

*THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT.*

VII. THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

CLOSELY related to the Epistles of Paul, but almost certainly by another hand, is the Epistle to the Hebrews. In this interesting and most instructive document the death of Christ as the divinely appointed means of man's salvation from sin is perhaps even more conspicuous than in the writings of St. Paul. This important element of the teaching of the New Testament demands now our best attention.

In Hebrews ii. 9 we see Jesus "crowned with glory and honour, in order that, by the grace of God on behalf of every one He might taste death." The words *ὅπως . . . ὑπὲρ πάντων γεύσῃται θανάτου* assert in plainest language, in close agreement with the rest of the New Testament, *e.g.* 1 Corinthians v. 15, "on behalf of all He died, in order that they who live may live for Him," that Christ's death was no mere accident, but was by deliberate purpose and for the good of men. And this purpose is emphatically traced to the "grace of God." The writer goes on in the next verse to say that "it was fitting for Him . . . to make the Leader of their salvation perfect through sufferings." This I understand to mean that only through His suffering of death did Christ become a sufficient Saviour of men, and that the sufferings of Christ as a means to this end are in harmony with the nature of God. In v. 14, the purpose for which the Son took part with men in blood and flesh is said to be "in order that through death He may bring to nought him that hath the power of death . . . and set free so many as by fear of death were held fast in bondage." These words again assert, and by repetition emphasise, that Christ died by deliberate design, in order to save men.

In verse 17 we read, in close agreement with Romans

iii. 25, that the Son became in all things like His brethren "in order to propitiate the sins of the people": εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἀμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ. The foregoing references to the death of Christ leave no room for doubt that the writer means that, just as under the old Covenant propitiation was almost always made by the blood of an innocent victim, so Christ by His own death saves His people from the penalty due to their sins.

An accusative following ἰλάσκεσθαι and denoting the sin forgiven is found in Ps. lxiv. 4, τὰς ἀσεβείας ἡμῶν σὺ ἰλάσῃ. The same construction is not uncommon with the (in LXX.) more frequent word ἐξιλάσκεσθαι. So Sirach iii. 3, "he that honoureth his father will *propitiate* sins"; and verse 30, "mercy will *propitiate* sins," i.e. a merciful man will be forgiven. The accusative is also occasionally used to describe the object to be purified by the propitiation: e.g. Leviticus xvi. 16, "and he shall *propitiate* the holy place from the uncleannesses of the sons of Israel and from their unjust acts touching all their sins"; also verse 33, "he shall *propitiate* the holy of holies, and the tent of the testimony and the altar he shall *propitiate*, and touching the priests, and touching all the congregation he shall *propitiate*."

The phrase *propitiate God* in the sense of deprecate the anger and regain the favour of an offended deity is common in classical Greek. So Homer, *Iliad*, bk. i. 147, "in order to propitiate for us (ὄφρ' ἡμῖν . . . ἰλάσσει) the Far-darter by performing sacred rites"; similarly lines 386, 444, 472. In each of these cases the name of the deity whose anger is turned aside is put in an accusative case governed directly by the verb *propitiate*. But this construction is found, in reference to God, only once (Zechariah vii. 2) in the LXX. and then as a solitary rendering of an altogether different Hebrew word. Similarly Jacob says of Esau in Genesis xxxii. 20, "I will *propitiate* his face

with the gifts": and Proverbs xvi. 14, "a king's anger is a messenger of death; but a wise man will *propitiate* it." Similarly, Clement of Rome I. 7: "the Ninevites . . . *propitiated* God by making intercession, and obtained salvation."

This grammatical distinction, so remarkably maintained, notes an important difference between the Biblical and the pagan conceptions of God. The Greeks looked upon their gods as needing to be appeased, as one man endeavours to turn away the anger of another. The change needed was in the mind of the god, who is therefore the direct object of the verb *propitiate*. But both ancient Israel and the Apostles of Christ knew that God's anger is not a vexation with an individual which needs to be changed, but an unchangeable opposition to sin. From that anger the sinner needs to find escape. But the propitiation he needs is not one which will change the mind of God, but one which will shelter the sinner from the punishment due to his sin. This is the etymological meaning of the Hebrew word used in the passages quoted above and in those quoted in my former papers: and in this sense we may interpret its Greek equivalent when used in the New Testament.

