

caring less for the name than for the thing behind it—

For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear . . .
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is ;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize despite the envy of the world,
And, having gained truth, keep truth, that is all.¹

I do not know, and in this connexion I do not care, what Tennyson's private theological opinions may have been, or what he thought they were. It is conceivable, though not, I think, probable, that

¹ Browning's 'A Death in the Desert.'

he may have regarded some of the phrases he employs as symbolically rather than literally true. What is certain is that he has clothed the central truths of Christianity in the forms of Christian speech, and in so doing has given us one of the noblest and profoundest Christian hymns in the English language. For its appeal is to One in whose hands are the issues of being, and in whom love is the conqueror of death—

Thine are these orbs of light and shade ;
Thou madest Life in man and brute ;
Thou madest Death ; and lo, *thy foot*
Is on the skull which thou hast made.

Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

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CHAPTER V. 2-5.

'Hereby we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we endeavour to keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith. And who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?'

VER. 2. The exhortation to brotherly love (begun in iii. 10) is now ended. It ended by pointing to the fact that love of the brethren is an indispensable criterion of the genuineness of one's love of God (iv. 20-v. 1). But John is far from desiring to give any occasion to the notion that he understands by the brotherly love, which he makes so fundamentally important, a love which has no connexion with the truly religious disposition, or that he is satisfied with merely external deeds of love, which are manifested to the brethren. He accordingly now declares expressly that genuine brotherly love has love of God for its presupposition as really as the latter presupposes the former; and that just as, on the one hand, brotherly love is the necessary criterion of genuine love of God, so, on the other hand, love of God is the necessary criterion of genuine brotherly love. He derives this position directly from the thought of the previous verse, from which indeed it follows with logical necessity. For if the Christian loves his neighbour as one born of God, as a child of God, this (seeing that love must love its object wherever it may meet it) is absolutely impossible

without his at the same time also loving God. It is just because the Christian loves his neighbour as one likewise born of God, as a child of God, that his love of his neighbour is really *brotherly love*. In order to bring out this connexion, John writes, not 'the brethren,' but 'the children of God.'

He is not, however, satisfied with merely mentioning this criterion of love to God. Seeing that this loving of God might possibly be understood merely of the *feeling* of love to God, in order to prevent such a misconception he expressly remarks that the loving of God, of which he is speaking, includes also the keeping of His commandments, and accordingly makes this keeping of His commandments the criterion (from another point of view) of the genuineness of one's love of God. He thus returns very naturally to the line of thought, with which he had already occupied himself in ii. 3-6; only that there he expressly included among the commandments, by the keeping of which he would test the reality of one's knowledge and love of the Saviour, the commandment of brotherly love; in which indeed he

made all the commandments properly consist (ii. 7-11).

John will thus neither let love of one's neighbour suffer in the interest of love to God, nor the latter in the interest of the former. The only too common separation of the two is indeed not possible to the Christian as such, seeing that in his neighbour he expressly loves the child of God and therefore his brother. But this Christian point of view has not yet become sufficiently familiar to us. One does not need to demonstrate to the Christian the indivisibility of this twofold love; whereas the non-Christian will not admit the union of the two. He loves man purely as man, and does not feel the obligation of also loving God at the same time. God seems to him to stand in such a remote relation to man, that he does not comprehend how love of the former includes love also of the latter. His love of God is, properly speaking, no love; it is so much merely a matter of his understanding, and of an obedience dependent on cold reflection, that he himself would probably admit that if he tried to love his neighbour with the same disposition it would be insufficient. Of his divided love he gives God only the least share. But the thought of such a *division* is altogether erroneous. Christianity absolutely rejects such a notion. It teaches us to love God and man with our whole love, inasmuch as it shows us that our neighbour is a child of God, and raises our love of our neighbour into brotherly love. The Christian has, therefore, to examine himself as to whether his brotherly love is really thoroughly inspired by religious motives and principles, as to whether in his brother he really loves God; and he is not satisfied, if in his brotherly love he merely at the same time stumbles upon a *feeling* of love to God. He asks himself further, whether he actually expressly fulfils the commandment of brotherly love as being a divine command, in which *all* divine commandments are comprehended. We must not make the consciousness of actually loving God a means of appeasing our conscience when it accuses us of our attitude to the rest of the divine commandments. And therefore we stand much in need of being thus reminded that there is no such thing as a love of God without the keeping of His commandments, and indeed all of them without exception. Towards those men, of whom we are sure that we love them, we are less strict in the discharge of

individual duties than towards those with whom we are less intimate. We are less strict because we make ourselves easy for our remissness with the consciousness that we really love them. So is it with us also in our attitude towards God. If we discover in ourselves sincere love of Him, we imagine that we do not need to be so strict as regards the one or the other of His commandments. Such a mode of procedure is in point of fact irrational in respect of God as well as of men. For if anything whatever can urge us to the strictest fulfilment of all our duties towards another, it is precisely the sincerity of our love towards him. If our love, whether it be of God or of men, becomes in the manner indicated an excuse for moral indolence and negligence, we should confidently conclude that it lacks the right sincerity. Love of God can be urged as an excuse for the neglect of His commandments only when it is extremely lukewarm and impure.

