

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

II.

REPENTANCE.

It has been a convention in Christian thought to strike a telling contrast between the mission of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus Christ, in which the mission is taken as temporary and the ministry as eternal ; but it is possible to carry this contrast to a dangerous extreme. Of course it goes without saying that in a historical sense John was simply the forerunner of the Messiah, whose office was to close the prophetic succession and to herald the opening of the new dispensation. His was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord"; his was the figure of one preparing himself for the Lord. When the Messiah had come, and opened the Kingdom of God, the work of the Baptist was in appearance finished, and it only remained that this heroic servant should seal his selfless life by death—a martyr's death. After a spiritual sense, the message and service of the Baptist were not closed by the arrival of Jesus, and cannot cease till Jesus come the second time, without sin, unto salvation. Stripped of circumstances, it is his high duty to awaken the conscience when religion has degenerated into hypocrisy and irreligion has grown into corruption, to make tender the heart that it be as spring soil, clean and open, for the good seed of the Evangel. His function in the work of grace must be to level down the swelling mountains of pride, and to fill up the dark valleys of despair, that there may be

a smooth road for the chariot of Christ; and so long as there is a sinful man to be saved John will meet him carrying the rod of the Law, that his hearer may be ready for the Gospel. First, John, with his camel's hair garment and his leathern girdle, and then Jesus at the marriage feast; first the Prophet, with strong, merciless words, and then the gentle Galilean saying, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden." A bodyguard of graces attend the Saviour, among which are Faith and Forgiveness and Holiness, Peace and Joy, but the grace which cometh first in the order of religious experience is stern and strenuous, the grace of the broken and contrite heart.

As we live in a day when this grace is very much a stranger, it is needful that we should identify her face, and make certain that godly sorrow is not a fancy of religious poetry. For that end, let the enquirer turn to the manuals of the soul and open what, after the Gospels, is the chief, not Augustine's *Confessions*, nor the *Imitation of Christ*, nor the *Pilgrim's Progress*, nor the *Saints' Rest*, although in each of those the mystery of the spiritual life is clearly set forth, but that book which is the heart of Old Testament Scripture. It is in the Psalms more than in any other place that we see the soul go out upon her "dim and perilous way" in search of her home in God. Among the Psalms there are seven, certain of which St. Augustine had hung before his eyes as he lay a dying, and which since the days of Origen have had a name and place of their own as the "Psalms of Penitence." As one reads the 6th, the 32nd, the 38th, the 51st, the 102nd, the 130th, and the 143rd, with their profound sense of the guilt of sin, their fear of the Divine displeasure, their unselfish longing for God's mercy, their passionate prayers for cleansing, one recognises the strength of Hebrew religion. Wherever the Old Testament saints failed, it was not in undervaluing sin. Whatever they did not know, they

understood penitence. Their massive strength of faith, which was not tossed by every wind of opinion, and their majestic conceptions of God, Who was to them the Rock of Righteousness, were rooted and grounded in that bitter, wholesome sorrow for sin which is the condition and earnest of true religion. It will be an evil day, and a calamity to the life of the Church, when this virile instrument of worship—the very epic of righteousness—gives place to hymns charged with beautiful emotion, but so destitute of ethical force that one could hardly have imagined that the Ten Words of Moses had ever been written.

It may be urged that this grace, in its pronounced and painful form, belongs to the period of the Law, and has no place under the Gospel; that its home is under the awful shadow of Mount Sinai, and that it ought not to live in the sunshine of Calvary. The child of the new dispensation is not a slave, but a son of God, who has been freely forgiven by the blood of Jesus, and is daily satisfied by His spirit. Unto him belong, as his birthright, the assurance of faith, the peace which passeth understanding, and the joy unspeakable, and not reproaches of conscience, and soreness of heart, and bitter humiliation. The agony of the Psalms does not befit those who have been brought near by the Cross of Jesus, and who stand complete in Him. This may be true, but it was not the experience of St. Paul, who was the champion of grace and the representative saint of the New Covenant. As he writes in his old age to his son Timothy, and exalts the gospel ministry, he is suddenly carried out of his course by an undercurrent of feeling, and magnifies the office of Christ, which is to save sinners, “of whom I am chief.” This is one of the most impressive utterances in the history of religion, whether you consider the writer or its date. He was not one who had played the fool in his youth before God and man, for he could declare that he had lived in good conscience all his days, by which

