

The Theology of the Epistle to the Romans.

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IV. THE NEED OF THE GOSPEL.

IN order to understand St. Paul clearly, you must realise that he makes a very definite distinction between two different, although closely allied, things—'Law,' used generally without the article, and 'the Law,' used definitely and meaning the Jewish law. If you look at the Greek, which is perfectly clear and definite, you will see this distinction in chap. iii. vers. 20, 21, a distinction which is there quite unnecessarily obscured in the Revised Version. 'By works of law,' St. Paul says, 'no flesh can be justified; through law cometh knowledge of sin. Apart from law a righteousness of God has been manifested.' In all these cases he is speaking of law as a principle. Finally comes an instance where he is clearly referring to the Jewish law, and in this case he uses the article. You must translate: 'Being witnessed by *the* Law and the Prophets.'

Now law is a great living principle, beneficial in its action, and holy in its nature, which has had its work to do, which will always have its work to do in individuals, but which must prepare us for something higher. It was not confined to the Jewish law, although the Jewish law was the most definite form in which it was embodied; and often when St. Paul is speaking of law as a principle he is thinking of this definite concrete instance. It is universal. It is represented in the law of the conscience, in the law as embodied in the statute-book, however imperfect that may be, in those moral judgments and maxims which men pass on one another; it means, in fact, that great principle which tells men that there is a difference between what is right and what is wrong.

This law, such as it is, has had and has still a many-sided work to do.

1. In the first place, it produces conviction of sin; it teaches the difference of right and wrong; it makes every man know his imperfections, know the ideal that he ought to aim at, and struggle, however imperfectly, for righteousness. 'I had not known sin, except through law: for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.' Conscious of God, conscious of

morality and duty, conscious of an ideal to aim at, man at once, when law is revealed, begins his struggle. And then he begins to feel the strength of sin, for 'apart from law sin is dead.' He then feels the power of this alien principle which has obtained a hold on his nature. By law came conviction of sin.

2. And, secondly, it is in this way that law leads on to higher things. St. Paul, in the Galatians, had put it most plainly when he said the law is a schoolmaster which leads us to Christ. Law teaches men that they have something higher to aim at than they have ever realised. Take a child and begin to teach. Must not you first begin with a system of clear and definite rules which distinguish for it clearly between what is right and what is wrong? By training it in rules you discipline its character and prepare the way for a freer and less disciplined, but more self-restrained, life beyond. So it is with the development of the human race. By law men have been led on to be fit for the freedom of the gospel.

3. And, thirdly, it is law which teaches us our personal weakness. Law, as we have seen, gives us our ideal, law gives us acts which we ought to perform, rules of conduct, systems of discipline. We try to fulfil them and we fail. In the passage which we have already referred to once or twice, in chap. vii. vers. 7-25, St. Paul describes to us this struggle as he had known it himself. 'In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. The good which I would I do not; the evil that I would not, that I do. I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.' And then he cries out: 'O wretched man that I am! who will deliver me from the body of this death?'

We can now pause for a moment and notice more clearly the grounds on which St. Paul considers the revelation of the gospel was necessary. It was, as we have seen, 'God's wrath

against man's rebellion from Him as shown by the fact of sin.' And this he was convinced of on two grounds—his own personal experience, the long struggle which he had had, and in which he had failed. He had learnt the weakness of his nature, which had become the prey of sin. But he knew that his own experience was not an isolated instance. He looked out on the world, and he saw that, judge it by whatever standard you might like, however leniently you might do so, you could not deny its sinfulness. Here then he had very strong evidence indeed for his argument.

These then are the functions of law and sin, but law and sin imply a third term, 'judgment.' And on this subject St. Paul gives a very clear and definite teaching—teaching inherited from Judaism, but expanded and softened by Christianity. 'God is the judge of the world.' 'God shall judge the secrets of all men by Jesus Christ.' 'God will render to all men according to their deeds.' 'Thinkest thou, O man! that thou wilt escape the righteous judgment of God.' There can be, I think, no doubt of St. Paul's teaching. And I wish to ask ourselves both what we know of judgment and the difficulties which have been suggested in connexion with it.

One of the greatest of modern philosophers has told us that if we look at the world and see the moral laws at work in it, and then think of the inequalities that there are in the distribution of happiness and misery, in order to reconcile all the facts before us, it is necessary to assume the existence of a future judgment which will remedy the inequalities of the world as we see it. Christianity warns us of judgment, and a system of philosophy which has as much a claim to acceptance as any other we are acquainted with, tells us that such an idea is in accordance with the facts of the world, but yet difficulties—difficulties arising I believe largely from not understanding and not interpreting properly the words of Scripture—have grown up. Let me state these, and let me deal with them as far as I am able, for these difficulties have arisen very largely from a hard and one-sided interpretation of the statements of Christianity.

