—

“I say then, Did God cast off his people? God forbid . . . God did not cast off his people which he foreknew Or wot ye not what the Scripture saith of Elijah? how he pleaded with God against Israel, Lord . . . I am left alone. . . . But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have left for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of

¹ It is curious how the word “reprobate,” which in the language of Scripture means rejected on trial and as a consequence of trial, like a gun that will not stand the proof charge, came in Calvinistic theology to mean rejected by arbitrary decree, independently of trial. To my mind, this violent change in the meaning of a common and perfectly intelligible word, is a strong presumption against the truth of the theory under the influence of which the change was made.

grace. . . . What then? That which Israel seeketh for, that he obtained not; but the election obtained it, and the rest were hardened. . . . I say then, Did they stumble that they might fall? God forbid; but by their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. Now if their fall is the riches of the world, and their loss the riches of the Gentiles, how much more their fulness? . . . For if the casting away of them is the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead? And if the firstfruit is holy, so is the lump; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, . . . they also, if they continue not in their unbelief, shall be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. . . . For I would not, brethren, have you ignorant of this mystery, that a hardening in part hath befallen Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in; and so all Israel shall be saved. . . . As touching the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes; but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes. For the gifts and the calling of God are not repented of. For as ye in time past were disobedient to God, but now have obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so have these also now been disobedient, that by the mercy shewn to you they also may now obtain mercy. For God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all. O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out! . . . For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things."

Before we consider the meaning of this difficult passage taken altogether, let us enquire the meaning of the 16th verse: "If the firstfruit is holy, so is the lump; and if the root is holy, so are the branches." Are these two metaphors identical in meaning? Is this verse merely a speci-

men of parallelism, like that of Hebrew poetry? The meaning of the second clause admits of no doubt; the following verses shew that the root means the Patriarchs, and the branches the individual children of Israel; so that the same is here stated metaphorically which is stated without metaphor in the 28th verse: "As touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes." But I venture to suggest that the meaning of the former of the two metaphors is different; that the "lump" represents the human race, and the "firstfruit" the elect Israel, the seed of Abraham, who is not only holy and blessed himself, but a blessing to all the nations of the earth. This interpretation would be quite inadmissible if it were not relevant to the context, but it is suggested by the mention, in the previous verse, of the world at large receiving a blessing through Israel: "If the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead?" And this is consistent with St. Paul's use of the metaphor elsewhere: "Christ the firstfruit; then they that are Christ's at his coming" (1 Cor. xv. 23). Moreover, the same metaphor is used with the same meaning by St. James, who had much more in common with St. Paul than many are inclined to admit, and was the author of that circular letter which was the charter of Christian freedom and equality to the Gentile churches (Acts xv.). He says: "Of his own will begat he us by the Word of Truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James i. 18). If this suggestion as to St. Paul's meaning is correct, the verse now under consideration (Ver. 16) means: "Mankind is holy for the sake of the elect Church, even as Israel is holy, and beloved (see ver. 28) for the sake of the fathers." But whether this interpretation is admitted or not, I see no danger of error in uniting the passage from St. James with that from St. Paul, and reading on from the one to the other thus: "He begat us, that we should

be a kind of firstfruit of his creatures." "And if the firstfruit is holy, so is the lump."

But this question scarcely affects the interpretation of the entire chapter. The chief difficulty respecting the entire passage is to determine of what the Apostle is speaking, and especially, of whom does he speak when he declares (Ver. 26) that at the last "all Israel shall be saved?" Who are the Israel spoken of? Is Israel here merely a synonym for the elect people of God, and is this to be read simply as a declaration that none of the sheep of Christ shall perish, neither shall any one be able to tear them out of God's hand? (John x. 28, 29). This no doubt is true, and a most blessed and valuable truth; but it ought to be evident to any one who reads the verse now before us in its connexion with what precedes and what follows, that this is not the Apostle's thought in the present passage. The primary reference is to Israel as a nation, and the whole passage is a declaration, that as the rejection of Christ by the Israelite people has led to the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles, so the mercy now extended to the Gentiles will in the fulness of time be the means of bringing back Israel to the fold of God, and the entire nation will become obedient to God in Christ.

