

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

I.

THE GRACE OF GOD.

IT was the mission of St. Paul to declare the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to the nations, and none of his successors in this high office has spoken with such persuasive power. Any one differs from St. Paul at his intellectual peril, and every one may imitate him with spiritual profit. One therefore compares together the dominant note of the Apostle and of the modern preacher with interest, and one observes with concern that the characteristic modern strikes a lower key. St. Paul carried himself as an ambassador, charged with a commission by God and addressing subjects who had rebelled against their king; the preacher of to-day is rather a barrister pleading his case with an impartial and critical jury from whom he hopes to win a favourable verdict on Jesus Christ. The Apostle believed that he had received from God, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, a divine message containing the terms of reconciliation and appealing to every man's conscience as a sinner; the modern has found in the religion of Jesus a reasonable discipline for the soul, and endeavours to convince his fellow-men of its excellent beauty. The Apostle was firmly convinced that if any man, Jew or Gentile, received his word and believed in Jesus Christ he would see the salvation of God,—such things as eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man,—and that if he deliberately refused the obedience of Christ, he had missed the way of

life everlasting. From the standpoint of our age there is possibly an advantage with the believing Christian; he has a wider vision and a more inspiring ideal; there is certainly some disadvantage in being an unbeliever, he has denied himself the support of the most majestic of all religious traditions and the delicate enjoyment of the most graceful æsthetic emotions. The Apostle was intense, commanding, uncompromising, and he preached with overwhelming authority; the modern is diffident, suggestive, conciliatory, and he has no authority.

When we ask how the most modest of men personally—did he not declare himself less than the least of all saints?—and the most reverent of thinkers—did he not confess that the love of God passeth knowledge?—carried himself with such confidence, the answer is to be found in his high idea of the Christian faith of which he was an Apostle. With him Christianity was not simply the most lofty of living faiths, as it has become the fashion of to-day to regard it in our devotion to the study of comparative religion. St. Paul certainly had too generous a doctrine of God, and too profound a doctrine of humanity, to suppose that the nations had been left since the beginning with no light, and that their religions were only systems of devil worship. Not only was the faith of his fathers a distinct revelation of the Eternal, but throughout the race there was diffused a knowledge of God and of righteousness sufficient to guide honest men in their life and conduct. Between Gentile religions, however, and Christianity the difference was not in degree, but in nature. They were instructive and prophetic—the preparation for the final faith; but they were natural, with no element in them which was not within the range of human attainment. Christianity has been throughout, as regards its historical facts, within the range of human life; and, as regards its organized action, Christianity must work through human agents; but Chris-

tianity, in its inherent force, is beyond the natural and has its source in God. It draws its strength from the eternal springs; its sanctions come from Deity; and when St. Paul invited men to hear and obey the Gospel, he stood, in all his own weakness, upon the rock of ages, and he spoke against a background of the supernatural.

With him the supernatural was not the mere idea of physical force—a matter of material miracles, to which indeed St. Paul attached no importance, but the nobler idea of spiritual influence, on which he delighted to insist. St. Paul had an altogether persuasive and beautiful word for the supernatural, which he was never weary of using, and which the Church should count one of her chief treasures—the Grace of God. Supernatural is a scientific word, and moves in the sphere of the physical; grace is a religious word, and moves in the sphere of the spiritual. As St. Paul conceived it in his sane religious imagination grace was the goodwill of God which from past ages had rested on the human race as a purpose of salvation. As the thoughts of God are their own fulfilment, so that when He speaks it is done, this goodwill is not only benevolence, it is also benefaction. Through the centuries before Christ it was made manifest in patient longsuffering towards sin and ignorance, in gradual revelations of the Divine character, in evangelical promises which were embraced by believing souls, in visions of Messianic days full of hope and gladness, as well as in secret light, comfort, strength and cleansing. During the centuries which have followed Christ the Grace of God, stored in the person of the Lord and administered by the Holy Ghost, has poured into human souls, through the preaching of the gospel, through the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism, through many providences of joy and sorrow, and through the mystical fellowship of the soul with God. It has been a long procession of the divine riches—the

very fulness of God passing through the avenue of the incarnation into the life of the human race.