In Hebrews ix. 12, we read that Christ, "by means of His own blood entered the holy places, having found an eternal redemption." These last words, *αἰώνιαν λύτρωσιν εὐράμενος*, recall familiar teaching in other parts of the New Testament. They assert plainly that our deliverance is brought about by the death of Christ. In contrast to the blood shed in the ancient sacrifices, referred to in verse 13, we read in verse 14 that "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself spotless to God, will cleanse your conscience from dead works, to serve the living God. And in verse 15, as in verse 12, the death of Christ is spoken of as a means of *redemption*: *ὅπως θανάτου γενομένου, εἰς ἀπολύτρωσιν τῶν ἐπὶ τῇ πρώτῃ διαθήκῃ*

παραβάσεων. We have here a close agreement with Romans iii. 24, Ephesians i. 7, Titus ii. 14, 1 Timothy ii. 6, where the same word or a cognate word is used.

That Christ's death is a means or condition of our salvation, dominates the remainder of Hebrews ix. In verse 16, this idea finds a new and remarkable expression based upon the double meaning of the word *διαθήκη*, the almost constant rendering in the LXX. of the Hebrew word used to describe God's *covenants* with Abraham and with Israel. This use of the word *διαθήκη*, peculiar in the Greek Bible to this passage, deserves further attention.

The common Hebrew word rendered *covenant* denotes always an agreement in which each of two contracting parties binds himself to certain action on condition of certain action by the other party. A covenant thus unites two parties in a definite relation involving mutual obligations. As examples, we may quote Genesis xxi. 27, 32, where Abimelech makes a friendly agreement with Abraham about a well; and chapter xxvi. 28, where Abimelech makes a similar covenant with Isaac. So in chapter xxxi. 44 Laban says to Jacob, "Come now, let us make a *covenant*, I and thou; and let it be for a witness between me and thee." The express stipulations are given in verses 50-52. Another good example is found in Joshua ix. 6, 7, 11, 15, 16: "and Joshua made peace with them, (*i.e.* with the Gibeonites) and made a *covenant* with them to let them live: and the princes of the congregation sware to them." These covenants were voluntary engagements by two contracting parties, engagements which either party might have refused, but which when once made were binding on both.

A very conspicuous feature of the Old Testament is the series of covenants of God with Noah, with Abraham, and with Moses as the leader and representative of Israel. So Genesis vi. 18, ix. 9-17; also xv. 18, xvii. 2-21; and

Exodus vi. 4, 5, xix. 5, xxiv. 7, 8. This last passage is expressly quoted in verse 20 of the chapter before us. In these covenants God graciously bound Himself to bestow certain benefits on certain conditions, and laid upon those to whom the covenant was given, apart from any choice of their own, the strongest possible obligation to fulfil the conditions.

That the same word is used in these two cases, must not be allowed to obscure the great difference between a covenant of man with man, and these covenants of God with man. The former becomes valid only by the agreement of both parties. Either party might have refused the agreement, and would then have been free from its obligations. But for man to refuse a covenant offered by God, is disobedience and rebellion. For his obligations rest, not in the least degree on his own consent, but simply and only on the command of his King and Creator. For God can do what He will with His own. Consequently, the Covenant of God is practically the same as the commandment of God. So Joshua xxiii. 16, "the Covenant of Jehovah your God, which He commanded you." And Jeremiah xi. 3-5, "Cursed be the man that heareth not the words of this Covenant which I commanded your fathers . . . saying, Obey my voice, and do them according to all that I command you: so shall ye be my people, and I will be your God: that I may establish the oath which I sware to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey." Doubtless the word *covenant* was chosen, in spite of this important difference, in order to emphasize the great truth that God had taken man into special and friendly relation to Himself, and had graciously bound Himself to bestow upon him definite and specified benefits on definite conditions. But the difference must not be forgotten.

This example warns us to interpret with utmost caution the analogies underlying the words of the Bible. For the

correspondence between things human and things divine is only partial. Yet only by this partial correspondence can we understand things divine. In each case the analogy holds good only in the point which the writer or speaker has in view.

In Jeremiah xxxi. 31-34 (see my first paper, vol. v. p. 9), God foretold that in days to come He would make a new covenant with men, a covenant pledging Him to pardon their sins and to write His law upon their hearts. And at the Last Supper, in the words of its institution, Christ announced the immediate ratification of this covenant in His own approaching death. This New Covenant is an exact counterpart of that given through Moses, differing from it only and exactly as the Gospel differs from the Law. He who graciously bound Himself to Israel by a special engagement again bound Himself to men in later days, through the Incarnate Son, in a still closer relationship, promising to give pardon and purity and eternal life to all who turn from sin and bow to Christ and believe the good news announced by Him. And, like the Old Covenant, this New Covenant lays upon all who hear the Gospel the strongest possible obligation to fulfil its conditions, an obligation which no refusal of man can set aside. For every covenant of God implies express command.