But is this all? What has the Apostle to say of those brethren of his who in his own time rejected the Saviour, and of whom he saw that God's wrath was coming on them to the uttermost? (1 Thess. ii. 16.) Had he regarded God's dealings with man from the same point of view as Moses, this would have been no difficulty at all; the question would scarcely have arisen. The blessings of the Mosaic dispensation were national blessings, and though the generation that came out of Egypt with Moses died in the wilderness, yet the nation of Israel entered into the Promised Land, and God's promise was kept. But could such an answer as this satisfy St. Paul, whose whole mind was dominated by

the thoughts of the resurrection of the dead, Christ's future judgment of mankind, and eternal life? When he said that all Israel is to be ultimately saved, is it possible that he only meant to say that every individual of the generations of Israel who shall live in the last times shall be saved, but that for the generations who have rejected Christ there is no hope? The rejection of Christ by his fellow-Israelites, he tells us, caused him "great sorrow and unceasing pain in his heart" (ix. 1); and for this was there no cure or consolation except in the thought of a salvation in the indefinitely remote future, from which they were to be excluded whom he knew on earth,—his kinsfolk, his playmates at Tarsus, his fellow-students at Jerusalem? Were these to remain under the wrath of God for ever? His words are inconsistent with such a belief. He asserts that the Israelites who have rejected Christ are to receive mercy at last. "Did they stumble that they might fall? God forbid" (xi. 11). "As ye (Gentiles) in time past were disobedient to God, but now have obtained mercy by their disobedience, even so have these also now been disobedient, that by the mercy shewn to you they also may now obtain mercy" (xi. 31).

But what of unbelieving Gentiles? The answer as to Gentiles is the same as the answer as to Jews. If salvation is universal for the one, it is universal for the other; St. Paul preached to the Gentiles a Gospel in which the principle of nationality was expressly abandoned (see the entire Epistle to Galatians). In the eternal world all such distinctions disappear, and "the Gentiles are fellow-heirs" (Eph. iii. 6).

Had not St. Paul believed in the final salvation of all, it appears scarcely possible that he could have ended his meditation on the fate of the historical Israel with the burst of triumph and praise which concludes the 11th Chapter; nor could he have said that "God hath shut up

all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all" (xi. 32), if he had believed that the disobedience and sin were universal and the mercy only partial. Nor do these words yield any consistent meaning, if we understand by them that God has shut up all the men of one generation unto disobedience, in order that He may have mercy on all those of another generation. Finally, St. Paul says in the concluding verse of the chapter, that *unto God are all things*; that is to say, all God's creatures, however far they may have wandered from Him, shall be brought back in the fulness of time, when *God shall be all in all* (1 Cor. xv. 28).

Rejection is but for a time, and election is not to a place in a kingdom from which others are to be for ever shut out; election means being chosen by God to be brought into his kingdom before the rest, and to be thereby a means of blessing to the rest. Abraham was chosen of God, not to any exclusive or selfish privilege, but that in him all the nations of the earth should be blessed. Moses was chosen that he might deliver his brethren out of Egypt. And Christ, the chief among God's chosen (Isa. xlii. 1), came into the world that He might return to his Father, saying, "Behold, I and the children which God hath given me" (Isa. viii. 18; Heb. ii. 13.). The teaching of the 11th Chapter of Romans is that the elect and the rejected of the present dispensation are alike working, whether consciously or unconsciously, towards the realization of God's ultimate purpose of good to all.

For much of what is in the foregoing, I have to express my obligation to Archbishop Whateley's *Difficulties of St. Paul*, and to the Rev. W. A. O'Connor's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*.

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