

STUDIES IN THE PAULINE THEOLOGY.

IX. THE PURPOSE OF GOD.

(1) WHEN Paul became a Christian he did not lose his Jewish belief in God as the ultimate cause and the final purpose of all things, his inheritance of the "ethical monotheism" of the prophets. The Christian salvation, which brings forgiveness, holiness, freedom, blessedness to man, and which comes through the person and work, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is rooted in, and springs out of the absolute and perfect will of God. In each believer in Christ, as in the Church of Christ as a whole, the purpose of God is being fulfilled. Paul knew, and gloried in knowing that his life in Christ had its source in the very being of God Himself. Hence his tone of certainty, confidence, courage. "We know that 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" (Rom. viii. 28-30). The same conviction is expressed in Ephesians i. 3-14, a passage in which the verbal structure altogether breaks down under the weight of the profound and comprehensive thought which the apostle is seeking to express. These two passages may serve to remind us that Paul's views about the purpose of God are not a speculative curiosity, but are closely related to his own personal experience. He could work out his own salvation with fear and trembling only because he was sure that it was God who was working in him both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. ii. 12, 13).

Doubtless in developing his conception of the divine purpose in relation to nature and history, to answer the questions of an intellect which was dominated by the necessity of *thinking things together*, he went far beyond the bounds of personal experience, and some of his conclusions cannot be invested with the certainty which belongs to that personal experience. Yet in all his thinking he was not indulging in abstract speculation, but was driven by the practical necessity to meet the objections which might be offered to the Gospel which he believed and preached, and so to remove doubts and difficulties to which his own faith or the faith of others was exposed. It was in the interests of the Christian's certainty of salvation in Christ that he developed his conception of the purpose of God.

(2) The purpose of God expresses His nature. How then did Paul conceive God? It was not necessary for him to formulate any doctrine of God; for he could take for granted the conception of God which he believed to have been given in the Old Testament revelation of God. He assumed also the revelation of God given in Christ. God is Father. It is in Christ God so reveals Himself; it is in Christ men receive this revelation of God. A question which has much interest for many thinkers to-day would probably have seemed meaningless to him. If he had been asked, Is God's Fatherhood *universal* or not? he would doubtless have answered, It is only in Christ that God has made Himself known to me as Father, and it is only in Christ that I can live the life of the child of God. This is the only answer which Christian faith can give. As Father God is *love* (*ἀγάπη*). That love is shown in, and proved by the sacrifice of Christ: "God commendeth his own love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. v. 8). From that love no power can separate the believer. "I am persuaded

that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (viii. 38, 39). The disposition of the love of God in relation to sinners is *mercy* (ἔλεος). "God, being rich in mercy, for his great love where-with he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses quickened us together with Christ" (Eph. ii. 4). The scope of that *mercy* is universal; God so works in history, so deals with men that all may share it. "God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all" (Rom. xi. 32). This merciful love of God becomes personally effective in each man in God's *grace* (χάρις). "By grace have ye been saved" (Eph. ii. 5). This grace is the free action of God in man for his salvation, and it is always through Christ. "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. iii. 24). So completely is God's grace identified with Christ that in the apostolic benediction the love of God is represented as coming in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and bringing the communion of the Holy Ghost (2 Cor. xiii. 14).

(3) If we ask why the grace of God must thus express itself in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, the answer lies in Paul's conception of the divine wrath (ὀργή). This doctrine has already been discussed in the *Third Study* on the *Need of Salvation*. All that needs now to be noted is that Paul conceived that the revelation of God's displeasure with, and antagonism to sin had in previous human history been partial and inadequate. In His forbearance God had passed over the sins done aforetime (Rom. iii. 25. Compare Acts xvii. 30, "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked"). Now He reveals His wrath