St. Paul intended that so far as he saw light he had always followed it, and so far as he knew righteousness he had always done it. His persecution of Christ in His disciples was only a pledge of his honesty and of his devotion to the will of God. It was this man of natural nobility and selfless character who wrote himself, not in affected humility, but in absolute sincerity, worse than the Philippian jailor and the evil livers of Corinth. Nor was St. Paul a recent convert, still ignorant of the mind of Christ, and young in grace, but one who for many years had been working out his salvation with fear and trembling, and in whom the readers of his life can trace the clear and convincing likeness of his Lord. With this career behind him, so honourable to himself as a Jew and as a Christian, the most honourable of Pharisees, the most gracious of apostles, St. Paul forgets his achievements and his attainments, and, as he instructs his son Timothy, remembers only his sin. As we catch this glimpse into the Apostle's heart, we begin to understand how St. Paul entered into the mystery of Christ's sacrifice, and realized the magnificence of the Divine Grace. According to his conception of sin was his conception of salvation.

Beside these passages of penitence, which soften the most majestic experiences of Bible religion, may be placed certain of later days, not unworthy of this high companionship. Towards the end of his life, than which none has been seen more perfect outside the Gospels, St. Francis d'Assisi wept so much over his sins that he injured his eyesight; but he would listen to no remonstrance. "I would rather choose to lose the sight of the body than to repress those tears by which the interior eyes are purified that they may see God." As George Herbert lay a dying he said, "I am sorry that I have nothing to present to my merciful God except sin and misery, but the first is pardoned, and a few hours will put a period to the latter." Francis Quarles, the author of the *Emblems*, expressed

great sorrow for his sins; and when it was told him that his friends conceived that he did thereby much harm to himself, he answered, "They were not his friends that would not give him leave to repent." And Bunyan learned "that none could enter into life but those who were in downright earnest, and unless they left the wicked world behind them, for here (in the narrow road) was only room for body and soul, but not for body and soul and sin." He writes, "I was more loathsome in my own eyes than was a toad, and I thought I was so in God's eyes too . . . I thought none but the devil himself could equal me for inward wickedness and pollution." One of the ablest men of his time used to say of Erskine of Linlathen that he never thought of God but the thought of Mr. Erskine was not far away; yet Principal Shairp informs us that in this holy man's last years all who conversed intimately with him were struck with "his ever-deepening sense of sin and the personal way in which he took this home to himself." Penitence is no monopoly or penalty of the Bible believers; it is one of the signs of true religion in every age. It is not the Pharisee, full of self-conceit and arrogance, who is nearest to perfection, but the penitent, despising and condemning himself, for the history of the Church shows that penitent is only another name for saint.

As this fine grace is almost an anachronism in our day—a survival of an obsolete state of mind—it is also necessary to distinguish repentance from its counterfeit, for all sorrow for sin is not unto life, and some is rather unto death. It happens often in life that a man flings the reins to passion and sins with a high hand in his youth. When years have come and gone, he awakes some day and calls himself a fool. The fruit has turned to ashes in his mouth, and the dregs of the cup are bitter. He wishes some one had warned him with strong words in his madness, and had restrained him by force. Had he been wiser then, he would have had

a stronger body and a more honourable position, and he could scourge himself for his blindness. This is bitter, gnawing regret, but it is not repentance.

Another man of nobler mind is in despair because he has quarrelled with the eternal law, and has been worsted. "What need I speak?" he says; "I must bear as best I can, and there is an end of the matter; I have deserved what I am enduring." There is here a sense of law and a sense of guilt; but this is not repentance, because there is in the man's mind no sense of God. Judas Iscariot broke his heart after his betrayal of Christ, and went out to die; he certainly felt more than selfish regret. His soul was filled with bitterness for the injury to Christ, but he did not repent, because if he had repented, he had turned unto the Lord, and had been the greatest monument of Divine grace. Regret may be only selfishness; remorse may be unbelief; repentance forgets self and trusts in God. What distinguishes repentance from every other form of sorrow is this: if it lays us in the dust, it is at the foot of the Cross and the throne of God.

