

to the usefulness of the story which He told. As it is, that story stands unrivalled, even among our Lord's discourses, for the extraordinary incisiveness with which it deals with certain popular untruths.

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### THE INTERCESSION OF THE SPIRIT.

“For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us ward. For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only so, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

“And in like manner the Spirit also helpeth our infirmity: for we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered; and He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”—ROMANS viii. 18-23, 26-27.

THESE verses cast an intense light on some of Paul's deepest thoughts concerning God, the universe and man. To those who had not yet received the Christian salvation he preached a simple gospel; and he preached simply to those whose religious life was as yet very imperfectly developed,—to persons whom he described as “carnal,” “babes in Christ”; but for those in whom the religious life had reached the maturity of manhood, he had teaching of a very different order. “We speak wisdom among the perfect—the full grown.”

In this passage he speaks with a majesty and daring that touch the very heights of sublimity concerning some of the greatest mysteries which can exercise human speculation; and if the substance of his teaching is lodged firmly in our thoughts, we shall be enriched with a divine wisdom

which will serve us well in the discipline of faith and the conduct of life.

I do not propose, of course, to illustrate the meaning of the whole passage: to do that would require many volumes filled from end to end with strenuous thinking: but I want to draw out, in a manner that shall be intelligible, one remarkable strand in the complicated structure of its teaching.

First, look at Paul's account of the visible creation—the heavens and the earth, the living creatures by which we are surrounded: he speaks of it as being under “the bondage of corruption,” and as “subjected to vanity,”—as waiting for some great deliverance that lies in the future. “We know,” he says, “that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.” There is suffering of which the universe is impatient, and which cannot last for ever; there is a longing for rest and for harmony; its powers are thwarted; its healthy growth is arrested; there is a grace, a beauty, a perfection unachieved. “The whole creation *groaneth*”—that is a strong and impressive word—“groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now”: it is a prolonged agony,—the agony of giving birth to a fairer and more glorious creation than itself.

And as for ourselves who “have the firstfruits” of the new and divine order, we have not yet reached the peace and the power and the joy to which God has destined us. Is there not the strangest and most pathetic contrast between the greatness of our titles and the misery of our condition? We are sons of God—and yet how little of the divine glory rests upon us! we are heirs to immortal blessedness—but how frail we are! how helpless! how keen are our sorrows! how faint and how transitory our joys! “Even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption,”—by which in this place Paul means “the redemption of the body”; or perhaps he may mean that

our complete adoption cannot come till "the redemption of the body." The great redeeming forces have begun to work; the powers of a divine life are within us; but while we remain in the flesh, and while we are living in this troubled world which is our home,—as long as we remain in the flesh, even the redemption of Christ is very far from complete. Till the body is transfigured and made the fitting organ of the life of the spirit, we are maimed and halt, our vision is dim, our hearing dull. Paul will yield to no illusions. He will see things exactly as they are. We *groan* within ourselves—as Christians—waiting for the redemption of the body. You are to expect nothing different from this while you remain here. You are to find consolation and courage in hope of the glory that is coming.

But this is not all: "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmity: for we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us, with groanings which cannot be uttered."

Is not that wonderful? Is it not startling? The creation is groaning—suffering—longing for a perfection it has not reached, for a rest and freedom from pain which as yet it cannot know. We Christian men are groaning; our condition is hard; our sufferings at times are great; the full and harmonious perfection we long for is out of reach. We are not free to work out our better conceptions of life and conduct: we are heavily burdened by the flesh. And the Spirit, the Spirit of God, who is making intercession for us—the Spirit shares the trouble—makes intercession "with groanings which cannot be uttered." For Him, too, there are unfulfilled and baffled purposes. He is hindered; He cannot work out His gracious will. He suffers pain; He is thwarted; He struggles against restraints which prevent Him from achieving His will. He makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

To the vivid imagination of Paul, the creation is a living

thing; and it groans while travailing in birth with a diviner universe. To the knowledge and experience of Paul, those who are already in Christ groan under the burdens and hindrances which at times prevent them from reaching the perfect life. To the faith of Paul, God Himself, in the person of the Spirit of God, is groaning in His great but thwarted endeavours to secure for us the power and the peace and the perfection which are our inheritance in Christ. He groans under the limitations imposed upon Him, partly by the necessities of our conditions, partly by our unfaithfulness.

That seems to me a very remarkable line of thought. It will reward meditation; it illustrates the Christian conception of the universe, of man, and of God.

There has been a very general reluctance on the part of expositors of this Epistle to take Paul's words as they stand. They have not been able to rise to the heights of his thought. The "intercession" has been attributed to the Spirit of God, Who is represented as moving and inclining us to pray; but "the groanings which cannot be uttered" have been attributed to *us*—not to Him; Paul has been made to mean that *we* groan in the earnestness of our longing for the great blessings which the Spirit inclines us to pray for. This is not what Paul said—it is not what Paul meant; and this meaning has been imposed upon him because a conception of God has prevailed in the Christian Church, drawn not from the historic revelation of God to the Jewish nation and in Christ, but from metaphysical philosophy,—a conception of God which represents Him as living in an eternal and passionless calm, as incapable of what can be called conflict or grief.