Ver. 3. The reason why the loving of God and the keeping of His commandments are identified is this: genuine love of God consists *in concreto* in the keeping of His commandments (iii. 24). The fulfilment of the divine commandments is the aim of its endeavouring; for in the very nature of love to God there is involved the tendency to keep His commandments strictly and conscientiously. Here again we see the essentially ethical character of love to God, in that it is not merely a matter of enjoyable feeling, but of the ethical disposition and the will. We should distrust any love of God in which this tendency does not directly inhere. No doubt everyone comes far short of having such a love of God that he perfectly fulfils His commandments. But we can easily discover whether the zealous endeavour to fulfil them inheres in our love; whether strict conscientiousness and moral earnestness is the real soul of our love of Him; and whether we measure our love of Him by this test or by the vividness of our feeling towards Him.

In order to make it still more clear that, from the nature of the case, the keeping of His commandments is inevitably involved in love of God, John goes on to say that to the Christian (that loves God) His commandments are not at all grievous, burdensome, repugnant. 'His commandments are not grievous,' namely to him, of whom and to whom alone the apostle is here speaking, the *Christian* reader (Matt. xi. 30). The expres-

sion 'grievous' is to be understood partly of difficulty and partly of burdensomeness; it probably refers most of all to the latter. To the Christian the divine commandments are not a burden. He rejoices that God has set him such a task, and recognises in these divine commandments his highest dignity and glory. That man has to engage in such lofty work, and is himself thereby to become so lofty a being, is a joy and pleasure to him; whereas the natural man feels himself constrained and confined by God's commandments; instead of setting himself so high an aim, he would rather fall back a stage in creation and give himself up to the condition of the merely animal life.

We must examine and test ourselves in accordance with this statement. For these two opposed attitudes to the divine law are usually at war in our heart; these, namely, delight in God's commandments, and delight in the lawless and unlawful life of the flesh in its sensuality and selfishness. The war between the flesh and the spirit in us reduces itself in the last analysis to the conflict between the twofold law within us. To the Christian, however, the commandments of God are not burdensome. The fulfilment of them costs him unspeakable labour and effort; but the reason of this is not to be found in the demands of the law, but in his own weakness and perversity. Looking at the matter by itself, he must confess that what God demands of him is simple and self-evident; that He demands only things that belong to the first elements of a truly worthy human existence. If he finds difficulties in connexion with the fulfilment of the commandments, he does not complain of the difficulty, but is rather grieved at himself, that even that which is simplest costs him such trouble. The natural man thinks he is entitled to complain that God imposes upon him a task of such difficulty; he sees in the divine law-giving a severity of God, who treats men with needless strictness. He accordingly seeks in every way to make terms with the divine law, to abate from the strictness of its demands; and he thinks himself justified in fulfilling the divine command with sighs and complaints. 'Such a life is far too difficult a matter for man.' He cannot conceive the possibility of corresponding to the divine law in a really satisfactory manner; and he torments himself with the law. The Christian, on the contrary, knows that the means of really and perfectly fulfilling the divine law are within his reach; he knows that

through faith in Christ everything has been abundantly bestowed upon him that is essential to the divine nature and walk. He feels how difficult it is *really* to be a Christian, and to enter entirely into fellowship with Christ; but he does not admit that the keeping of the divine commandment is associated with special difficulties. He grieves merely at the incompleteness of his own Christianity and of his own faith.

Ver. 4. John now states the reason why to the true Christian the commandments of God are not difficult and burdensome. (The last clause of ver. 3 should be attached to ver. 4.) That, namely, which makes the keeping of God's commandments so difficult and burdensome a matter (an object of our resistance and repugnance), is the opposition which the world (both the world within us and the world without us), in virtue of its essential contrariety to God and His will (*vid.* ii. 15-17, iv. 4-6; cf. Jas. iv. 4), presents to their fulfilment. But this opposition of the world has been overcome by the true Christian, in so far as being a Christian he is a man begotten of God. For as such he has a principle of his being which is mightier than the world and its principle (iv. 4). In order to encourage his readers, John reminds them of the fact that they are begotten of God.