The ordinary Greek word for an agreement or covenant between men or nations is *συνθήκη*, a word found in Isaiah xxviii. 15, Daniel xi. 6, as a rendering of two Hebrew words each quite different from the word discussed above, and in Wisdom i. 16, xii. 21, 1 Maccabees x. 26, 2 Maccabees xiii. 25, xiv. 26, but not elsewhere in the Septuagint. Notice carefully that in Isaiah xxviii. 15 *ברית* is translated by *διαθήκη*, as almost always in LXX.; while in the same verse *συνθήκη* is given as a rendering of another Hebrew word. This reveals the reluctance of the translators to translate *ברית* by *συνθήκη*. Instead of this common and appropriate Greek

equivalent, the LXX. use, almost always, the apparently less suitable word *διαθήκη*, for covenants between man and man, and for the Old Covenant between God and Israel. In this sense the word *διαθήκη* is, so far as I know, found in classical Greek only in Aristophanes' *Birds*, line 440. Its ordinary use is to denote a testamentary deed by which a man disposes of his property after his death, and which becomes a valid legal document only by the testator's death. Why the Septuagint translators rejected a common Greek word, and put in its place a word very seldom, if ever, used in the sense intended, is not evident. Had the word *διαθήκη* been used only for the Covenant of God with man, the selection of this rendering might have been explained by the above-noted imperfection of the metaphor underlying the word *covenant* as applied to God. But this suggestion is overturned by the fact that the same Greek equivalent is used also for agreements between man and man, as in the examples quoted above.

Explain the selection of the word as we may, the fact remains that the Greek word constantly used in the LXX. for God's covenants with Abraham and Israel, and adopted by Christ as recorded in 1 Corinthians xi. 25 etc. to describe the new compact of God with man involved in the Gospel proclaimed by Christ, denotes almost always in classical Greek a testamentary deed which becomes legally valid only by the testator's death.

This word, with these associations of thought, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews accepts with special reference to its classical meaning, as setting forth the relation between the death of Christ and the salvation announced by Him. He says in chapter ix. 15, 16, "Because of this He is Mediator of a New *Covenant*, (*διαθήκης καινῆς μεσίτης*), in order that, death having taken place for redemption of the transgressions under the first Covenant, they who have been called may obtain the promise of the eternal inherit-

ance. For where a *covenant* (or *testament*, *διαθήκη*) is there must of necessity be the death of the *testator* (*διαθεμένου*). For a *testament* is of force over the dead: for doth it ever avail while the testator liveth?" This special reference to the classical meaning of the word *διαθήκη* implies that this meaning sets forth an aspect of the New Covenant. And manifestly the aspect is the absolute necessity of the death of Christ for the legal validity of that Covenant. For to this legal necessity special attention is called in verse 16. It is as though the writer said that the New Covenant is a *διαθήκη* in both senses of the Greek word; that it is an engagement by which God graciously binds Himself to confer certain blessings on certain terms, and is also a testament which obtains legal validity only by the death of Christ. This play upon the double meaning of a Greek word thus involves important theological teaching.

We have here a most important coincidence with St. Paul's teaching in Romans vii. 4 and Colossians ii. 14 that through the death of Christ has been removed a legal obstacle to the justification of believers. The coincidence is the more remarkable because, except in this passage, this teaching is found only in the writings of St. Paul, and because in this passage it finds expression in phraseology and modes of thought very different from those of St. Paul.

That Christ died in order to save men from their sins, is very prominent in Hebrews ix. 26, "for the putting away of sin by the sacrifice of Himself"; and in verse 28, "once offered in order to bear the sins of many." We have similar teaching in chapter x. 12, "having offered one sacrifice on behalf of sins," *i.e.* in order to benefit the sinner by saving him from his sins and their consequences; and in verse 29, "having counted as a common thing the blood of the Covenant in which he was sanctified." So also in chapter xiii. 12, "Jesus, in order that He might

sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the camp."