St. Paul was accustomed to dwell with even more tender recollection upon the grace of God as that grace rested upon the individual. From eternity, as he imagined, the goodwill of the Almighty had reached forward to a man who was not yet in being, and already it purposed great mercies for his soul. From the day of that man's birth the divine grace had pursued and encompassed him in the teaching of his mother and the example of his father, in the words of Scripture and in many deliverances in early years. One day that grace made a chief assault upon his soul, moving his conscience and his heart, leading him to repentance and to faith till that man became a new creature in Christ Jesus. From his birthday forward the same grace guided and instructed him, succoured and sanctified him, kept him from falling and changed him into the very character of the Son of God. During hours of darkness and the straits of human sorrow that grace was his comfort and his strength, and this grace of God was ever keeping his heart in the hope of life everlasting; and when at last this favoured man, his last sin forgiven and his last fault removed, stands in the presence of God perfect it will be to the praise and the glory of the divine grace. All that this man has ever known and all that he has ever done of good, all that he is in character and power, has come from the grace of God. So that without grace he is nothing, to grace he owes all. Such, according to St. Paul, was the magnificence and the fruitfulness of the grace of God.

Should it be the case that little to-day is heard of the sovereign and almighty grace of God, this is due not to its withdrawal nor to the slackening of its tides, but rather to new modes of thought and an atmosphere alien to the supernatural. Between the mental attitude of our fathers and our own there is a great difference wherein it is sup-

posed that we have gained much in intelligence, but where-in it is possible we have lost much in faith. According to our fathers the supernatural was very near to us, on every side, till perhaps their faith passed into credulity and their reverence into superstition. They peopled the world with spirits till not only did the holy angels stand, as surely they did stand, near to the children of God, ministering to the heirs of salvation, but every awful or beautiful place in nature had its spirit of blessing or of danger. They heard voices that are not heard to-day, and received warnings to which we give no heed, and everywhere the unseen mixed itself with the seen, so that our fathers were the inhabitants of two worlds. It was easier in such a receptive state of mind to believe in God and to believe in His constant and blessed intervention in human life.

During our day the veil of mystery has been lifted and the frontiers of the supernatural driven back; we have been convinced by the arguments of physical science that nature through all her provinces is one, and that her laws are inflexible. It has been our endeavour to trace everything spiritual to a natural cause and to embrace within the visible universe all the mysteries of life. Is it wonderful that the impression has been left on men's minds that there is nothing real except that which is seen or can be discovered by the methods of science, and that the supernatural is a myth and an unreality? With this idea in the background of our minds we are not inclined to believe that God is ever acting on human souls and making Himself known in human life, and therefore we have not only for the largest part ceased to believe in what is called the miraculous, meaning thereby physical miracles, but we have also ceased to believe in the nobler miraculous, the effects and evidence of the grace of God. We have forgotten the goodwill of God because we have forgotten that He is a Will.

Should any person have been so saturated by the modern spirit that to him the idea of the divine intervention even for the salvation of his soul is incredible, then nothing can be more foolish or uncharitable than to scold and to denounce him, and especially nothing is more to be deprecated than offering to him, or rather forcing upon him, the brutal alternative between believing in the supernatural or surrendering the ideal of a holy life. If any one be unable to believe in God as a personal and beneficent will and in Jesus Christ as the revelation of God and the Saviour of the world, then he is suffering an immense loss, but an austere ideal still stands out before his soul. He can still respect himself and still serve his fellow-men. He can still appreciate righteousness and fight the good fight against sin. He can still possess his soul in patience, and await with courage the unknown future. His models in the natural virtues are such as may well strengthen and inspire any one, for they are Socrates dying bravely with nothing but a plank to carry him across the great sea to the new world, and Marcus Aurelius sadly speculating regarding the origin and end of all things, but ever doing his duty bravely and carrying himself purely in the battle of life. His, however, is an incalculable deprivation and a dreary outlook, for his conception of life is so much more hopeless than that which filled the heart of the Gentile Apostle with gladness, and touched all his life with a light that shone even when he was a chained prisoner and a candidate for martyrdom.