(Rom. i. 18). This wrath is finally and perfectly expressed in the sacrifice of Christ which brings salvation. Mercy and wrath, grace and judgment are expressed by God in the one act of the sacrifice of Christ which redeems mankind. The *righteousness of God* includes both mercy and wrath, grace and judgment, as has already been shown in the *Fourth Study*. It does not bear merely a judicial and penal sense, although it does include *wrath* and *judgment*, but as subordinated to, because harmonized with *mercy* and *grace*. We should avoid many a misconception if we used instead of this phrase *righteousness of God* the phrase *holy love*, which makes explicit the two elements implicit in it. The holy love of God is *holy* because it expresses wrath and visits judgment on sin ; but it is *love*, because it endures the wrath and judgment itself, that it may forgive and save. The purpose of God in human history is consummated in this revelation of the righteousness of God, or, to use the simpler and clearer phrase, His holy love.

(4) The first question which at once presses for an answer is, How is this revelation related to God's former revelation ? From our modern standpoint the problem is not as acute as it was for Paul, who approached it not only with his Jewish, but even his Pharisaic presuppositions. For us there is only the difference between the lower and the higher stage of moral and religious development ; for Paul there was the antithesis of the Law and the Gospel. He asserted the continuity of God's purpose, and so justified the consistency of God's character by offering two considerations. First of all, the Gospel was the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham, which was antecedent to, and so could not be superseded by the law. " A covenant confirmed beforehand by God, the law which came four hundred and thirty years after, doth not disannul, so as to make the promise of none effect " (Gal. iii. 17).

Not only so, but Abraham himself, the recipient of the promise, was by his faith in the promise of God saved in the same way as are those who by faith accept its fulfilment in Christ. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness" (Rom. iv. 3). Secondly, the law which "came in beside" discharged a necessary historical function in relation to the fulfilment of the promise. In provoking and condemning sin it made man more fully aware of his need of the grace of God, and so the law was a preparation for the Gospel (see the *Sixth Study* on the *End of the Law*). In this argument there is much that is remote from our present modes of thought. The mere priority in time of the promise to the law for us proves nothing. That the law was intended to provoke and multiply transgression is for us an altogether doubtful assumption, although we may admit that restraint of itself may be morally hurtful. The argument translated into modern terms is this, that moral discipline is necessary to fit men for the filial relationship to God, and that it is this relationship which is the end of God's dealings with men, while the preparatory discipline is but a means. If God be *holy love*, that is, the personal perfection which seeks self-communication to man, then His ultimate relation to man, which is only finally realized after much preparation, is expressed not in the Law, but in the Gospel.

(5) Granted that the Gospel as antecedent to the Law must supersede it, when it has discharged its preparatory function, the second question which emerges is this. The law was the exclusive possession of God's chosen people: the Gospel is being offered to all mankind. How can such an extension of the divine purpose be explained? Paul is again ready with his answer. "Is this blessing then pronounced upon the circumcision, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for

righteousness. How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision, that righteousness might be reckoned unto them and the father of circumcision to them who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham which he had in uncircumcision" (Rom. iv. 9-12). What does this mean? Surely that the moral and spiritual disposition which welcomes the Gospel, and receives the grace of God offered in the Gospel, is not inseparable from any national organization or racial peculiarity. All men are capable of faith, and so the Gospel of the grace of God can be offered to all men. The Rabbinism of the form of Paul's argument should not hide from us its essential soundness; it was as man, not as Jew, that Abraham believed. The Gospel appeals to a universal human capacity.