'Whatsoever is begotten of God' expresses the unqualified universality of what he is now to assert more emphatically than 'every one that is begotten of God.'

The strength, in virtue of which the man born of God overcomes the world, is faith in Jesus as the Christ, as the Son of God; and indeed this faith is the operative cause of the new birth (v. 1); and thus John comes at once to the theme, which he means specially to treat of at the close of the Epistle, as being the foundation of the whole, and over which he lingers up to the end of v. 12, namely, the absolute demand and necessity of faith in Jesus as the Christ and consequently as the Son of God, the Victor over the world (John xii. 31, xvi. 33). When man confronts the divine commandment as flesh begotten of flesh, his courage must fail him. But this is precisely what is perverse, this, namely, that man, in the feeling of his natural inability, will not believe that he can become different from what he is by nature, that he can be as truly and strictly born of God as he has been born of the flesh. This unbelief is doubtless of a very excusable nature wherever there has

been no experience bearing witness to the truth and reality of this divine birth. But he who, after coming into contact with Christ, who in His own human existence has given the practical proof of it, still persists in such unbelief, is not to be excused. If we could think of the ethical condition of Christ becoming our own, should we find the divine commandments still grievous? By means, however, of the new birth through faith in Christ our own ethical condition can become like the ethical condition of Christ. There is nothing that so promotes incompleteness in an ethical respect as the keeping back of this truth from men. Ordinary moral teaching is of opinion that if we would make men really conscientious, we must keep this faith in so-called divine gracious operations; and in Christian conversion as a work supernaturally wrought by God Himself altogether in the background. But, on the contrary, that is really to rob men of all courage as regards the fulfilling of the divine law. It is only through the strictly supernatural aspect of that, which Christianity seeks to make out of man, being made prominent, that we are endued with the courage which enables us to endeavour conscientiously to keep the divine law even in its slightest details.

John, however, credits the Christian not merely with the consciousness of possessing the power to overcome the world, but even with *having already overcome it*. He here represents the victory of faith over the world as being a victory already gained, and the world as a world already overcome by the believing Christian. He means that it is so in principle; just as in ii. 13, 14, iv. 4, and Gal. v. 24. We are conscious of our conversion as a moment in which the bonds of sin are broken; so also are the bonds with which the world holds the natural man. His heart is actually set free from it; and therewith he is conscious of having overcome it, notwithstanding the unceasing temptations that proceed from it. For after he has routed it completely, he must still with toil conquer the separate portions of its domain; but he knows himself as the victor, who has to work out his victory in all its consequences. He accordingly confronts the world boldly and despises it.

Ver. 5. This verse contains an express proof of the position, that faith in Jesus as the Christ is the real power whereby he that is born of God overcomes the world. True, it is not connected with the previous verse by means of any causal particle.

But it is precisely upon this omission of any such particle that the rhetorical character of the passage depends (as in ii. 22). Instead, namely, of adducing any strict reasons for his assertion, John appeals directly and boldly to immediate consciousness and to the experience of his readers, and puts to them the question, Who else than he that believes in Jesus as the Son of God overcomes the world? It is a question of triumphant confidence in the incontestable truth of his assertion. Who can claim, like the Christian, to have overcome the world? The natural man lays no claim to such a victory. He regards himself as one that must serve the world, and counts it fanatical pride on the part of the Christian to maintain that the world must serve him, and not he the world. The Christian, however, knows that he overcomes the world; indeed, he knows that in his faith the overcoming of the world is involved in a thoroughly reasonable manner. His faith is the faith that Jesus is the Son of God, that a man, his fellow, has fought his way to perfect fellowship with God, and has overcome everything in himself that could have given the world any power over him. Knowing this Jesus as the conqueror and lord of the world in perfect fellowship with God, he knows at the same time that he himself belongs through faith to this Jesus, and the latter to him; and that the power of Jesus, like His history and crown, is his own. No doubt, a faith in Jesus, which should regard Him, not as God's Son, but only as a man such as we all are, could not impart to us the consciousness of possessing the power to overcome the world. That is the reason why John lays such stress upon the fact that Jesus is God's Son. How important it is in the interest of our religious-ethical confidence and gladness to find in Jesus that which He is, namely, the Son of God, is very clear from this verse. He to whom the Saviour is unimportant will certainly also live a mean and beggarly Christian life. In proportion as the Saviour is grand and lofty in our estimation, so will our Christian life also be full of power and of glory. To attempt to rob humanity of this sole, true God-man is the most heinous crime that can be committed against it.

With this thought John has now reached the last point which he means to discuss in his letter, namely, to the unconditional demand and necessity of faith in Jesus as the Christ or the Son of God. (vers. 6-12).