What conception of life can be more cheerless than to think of it as a huge piece of machinery into which one is cast at birth as a sheaf of corn between the teeth of the threshing-mill, through whose revolving drums and whirling wheels one is carried from stage to stage for seventy years, and from which what remains is cast at death into an unknown and dark chamber. What discourages and shakes one in this severe idea of life is the hopelessness of

repenting the past and regaining the years which have been lost. One has been caught in the hands of mighty law, and because one's father or one's great-grandfather has been a sinner, and because one in the days of his youth has sinned himself, then the sins of the far distant past are so entailed and fastened upon the will and heart that life can never escape from their malign influence, but must ever accomplish its predestination of evil. What availeth to fight when the issue is already settled? and what availeth to tell me of the inflexible majesty and the unerring certainty of the moral laws when I myself am their victim and their illustration? It is in such circumstances that even the firmest and most convinced believer in the reign of law is visited with what may be only a devout imagination, but what every one must hope is also an instinct—the hope of help from without.

Suppose that there be some other force in this spiritual creation than law, and that, indeed, law be not a force at all, but only the instrument by which a living will is working. Suppose that this will can assert itself—not by the subversion of law, but by the new application of law; not by ignoring any law, but by introducing some superior law. What one desires is that a springtime should come to one's life when upon the waste ground which has been covered with obscene rubbish and is haunted with every evil thing, the birds of the air shall drop the good seed, and the showers of heaven descend and water it, and the sunshine of heaven quicken it into being till the waste places be covered with green grass which not only covers the evil of the past, but changes that very evil into flowers and fruit. One looks upon his life as a foul and stagnant river which is running in the bottom of the channel and into which has poured the moral sewage of many years, and he must pray at times, whatever he may believe, that a springtide of that great ocean from which the

river came pure as a shower upon the mountain, and to which that river must return, would break through all barriers and rush up the unclean channel, filling it from bank to bank with pure and wholesome water in which the sediment of years will be changed and cleansed. This may be incredible, but this surely is to all men most desirable; and this really is the Pauline conception of the Grace of God.

What, however, if this most enticing image of religion—a reinforcement from God—be only a hope and a dream which filled the sensitive and mystic soul of St. Paul, but which has no reality in history or in life? If the grace of God be a fact, and God has intervened, then there ought to be evidence of so great an affair which would convince any reasonable mind and afford a sound basis for faith. There is such an evidence, and it is really twofold, standing, first, in the person of Jesus Christ; and second, in Christian experience. It is a fact, and one about which there can be no doubt, that at a certain date in the history of the human race, and when the race was falling into moral decay, a man appeared in Palestine who bore no signs of evil heredity, and was impervious to His decadent environments. For about three years He lived in the full light of criticism and hostility, and during that time He so carried Himself in word and in deed amid all the circumstances of ordinary human life, that not even His bitterest enemy was able to accuse Him of sin, and to this day His life remains the most perfect manifestation of spiritual grace. His influence also was so attractive and so irresistible that any sinful man or woman coming under its power, Mary Magdalene or Zacchæus, was lifted out of the former habit of sin and passed into a new atmosphere of virtue, and any person of high and pure character, a John or a Mary, rose to the full height of excellence, and the

soul opened as a flower of spiritual beauty. As we now study the life of Jesus, examining His motives, hearing His words, watching His actions, it comes with conviction to our minds that a new force has entered into human life and has begun to work unto salvation. With Christ as the Head and Spring, another race rises within the human race, like fresh blood coursing along the veins of a decrepit body, or like a healing process begun within the ravages of disease. There are now, if one may so say, two hereditary lines, the old and the new; and one passing from the old passes from the influence of the sin of himself and his fathers and passes into the spiritual atmosphere of Christ Jesus, so that old things pass away and all things are made new. As St. Paul journeyed from city to city of the Roman empire, then falling into corruption, and preached the evangel of the grace of God, amidst the moral ruins of cities so unspeakably corrupt as Corinth and Rome, little communities arose, not perfect yet in character and life, but not unworthy to be called by the name of saints. The same heredity has continued and asserted itself unto the present day, and is manifested beyond controversy as often as a man who has disobeyed and been punished by the eternal law of righteousness passes under the sway and enters into the fellowship of Jesus Christ. Grace is therefore not an imagination, however beautiful and fascinating, but it is an historical and objective fact contained in the biography of Jesus, and repeated endlessly in human history for eighteen centuries.