(6) An objection may suggest itself, which was not present to Paul's mind, and yet to meet which he offers us the materials. If Abraham had this capacity of faith, and the Gentiles too possess it, why in the case of Abraham's descendants according to the flesh was any interposition of the law necessary? or if necessary for them, how can it be shown unnecessary for the Gentiles? Among the Gentiles too Paul recognized a preparation for the Gospel similar to, if far less adequate than, that of the law for the Jew. The revelation of God was universal. Paul rebuked the idolatry of the people at Lystra by summoning them to "turn from these vain things unto the living God," who "left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful

seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts xiv. 15-17). At Athens he declared God's immanence in and affinity with man as the reason for man's feeling after God that he might find Him (xvii. 27-28). In the first chapter of Romans he describes God's revelation of Himself in nature (verses 19-20), and in the second His revelation in conscience (verses 14, 15). He maintains that revelation to have been full enough to leave no excuse for the idolatry and corruption of heathenism, and adequate to produce the conviction of sin in the Gentiles which the law was intended to produce in the Jew. The bondage to the rudiments (or elements) of this world of the Gentiles was a state of tutelage even as that of the Jews under the law, the tutor unto Christ (Gal. iv. 1-3, iii. 24).

The study of the religions of the world does not bear out Paul's contention of so full a revelation of God, and therefore of so inexcusable an ignorance of man. It does present to us a religious evolution, in which the conception of the divine becomes more personal, spiritual, and ethical, and in which even there is a tendency to conceive the divine as unity. The modern missionary enterprise has, however, proved conclusively that no race is incapable of the moral and religious response which the Gospel of the grace of God not only demands, but evokes. Although on other grounds, we may share Paul's conviction of the universality of the Gospel, the world-wide scope of God's purpose.

(7) While recognizing a preparation for the Gospel among the Gentiles, Paul, as a pious and patriotic Jew, does not ignore or deny the historical privileges of the Jew. He answers his own question clearly and boldly: "What advantage then hath the Jew or what is the profit of circumcision? Much every way: first of all, that they were intrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. iii. 1-2). The authority of the Old Testament as the revelation of the

mind and will of God is throughout assumed. A fuller statement of the privileges of the Jew he gives in a passage, in which the impassioned patriotism bursts into a doxology. "For I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh : who are Israelites ; whose is the adoption and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises ; whose are the fathers, and of whom is Christ as concerning the flesh, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen" (ix. 3-5). It is not necessary for the present purpose to discuss whether the doxology is in this rendering rightly ascribed to Christ or not. (See the *Second Study*.) The application of the Higher Criticism to the Old Testament need not lead us to deny this appreciation of the unique vocation and function of Israel. That this people, so blessed of God, should be refusing the Gospel, and so running the risk of their rejection by God—this was the saddest and hardest problem of the divine providence for Paul. He boldly wrestles with it in Romans ix.-xi. The writer craves the indulgence of the reader for quoting a few sentences he has elsewhere written on this subject. "The Gospel which Paul preached had been accepted by many Gentiles, but had been rejected by most Jews ; this might seem a serious objection against it. If the people to whom the promises were given had not welcomed it, surely it could not be their fulfilment as it claimed to be. Or, if the Gospel was indeed the fulfilment of the promises, had not God failed to keep His word to His chosen people, whose place was now being taken by the Gentiles ? If God were faithful, His fulfilment of His promises would be surely of such a kind as would commend it to those who had received the promises, and would not, as Paul's Gospel did, arouse their antagonism. But if God Himself allowed His people to be thus offended by the Gospel, His character

seemed compromised. Paul seeks to show both that his Gospel is true, even although the Jewish people as a whole has rejected it, and that their rejection does not involve God's unfaithfulness to His promises. The argument consists of three main propositions : (1) God is absolutely free to elect or reject individuals or nations according to His own will (ix. 1-29) ; (2) the Jewish people by its unbelief has deserved its present exclusion from the blessings of the Gospel (ix. 30-x. 21) ; (3) this exclusion is partial and temporary, as it is God's purpose ultimately to include both Jew and Gentile in His grace (xi.)" (*Romans in Century Bible*, pp. 205-6).