It is now evident that St. Paul's important and very definite conception of the death of Christ in its relation to our salvation is reproduced almost to the full in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Its writer held that Christ's violent death upon the cross was the means of man's salvation, and that for this end He died. He speaks of it twice as a means of "redemption," and of Christ as making "propitiation for the sins of the people." And, still more remarkably, he uses a comparison which implies that the death of Christ was needful for the legal validity of the Covenant which in God's name he made with men. He thus implies that the need for the death of Christ as a means of salvation lay in the justice of God.

Such is the teaching of the New Testament about the death of Christ in its relation to the salvation of men. We have seen that each of the four Gospels, the Epistles of Peter and of John, nearly all the Epistles of Paul and that to the Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation assert conspicuously and frequently that the death of Christ upon the cross is, even as compared with His spotless life and His matchless teaching, in a special sense the means of our salvation; that it was absolutely needful for our salvation; that for this end He deliberately laid down His life; and that the need for this costly means of salvation lay in man's sin. We have also seen that St. Paul, followed by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, goes beyond the other writers of the New Testament in teaching that God gave Christ to die in order to harmonize with His own justice the justification of believers; or, in other words, that the need for this costly means of salvation from sin lay in the justice of God. This teaching he confirms by asserting in various ways that through the death of Christ we are

liberated from the claims and the curse of the Law. A similar confirmation is found in a legal metaphor in the Epistle to the Hebrews. All this implies that in the righteousness of God there was a hindrance to the forgiveness of sin, and that this hindrance was removed by God through the death of Christ.

From the above it appears that the various and very different writers of the New Testament are in complete agreement touching the relation of the death of Christ to our salvation. They differ only in that St. Paul traces the need for this costly means of salvation not only to man's sin but to the justice of God. But this further development is in close accord with St. Paul's general conception of the Gospel, in which the righteousness of God and the Law occupy a large place. Moreover, this further development is a legitimate inference from the teaching common to nearly all the writers of the New Testament. For righteousness is that attribute of God which takes special cognizance of sin. Consequently, a need created by sin must have its root in the justice of God.

The remarkable agreement just noted reveals the common source of the various types of teaching embodied in the New Testament. It proves indisputably that the elements common to its various writers are due to the Great Teacher at whose feet they all sat. In other words, the documentary evidence we have examined compels us to believe that as matter of historical fact the Author of the great religious impulse which has saved the world taught that the forgiveness of sins which He indisputably announced for all who believe His words was to come through His own approaching death and that for this end He was about voluntarily to die. This we must now accept as well-proved historical fact.

This result of our research leaves us only one alternative. Either the remarkable doctrine of salvation through the

death of Christ which we have now traced to the confident belief of the earliest preachers of the Gospel and to the actual teaching of Christ is true ; or, the men who gained for Christ the homage of the world and thus saved it from the ruin into which in His day it was sinking were in deep error touching the work of their Master, and the great Master Himself was in error touching His own mission to mankind. Such error is in the last degree unlikely. And its extreme unlikeliness is a very strong presumption that the doctrine believed so firmly by the Apostles and attributed so confidently to Christ is true.

It is at once evident that St. Paul and his colleagues accepted this remarkable doctrine as true because they believed that it was taught by Christ. It would be easy to show that they accepted it at His word because they believed Him to be infinitely greater and nearer to God than the greatest of men or angels, and that they gave to Him this august dignity because without a shadow of doubt they believed that He had trampled death under foot and come forth living from the grave. If Christ actually rose from the dead, we shall not refuse His claim to be in a unique sense the Son of God ; and, if this claim be just, we shall accept His teaching about His own death. If we refuse this teaching and this claim, and reject the belief of the Apostles touching their Lord's resurrection from the dead, we must be prepared to admit that Christianity and its wonderful effect upon the world, attested by the unique superiority of the Christian nations to-day and during long centuries past, are results of a complicated tissue of delusions.

Teaching about the death of Christ practically the same as that expounded in these papers has been held in all ages by an overwhelming majority of the followers of Christ. It is a distinctive and conspicuous feature of the Christian religion. To its all-controlling influence on Christian

thought and life, all Christian art and literature bear witness. It has been the inspiring conviction of martyrs and missionaries, and of unnumbered myriads in all positions of life. Even in a world where all are doomed to die, a world stained with the blood of martyrs and heroes, the death of Christ stands without a parallel.

My task is not yet accomplished. The evidence already adduced compels us to ask, with profound reverence, Why could not the justice of God forego its claims apart from the death of Christ? and How can the death of the Innocent harmonize with the justice of God the pardon of the guilty?

These supremely difficult questions will demand attention in my next paper.

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