When one inquires whence Jesus came, and what is the unseen spring of His influence, then it is open for any person to say that He was simply an amazing phenomenon in ordinary life, and that His grace was simply an achievement of pre-eminent character. This is, however, an explanation which does not meet the

facts of the case, and places a strain upon reason which it can hardly bear. Since there never has been any parallel to this perfect sinlessness, never any parallel to this immense influence, one is rather convinced that wherever Christ came from it was not from within the race in which He originated this new strain, seen alike in the Jewish and Roman world, and that however Christ exercises His constant power it is something more than the power of example now eighteen centuries distant. Is it not the case that when one hears the Word of Jesus and considers His life, he discovers that the idea of God which is a part of the natural capital of his soul has suddenly been realized before his face, and that Jesus is at least the equivalent or spiritual value of God. He fulfils to our minds all that we have put into the idea of God, so that beyond Him nothing divine can be imagined. Is it not, therefore, reasonable to believe that when Jesus appeared in the midst of the human race, born of the Virgin Mary, God Himself had intervened and the very grace of God had appeared and become a resident power in human history.

Our second evidence for the reality of the divine grace is the experience of the Christian Church, and by that phrase we mean the experience of its different members, and especially of those who have made fullest trial of the Christ. Any one desiring certain information in a department of study will naturally seek it from its experts, and it is worse than folly to seek our evidence of the matters of religion from the students of science or of philosophy. The sure witnesses in this highest department are the saints, the men who have overcome sin and have attained unto holiness; and their testimony in all the ages regarding the influence which has redeemed their lives and made perfect their souls is constant and unhesitating. Whether we ask St. Paul or St. John, whether we ask

St. Bernard or John Calvin, it matters not to what school of theology or to what ecclesiastical province the witness belongs, he has one reply to our question. If I am not to-day as other men, sinful and disobedient, if I have to-day a quiet conscience and a clean heart, if I have been able to do any good thing in the world, and to help any human being, it is not due to myself. This good has been due from beginning to end to the grace of God; and if I ever attain unto the perfection of the heavenly kingdom, then to the same grace must be ascribed my achievement. This faith is the spirit of the prayers of the Christian Church and of her praise and of her theology and of her endeavours, and it is hardly to be believed that her experience of eighteen centuries has been one great delusion, and that in her own strength she has done those great marvels which she has always ascribed to the grace of God.

One may even leave this historical evidence and venture upon an appeal to the heart of the ordinary man who is not utterly frivolous, and who has had some experience of life. Is it not the case that he has from time to time realized that an influence has been pleading with him, and restraining him, which was separate from books, even the Bible, and from friends, even the best, and that in any great event of his life, when he rose to his height and did that which before he had hardly believed possible, he was inspired and moved by a power that was from above? Is not every faithful man also haunted with the fear lest he should suddenly be overcome by a fiery temptation, and in five minutes wreck the whole of his past life, and not only his own life, but the concerns committed to his charge, so that the pulpit, or the law, or medicine, or commerce, be almost hopelessly disgraced by his fall? It is in the moment of his unexpected achievement that a thoughtful man is most humble and reverent, for he knows

this was God. It is in the hour of spiritual anxiety that a man hears with unspeakable thanksgiving of a power so vigorous and so strong that it can restrain him even when the currents of temptation are running at their fiercest, and it is with a sense of great relief that one commits himself in all modesty and in the simplicity of faith into His hands, who is able to keep us from falling, and whose grace, as it is alone the source of all goodness, is also the one hope of spiritual preservation.

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