(8) In the first part of his argument, after affirming his impassioned patriotism in a passage already quoted, he shows how in the history of the chosen people the principle of God's unconditional election has been again and again asserted, and repels the charge of injustice by appealing to God's own words, in which He claims freedom in all his acts. While rebuking the arrogance of the creature in questioning the acts of the Creator, he blunts the edge of his argument somewhat by showing that God has used His freedom to show mercy rather than judgment. The form of the argument is not beyond criticism ; Paul's exegesis cannot be accepted as strictly historical. We must confine ourselves to the substance of it, and ask ourselves whether we can accept such a doctrine of election even on his authority. We do not escape the difficulties by the assumption that Paul is here dealing with the part played by nations in history, and not the fate of individuals hereafter. The problem is undoubtedly the temporal rejection of the Jewish nation ; but in his argument Paul asserts God's freedom in electing or rejecting individuals. In his phrases "vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction," and "vessels of mercy which he afore prepared unto

glory" he is concerned with individuals; it is certain he would not have accepted the limitation of the divine freedom which his modern apologists seek to impose. What we must not forget, however, is that the whole passage is an *argumentum ad hominem*. Jewish arrogance is rebuked by an appeal, not only to the Scriptures recognized as authoritative, but to the conception of God, supposed to be derived from these Scriptures, which was accepted as orthodox. It is not the Christian conception of God which dominates the discussion. It must be noted also that the argument itself breaks down. Paul has to admit that God does not use His freedom as, according to the argument, He might. He shrinks from affirming that God fitted the vessels of wrath unto destruction, and admits that God endured them with much longsuffering. He expressly declares that God prepared unto glory the vessels of mercy, and that it was to make known the riches of His glory upon these that He suffered those (verses 22, 23). The metaphor of the potter itself cancels the argument. The potter does not use the clay wilfully, but makes of each lump what it is fitted to become. The subsequent stages of the argument really cancel it. Not the will of God arbitrarily exercised is the cause of Israel's present condition, but its own unbelief. But God's purpose is not merely to punish sin or reward goodness (the ethical conception); it is to bless all (the evangelical conception). Thus does Paul himself escape from "the Jewish entanglements" by which his previous thought had been held, and into which he was sometimes forced back, to meet the thought of his opponents, into the genuinely Christian conception of God. We do not need to burden his Gospel, still less our reason and conscience, with a doctrine which sprang from and bears the marks of controversy, which he himself could not consistently maintain, and which he abandoned as he advanced to the hope his Christian faith inspired.

(9) Paul's proof that the Jews have failed through unbelief may be very briefly stated. The fact of their unbelief is due to their mistaken zeal to establish their own righteousness instead of accepting the righteousness God freely offers to Jew and Gentile alike in the Gospel, which supersedes the law, on the simple and easy condition of faith. This mistaken zeal is, however, blameworthy, as the Jews have refused to listen to the Gospel itself, and to take heed to the prophetic warnings against unbelief. It may be, if Paul had remembered how signal an act of the grace of Christ was necessary to convert himself from unbelief to faith, his judgment of his own people might have been kinder and gentler. He who is firmly convinced himself finds it hard to make due allowance for the difficulties others feel; and we may even, in regard to the apostle's argument, remind ourselves of the Master's warning, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." Especially if we recall the intolerable wrongs which Christians have inflicted on Jews, shall we gladly turn from Paul's judgment on, to his hope for, God's chosen people.

(10) The hope, which his piety and his patriotism alike inspired, he supports by an argument in four parts. (i) "At this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (xi. 5). Not all have fallen through unbelief. (ii) "The casting away of them is the reconciling of the world" (v. 15). It was the unbelief of the Jews which led Paul to turn from them to the Gentiles. It is not at all improbable that, if the primitive Church had been more successful in Judaism, not only would the Gentile mission have been delayed, but Jewish exclusiveness would have so asserted itself as to make that mission more difficult. (iii) "If the firstfruit is holy, so is the lump: and if the root is holy, so are the branches" (v. 16). For Paul the ancestry of the Jewish people appeared a guarantee of their