Great and wonderful is the life of the Eternal, and it lies beyond the comprehension of human thought; but it is a life to which in inferior forms our own life corresponds; and the daring language of Jewish prophets and of Christian

apostles who attribute to God anger and sorrow and a change of mind resulting from the conduct of His creatures, is far truer and profounder—is nearer the fact—than the cold and colourless account of Him which is given by Deistic speculations. To make the groanings which cannot be uttered ours—not His—is to do violence to Paul's language, and to destroy the energy of his thought.

What Paul says in substance is that the Spirit of God who lives and works in Christian men has an immense longing for their perfection,—a perfection which as yet they have not reached; that He feels—that He Himself feels—the burden of their troubles, their failures, their limitations; that in Him—though in a divine form—there is what in ourselves we call the pain and yearning of an unfulfilled hope; in us, that pain and yearning find utterance in groans; in Him, they lie too deep in His mysterious and infinite life for utterance—they are “groanings which cannot be uttered.”

Consider the intimacy of the relationship between the Spirit of God and ourselves which this implies. I suppose that to very many of us the Spirit seems nothing more than a divine power which from time to time is exerted on us from without. We think of Him as a divine wind which moves and freshens the sultry and stagnant air of our higher life; as the rain and the dew which descend upon the withering, fainting grass to renew its healthy and vigorous growth. Or we think of the Spirit as an illumination granted to us for some happy hours,—like occasional sunlight on cloudy days—days followed by dark and dreary nights, in which His splendour is wholly concealed. While the illumination lasts, we see wonderful things, and our hearts are filled with warmth and joy. Or we think of the Spirit as approaching us like a friend to warn us in times of peril, to comfort us in times of sorrow, to animate us with courage and earnestness by disclosing to us noble

truths. These conceptions are true as far as they go, but they are imperfect. They are Jewish rather than Christian. The whole impression of the New Testament teaching is that He is immanent in the life of the Church and of the individual Christian. He makes His abode with us, not as a stranger, or even as a friend, who stays with us for a time, but does not share the sorrows and joys, the successes and the troubles, of the house, but as one of the family; our fortunes are His. The work which He is accomplishing in us is like the picture which the artist is painting on the canvas: He is trying to give expression and reality to a fair and noble conception of His own, and to express His own thought and life in ours. He has present to His mind the perfection for which He is working. He finds joy in His work, but His work is not all joy; for in this case the canvas is a living man, and the colours are the affections and volitions and habits of a living man; the materials of His art are not, therefore, perfectly submissive to His will: they are wayward and inconstant; He groans because He is hindered and thwarted.

The words suggest the depth and strength of His love for us. He is troubled because we are not yet what we are destined to be. As a mother groans because her child has many faults, and because its very virtues are imperfect; as in the greatness of her love she cares more—is not it so?—for her child's goodness than her own; so the Spirit cares, and cares supremely, for our righteousness and joy.

Do we sufficiently remember and adequately realize this love of the Spirit? We might have learnt it from our Lord's own words about the expediency of His departure in order that the Spirit might come to His disciples. It was the depth and tenderness of His love for His friends that made the loss of His visible presence so keen a pain. If that other Comforter of whom He spoke had not had equal love, His presence would not have been a compensation for

that supreme loss. The Spirit might have brought larger knowledge, made possible a nobler righteousness, given to the Church higher forms of power; but if His love for us had been less than the love of Christ, we should still have been unconsolated. It is one of the most serious evils accompanying the common conception of the Spirit as an influence, rather than a Person, that the strength and happiness which come from the full assurance of His love for us are unknown.

“He maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” *Intercession?* Why? What need is there for intercession? Cannot He—the Eternal Spirit—confer upon us at will all the blessings of salvation?

Ah! no. According to the divine order—the necessary relations between us and God—there must be movement from the side of man to God, if there is to be continuous movement from the side of God to man. The movement begins on God’s side, but it will be arrested unless it is taken up and continued on ours. And so—while the divine mercy is the original fountain of our salvation—the Eternal Son of God became man that He might bear the sin of the world, and die, the Righteous for the unrighteous. The divine grace yearning to forgive us had to be met by the propitiation for the sin of the world, if forgiveness was to be actually conferred.

And so, now that the Atonement has been offered and the divine grace is yearning to make us perfect in righteousness and blessedness, that grace has still to be met by prayer and supplication on our side, if the righteousness and blessedness are to be actually achieved. We pray; but are conscious that “we know not how to pray as we ought,” and the Spirit within us takes up the work of intercession. He, like Christ, is our Advocate with the Father, in whom are represented all the majesty, and sovereignty, and righteousness, and love; and power of the Eternal.

He has made His home in the innermost sanctuary of our life—in its Holy of Holies; and we are temples of the Holy Spirit: from that inner sanctuary His intercession on our behalf ascends to Heaven; it is His, and He makes it with groanings which cannot be uttered. We, dimly perceiving His meaning, desiring vaguely for ourselves the great blessings which He desires for us, say Amen to the prayers which we only imperfectly understand. But He who searches the hearts, and sees beneath all our poor human thought and desire the mind of the Spirit, answers—not our desires, but *His*. Yes, He maketh intercession for us according to the will of God. And as the Christian life matures, we, too, know the mind of the Spirit more and more clearly; and with larger intelligence and intenser desire we make His prayers our own.

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