It is necessary in our day to magnify this grace, because it has been depreciated, and is often counted little less than a religious hysteric. Various contemporary influences militate against this state of mind, and, indeed, have almost driven it out of the religious consciousness. A certain school of modern literature has done much to lessen the sense of conscience amongst men, and has done so after a subtle and attractive fashion. We have been taught in our time by one influential teacher, whose delicate thought and perfect style we have all admired, that the human mind of man passes through two moods. One is the Jewish, austere, ascetic, legal, wherein a man is concerned with righteousness, with guilt, with punishment. The other is lighter and more gracious, and had its origin in Greece, wherein a man is conscious of beauty, and perfect, divine, and har-

monious living. It may be natural to some people to play the Hebrew, but in that case he will neither be a happy nor an attractive person. It is natural for others to play the Greek, and to call for a full and free life; and one, therefore, might have no sense of repentance, and only show that he has entered into greater liberty, and has attained unto finer proportions in humanity. One also is haunted with the fear—but this must be said with great diffidence—that the evangelical type of religion in our day is not always meet for repentance. Is it not the case that the gospel has been preached very frequently on such unethical conditions, and with such dangerous liberality, that men have been moved not so much to repent of their sin as to grasp greedily at a cheap salvation? They have not learned to despise themselves because they have come short, but they have learned to escape from punishment. The great preachers of the past used to lay much stress upon what was called in ancient theological language “law work.” Richard Baxter and William Law first took men and women to Mount Sinai, and we are not prepared to say that they did not keep them too long under the shadow and sound of the awful Mount. It is just possible that some of their pupils tarried so long at Mount Sinai that they never escaped from the wilderness, and never saw the Land of Promise. It remains, however, a good thing either for a hard or for a shallow man, filled with selfishness and vanity, to stand before the black darkness, and to hear the thunder of the eternal law. It humbles his pride, and cleanses him from self-conceit, and this experience lays the foundation of a nobler and a stronger manhood. As all know who have read Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*, none are so ready to welcome the Cross of Christ as those who have passed through the discipline of law. When a man comes to realize his own entire unworthiness, and his ingrained bias to evil, he understands the greatness of Christ’s achievement, and surrenders

himself with more absolute faith into the hands of his Saviour.

Whatever may be the reason, people are at any rate not much given to repentance to-day, and as a rule they are not at all ashamed of an unrepentant state of mind. They are apt to complain of Psalms written in a minor key of penitence, and refuse to sing hymns such as "Rock of Ages," where the sinner declares that he is foul and has no hope of cleansing save through the blood of Christ. What this person says—and he is a representative modern—is this: "I know the meaning of the English language, and I know the history of my own life. I am not going to tell lies at any time, and especially I wish to be truthful when I am worshipping God. I am not foul, and I am not going to say I am foul when I know that that would be a falsehood." This person is of course perfectly right in not singing songs of penitence when they would be a lie on his lips. There are undoubtedly a certain number of psalms which ought not to be sung by a person who is proud and self-righteous, just as there are a certain number of hymns regarding the future state which ought not to be sung by any person who is absolutely satisfied with this present world and has no longing whatever for Jerusalem the golden. Undoubtedly there is a great amount of hypocrisy and unreal sentiment in the conventional praise of our public worship, and it would be a good thing if people were so affected by a sense of honesty and the fitness of things that they were silent when a congregation is declaring its penitence and they are not penitent, or a congregation is longing to be with the Lord and they are desiring only to be in their offices. At the same time it ought to be pointed out to that person that if he is entirely satisfied with his condition this is no ground for pride, but rather a ground for humility. Suppose that some one is practising an art,

and you go into the room where the work is lying. You are shown the work, and as conversation proceeds you discover that the artist considers that he has touched perfection. Drawing and colouring are, in his opinion, altogether right, and you cannot discover that this person is able to distinguish between his work and that of Raphael. You do not on that account admire that person, or consider that he is likely himself to be a great artist. You are rather convinced that he will never touch even the lowest levels of perfection, because he is utterly unconscious of his own imperfection. After the same fashion, if any one considers that he has written so well that criticism gives him no information and chastens no fault, then it is certain that he has done his best work, and his best work is extremely bad. We admit in the sphere of art and literature that the depreciation of one's own work and a sense of its deficiencies are conditions of success. And yet this cultured modern will consider himself superior to the saints of the past and their successors of to-day, because they sing the 51st Psalm and the "Rock of Ages" with intense feeling and he has been raised above this experience. As a matter of fact this person is sealing his own doom and shutting himself out from the higher reaches of religion. A Pharisee is a very incomplete work of religion, and there are for him no future possibilities. You can finish a villa, such a villa as is erected by the modern builder, to the disgrace of the State and religion, within a few weeks, and it is not likely to last more than a few years. When we build a cathedral, nothing but the foundation is seen for years, and it may be that centuries will pass before that cathedral is finished. When it is finished, it stands a monument of human art and industry, and will remain unto all ages and after miles of those miserable buildings have passed again into their kindred dust. This is the differ-

ence between the cheap and flimsy character of the Pharisee and the strong but slow growth of sainthood; and the foundations of sainthood are laid in the broken and contrite heart.