ultimate recovery. While, on the one hand, the persistency of Judaism in its racial characteristics, its constancy in belief and custom, seems to lend some force to their argument, on the other hand the antagonism between Jew and Christian has so intensified, the absorption of the Jew in secular gains has so increased that the present condition of Judaism appears rather to contradict Paul's expectations. If Israel as a whole is saved, it will not be due mainly to its heredity. (iv) "God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all" (v. 32). Paul assumes the universality of God's purpose of grace: to its fulfilment the present rejection and the final restoration of the Jews are both necessary. The disobedience of the Jews was necessary that the Gospel might be offered to the Gentiles; the faith of the Gentiles will be the means of overcoming the unbelief of the Jews. Here is prophecy which we can neither confirm nor deny. That God should desire the salvation of all mankind is a conviction rooted in our Christian faith. However improbable from our present standpoint the conversion of the Jews may appear, it is not an unreasonable hope that the nation, to which in the highest things mankind owes so much, will not as a whole be shut out from the kingdom of God. The condition of that conversion may at first sight seem even less probable. Will Christendom ever be so truly and fully Christian in its relation to the Jews as to remove probably the greatest hindrance to their faith? A Christian Church in which God's purpose is perfectly fulfilled will surely irresistibly attract God's "ancient heritage." Whether Paul's hope, which we may make our own, will be literally fulfilled or not, it is one which springs not from his Jewish patriotism alone, but also from his Christian faith.

(11) As God had chosen the Jewish people, and would not repent of His choice, so Paul believed God had chosen

the Christian Church, and in the membership of that Church the Christian believer. Paul mentions as a cause of thanksgiving "that God chose you from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. iii. 13). Christians are fore-known and foreordained (Rom. viii. 29), elect (verse 33), and "called according to God's purpose" (verse 28). This is "the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. iii. 11) "before the foundation of the world" (i. 4). This truth is taught to give assurance to Christian faith. The relation in which the believer stands to Christ is not "the fleeting fashion of an hour," but has its source in the very being of God. It is a perversion of Paul's intention to infer from his teaching for the sake of logical consistency that as God elects some, so He reprobates others. It has already been shown how the argument of Romans ix., in which he does assert God's unconditional freedom to accept or reject individual men breaks down, and how he himself modifies and corrects it. According to his plain teaching, as in the tenth chapter, failure to be saved is due to unbelief. The individual believer's certainty that he has been chosen of God unto salvation is not to the exclusion of any other man, for God's purpose of salvation is universal. "The living God" is "the Saviour of all men" (1 Tim. iv. 10); God "willeth that all men should be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth" (ii. 4); "God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that He might have mercy upon all" (Rom. xi. 32). This is Paul's final conclusion in regard to the purpose of God. Will that purpose be absolutely accomplished? In the *previous Study* an answer was offered to that question. There are passages in Paul's writings that, taken apart, appear to teach "the larger hope" of universalism. But this hope cannot, even by an apostle's authority, even if we were

sure Paul meant to teach it, be turned into a dogma, for there are difficulties in holding it. Nevertheless the interpretation Paul does give to the purpose of God may inspire certainty, confidence, courage.

It is infinite and eternal Love which is and works in all, and through all, and over all. Human history is not left to the confusions and conflicts of men only, but is controlled by a wise, holy, and gracious will. In Jesus Christ God is made manifest, and it is His grace that is the clue to the labyrinth of life. A family of God is in the making, and even nature, with all its miseries and pains, will be transformed by the glory of God's fulfilled promise. "The creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. viii. 21). How and when we know not; for we walk by faith, not sight. Yet even here and now we can, as Paul did, keep our trust, and do our task better and more bravely because we have this hope. Such practical reinforcement is the justification of such speculative thought.

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THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL.

II. THE MINISTRY OF THE BAPTIST.

ALL the four Evangelists agree in representing the ministry of the Baptist as a deliberate preparation made by him for the coming of another after him greater than himself. In all the Gospels the Baptist comes forward in fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight (or make ready) the way of the Lord." And in all he points to Another who is to come after him, the latchet of whose shoes he