It has sometimes been taught as if it was implied that God condemned all those who had disobeyed a law of which they had never heard. Now let us consider what St. Paul says about the divine judgment. He tells us, we remember, that this judg-

ment will be in accordance with men's opportunities and without any respect of persons. He tells us that it will be a judgment by a God of infinite goodness and infinite mercy.

But it is said God's laws are very severe. His laws, especially as laid down in (we will take an instance which is often quoted) the Athanasian Creed. Now it is perfectly true, and St. Paul himself implies it,—God's laws are severe, they are severe in order to impress upon us a very lofty standard of duty. But they will be administered by a God of infinite mercy.

Let us illustrate what we are saying by the law of England. The law of England puts the penalty of death on murder. Yet we know that not all murderers suffer that penalty. The Crown reserves to itself the right of pardoning or reducing the sentence. It holds that many circumstances have to be taken into consideration. Now why do we imply different methods to God's judgment? Why do we consider God's judgment as if it must be unjust because His laws are severe. We know that God's law tells us that all who do not believe in Him, all who reject Him, all who disobey Him, deserve death. That is true. But in applying that law, God will take into account the exact circumstances of every case. He knows the exact opportunities we have had, He knows the real value of every action of our lives, He knows our trials and temptations, He knows our weakness and want of strength. He judges us in accordance with that character we have inherited, the circumstances in which we have been placed, the opportunities we have enjoyed, that knowledge we have been given. He judges mercifully, but He judges.

But the old strictness of view is relaxed, and men are beginning to doubt the severity of God's judgment, they remember all that has just been said of His mercy. And they begin to presume on the mercy of God. I do not think they say it in so many words, but they hold half-consciously some such idea as this. What need of preaching Christ to the heathen, if all men are judged equally? what need of being so particular about religion, if God is as merciful as you say? They are in fact beginning to presume on God's mercy. Well, there is one class of people whom St. Paul does implicitly condemn, and they are just those who do presume on the divine mercy. 'Reckonest thou that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?

Or despisest thou the riches of His goodness? Remember that the goodness of God leadeth thee to inheritance. Be careful. Thou art treasuring up for thyself wrath in the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.' If there is one temper which is definitely condemned, it is this. For the most sin-stained of men there may be mercy, for the most hardened blasphemer there may be mercy, for the atheist there may be mercy; but for the man who presumes on God's mercy there will be none.

Sin, law, judgment—these are the three facts involved in the revelation of God's justice, and it is on account of these facts that the revelation of God's mercy in the gospel was necessary for men.

St. Paul's theory of human history and of human nature then is as follows. It is a theory which is equally true both for the race and the individual, just as the doctrine of evolution and the study of development teaches us that each individual must go through in its life's history the whole process which its ancestors have experienced during countless generations.

Man is created with a nature 'in the image of God,' but from the beginning of history he has been in the power of an alien and destructive principle, sin; that is, he has been incapable of attaining to the aim and purpose for which he was created. The first stage is one of ignorance and sinfulness, but not of guilt. The next is that

represented by law. Mankind learns the need for higher things. He tries to struggle upwards; he fails: not necessarily indeed, absolutely and completely, but, as compared with the ideal, very definitely. Typically these stages are illustrated by the history of the Jewish race; with its period of ignorance or imperfect knowledge, from Adam to Moses, and its revelation of the law, from Moses to Christ. And the same stages may be traced in other nations and peoples. Not indeed in such a clear cut away. The stages of history are indeed not actually marked in such a definite way, even in the Jewish race. There was knowledge of right and wrong before Moses; there was growth in knowledge after Moses. But looking broadly at human history, there are two great stages—an original period of degradation and ignorance, and the gradual development and realisation in men's minds of the great facts of law; of the distinctions of right and wrong.

So in the individual. Ignorance is his first stage; a knowledge of right and wrong the second, a knowledge capable of continuous growth and development; knowledge implies a struggle for attainment; and the struggle reveals the weakness and imperfections of human nature.

In both nations and individuals, in both history and personal development, there is the preparation for and the need of a higher revelation, and that higher revelation is the Gospel.

At the Literary Table.

THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

(The Prices of the Books mentioned below will generally be found in the Advertisement pages.)

I.

GOD'S WORLD. BY B. FAY MILLS. (*Allen-son*. Crown 8vo, pp. 322.) Other things being equal, the less there is in a sermon the more successful it will be. Take the sermons of the most powerful preachers; take the sermons of even the most permanently popular preachers; take Spurgeon's own, you are disappointed when you read them: 'there is so little in them!' They were not prepared to be read, but only to be heard, and the preacher's first care was just that there should not be much in them. So is

it with this popular American preacher. As literature, as matter, as quarry, they are naught; as inspiration, as electric spark, in short, as sermons, they are everything.

A SERVICE OF ANGELS. BY THE REV. HENRY LATHAM, M.A. (Cambridge: *Deighton, Bell, & Co.*; London: *Bell & Sons*. Crown 8vo, pp. xv, 223.) 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy,' and especially the angels of heaven. But when 'at length the man perceives it die