Suppose, however, some person were to say, "I am not penitent, and I never have been penitent; the atmosphere of the day does not encourage this grace, and all my efforts to obtain it have failed. Can I create penitence? and is there any method by which a shallow, self-sufficient, self-righteous person can have his character deepened and his pride turned into humility?" Surely the first prescription is to turn to the Law of Moses, and it is an excellent arrangement by which the Ten Commandments are read every Sunday in a public congregation. Suppose a man take those commandments one by one, and, using each as a candle of the Lord, go into the holes and corners of his heart; suppose he sit down in quietness alone with his soul and say to himself in all honesty, "Am I perfect by the first commandment, and by the second, by the third, and by the tenth?" Suppose he take for a commentary on the commandments the Sermon on the Mount, and be not content until he be able to acquit himself not only because he has not done evil, but because he has not imagined evil, not only because his life is clean, but because his thoughts are pure. The commandments may not affect the conscience of some people, and they may be inclined to hold themselves not guilty by the Ten Words of Moses. For this person it would be a good thing to take his life and to lay it alongside the life of our Saviour Jesus Christ, comparing how the Lord spake and how He carried Himself, how we speak and how we carry ourselves. Perhaps the best thing that can be done with a person who is painting, and painting very badly, is not to criticise, and far less to be angry with him, but to place before him a

masterpiece of the great age, and then to leave the blunderer alone with perfection. If there be the faintest sense of art in him, this young painter will destroy all that he has done and will go away to begin in a better and more hopeful spirit because a humbler and more ambitious spirit. The impression of the master's greatness will give to the pupil a sense of his own littleness; and if it be hard for him to burn everything that he has done, yet one can encourage him with the hope that out of the fire will arise a new artist. The contrast between the life of our Master and our own is enough to humble even the most self-satisfied person, for although the linen of the Holy Table seems white when we hold it in our hands, it shows poorly beside the untrodden snow at the height of a great mountain. Saint Peter was one of the most self-sufficient of men and almost impervious to criticism, and yet one day the vision of the bright excellency of his Master came strongly upon him, and he saw in Jesus, with His peasant's raiment and His lowly habits of life, the very glory of God. Although there were times when Peter was prepared to advise the Master and to show Him His mistakes, this day he could only say, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Should it happen that we remain untouched by the Ten Words and by the life of the Holy Gospel, what else can be done for Pharisaic and religious pride? One other remedy remains; and if that fail, there is no hope that we can ever attain unto the grace of penitence. Let us take our way to the Cross of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and there consider Him in His innocence and in His sufferings. If Christ living has not overcome the soul with a sense of His holiness and our sinfulness, then maybe Christ's dying, with our sins wound round His head as a crown of thorns, with our sins piercing His hands and His feet as iron nails, may break the hardest heart and

lay us in contrition at His feet. This humility is the beginning of salvation, for it is the condition and prophecy of forgiveness. The Christ before whom we lie in contriteness of heart has been raised up first on the Cross and then on the Throne, that with one hand He might give us repentance, and with the other the forgiveness of sins.

JOHN WATSON.

STUDIES IN THE CRITICISM OF THE PSALMS.

I. PSALM XXXIX.

I HOPE in this short series of papers to keep true to the principle which I have already expressed (EXPOSITOR, Aug., 1898, p. 81), that controversy is something to be avoided as long as possible by lovers of the Church and of truth. "I am quite unwilling"—may I quote from myself?—"to criticise Prof. Robertson," even now, when this courteous controversialist tempts me to a different course. To answer my opponent's belated criticism would not only be to acknowledge that such tardy refutation was quite admirable, but also to lead the public to suppose that a scholar could possibly live seven years without making progress. To my earlier critics I have already given such answer as was requisite, especially in *Semitic Studies, in Memory of Alexander Kohut*, published at New York in 1897;¹ later on I will again briefly refer to them. Besides, Prof. Robertson's position as an Old Testament critic is so peculiar that I should have had some difficulty in meeting him. I cannot help wishing that this honest, well-read, eloquent writer had put controversy aside, and offered his own reconstruction of the history of Jewish religion, or of

¹ See pp. 111-119 : *The Book of Psalms, its origin and relation to Zoroastrianism*. The essay referred to was written in Dec.-Jan., 1895-1896.