

SIN AND JUDGMENT TO COME

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The Book of Judges records that in evil days when civil war was raging in Israel, the tribe of Benjamin boasted of having 700 men who "could sling stones at a hair breadth and not miss" (<Judg 20:16>). Nearly two hundred times the Hebrew word [chaaTa' (heb 2398)], here translated "miss," is rendered "sin" in our English Bible; and this striking fact may teach us that while "all unrighteousness is sin" (<1 Jn 5:17>), the root-thought of sin is far deeper. Man is a sinner because, like a clock that does not tell the time, he fails to fulfill the purpose of his being. And that purpose is (as the Westminster divines admirably state it), "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Our Maker intended that "we should be to the praise of His glory" (<Eph 1:12; 1:14>). But we utterly fail of this; we "come short of the glory of God" (<Rom 3:23>). Man is a sinner not merely because of what he does, but by reason of what he is.

MAN IS A FAILURE

That man is a failure is denied by none save the sort of people who say in their heart, "There is no God." For, are we not conscious of baffled aspirations, and unsatisfied longings after the infinite? Some there are, indeed, we are told, who have no such aspirations. There are seeming exceptions, no doubt-- Mr. A. J. Balfour instances "street arabs and advanced thinkers"-- but such exceptions can be explained. And these aspirations and longings-- these cravings of our higher being-- are quite distinct from the groan of the lower creation. How, then, can we account for them? The atheistic evolution which has superseded Darwinism can tell us nothing here. They are a part of the mass of proof that man is by nature a religious being; and that indisputable fact points to the further fact that he is God's creature. People who are endowed with an abnormal capacity for "simple faith" may possibly attribute the intellectual and aesthetic phenomena of man's being to the great "primordial germ," a germ which was not created at all, but (according to the philosophy of one of Mark Twain's amusing stories), "only just happened." But most of us are so dull-witted that we cannot rise to belief in an effect without an adequate cause; and if we accepted the almighty germ hypothesis we should regard it as a more amazing display of creative power than the "Mosaic cosmogony" described.

WHY IS MAN A FAILURE?

But all this, which is so clear to every free and fearless thinker, gives rise to a difficulty of the first magnitude. If man be a failure, how can he be a creature of a God who is infinite in wisdom and goodness and power? He is like a bird with a broken wing, and God does not make birds with broken wings. If a bird cannot fly, the merest baby concludes that something must have happened to it. And by an equally simple process of reasoning we conclude that some evil has happened to our race. And here the Eden Fall affords an adequate explanation of the strange anomalies of our being, and no other explanation of them is forthcoming. Certain it is, then, that man is God's creature, and no less certain is it that he is a fallen creature. Even if Scripture were silent here, the patent facts would lead us to infer that some disaster such as that which Genesis records must have befallen the human race.

MAN IS WITHOUT EXCUSE

But, while this avails to solve one difficulty, it suggests another. The dogma of the moral depravity of man, and irremediable, cannot be reconciled with divine justice in punishing sin. If by the law of his fallen nature man were incapable of doing right, it would be clearly inequitable to punish him for doing wrong. If the Fall had made him crooked-backed, to punish him for not standing upright, would be worthy of an unscrupulous and cruel tyrant. But we must distinguish between theological dogma and divine truth. That man is without excuse is the clear testimony of Holy Writ. This, moreover, is asserted emphatically of the pagan; and its truth is fully established by the fact that even pagandom has produced some clean, upright lives. Such cases, no doubt, are few and far between; but that in no way affects the principle of the argument; for, what some have done all might do. True it is that in the antediluvian age the entire race was sunk in vice; and such was also the condition of the Canaanites in later times. But the divine judgments that fell on them are proof that their condition was not solely an inevitable consequence of the Fall. For, in that case the judgments would have been a display, not of divine justice, but of ruthless vengeance.

DEPRAVITY IN RELIGIOUS NATURE

And, further, if this dogma were true, all unregenerate men would be equally degraded, whereas, in fact, the unconverted religionist can maintain as high a standard of morality as the spiritual Christian. In this respect the life of Saul the Pharisee was as perfect as that of Paul the Apostle of the Lord. His own testimony to this is unequivocal (<Acts 26:4-5; Phil. 3:4-6>). No less so is his confession that, notwithstanding his life of blameless morality, he was a persecuting blasphemer and the chief of sinners (<1 Tim. 1:13>).

The solution of this seeming enigma is to be found in the fact so plainly declared in the Scripture, that it is not in the moral, but in the religious or the spiritual sphere, that man is hopelessly depraved and lost. Hence the terrible word as true of those who stand on a pinnacle of high morality as of those who wallow in filthy sin-- "they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (<Rom 8:8>). "The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib" (<Isa 1:3>). But, as for us, we have gone astray like lost sheep. The natural man does not know his God.

MAN IS A SINNER IN CHARACTER

While then sin has many aspects, man is a sinner, I repeat, primarily and essentially, not because of what he does but because of what he is. And this brings into prominence the obvious truth that sin is to be judged from the divine, and not from the human, standpoint. It relates to God's requirements and not to man's estimate of himself. And this applies to all the many aspects in which sin may be regarded. "It may be contemplated as the missing of a mark or aim; it is then [hamartia (grk 266)] or [hamarteema (grk 265)]: the crossing over of a line or transgressing of a line; it is then [parabasis (grk 3847)]: the disobedience to a voice; in which case it is [parakoe (grk 3876)]: the falling where one should have stood upright; this will be [paraptooma (grk 3900)]: ignorance of what one ought to have known; this will be [agnoeema (grk 51)]: diminishing of that which should have been rendered in full measure which is [heetteema (grk 2275)]: non-observance of a law, which is [anomia (grk 458)] or [paranomia (grk 3892)]: a discord, and then it is [pleemleia] and in other ways almost out of number."

This well known passage from Archbishop Trench's "Synonyms" must not be taken as a theological statement of doctrine. As Dr. Trench notices on a later page, the word [hamartia (grk 266)] has a far wider scope than "the missing of a mark or aim." It is used in the New Testament as the generic term for sin. And [anomia (grk 458)] has a far deeper significance than the "non-observance of a law." [Hee (grk 3588) hamartia (grk 266) estin (grk 2076) hee (grk 3588) anomia (grk 458)] we read in <1 John 3:4>; and "sin is lawlessness" is the revisers' admirable rendering of the apostle's words. What anarchy is in another sphere, anomia is in this-- not mere non-observance of a law, but a revolt against, and defiance of law. "Original sin" may sometimes find expression in "I cannot;" but "I will not" is at the back of all actual sin; its root principle is the assertion of a will that is not subject to the will of God.

THE CARNAL MIND

Spiritual truths are spiritually discerned; but when the Apostle Paul declares that "the carnal mind," that is, the unenlightened mind of the natural man, "is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God" (<Rom. 8:7>), he is stating what is a fact in the experience of all thoughtful men. It is not that men by nature prefer evil to good; that betokens a condition due to vicious practices. "Given up to a reprobate mind" is the apostle's description of those who are thus depraved by the indulgence of "shameful passions." The subject is a delicate and unsavory one; but all who have experience of criminals can testify that the practice of unnatural vices destroys all power of appreciating the natural virtues. As the first chapter of Romans tells us, the slaves of such vices sink to the degradations, not only of "doing such things," but of "taking pleasure in them that do them" (<Rom. 1:24-32>). All power of recovery is gone there is nothing in them to which appeal can be made. (NOTE: I cannot refrain from saying that if I can intelligently "justify the ways of God" in destroying the cities of the plain, and decreeing the extermination of the Canaanites, I owe it to knowledge gained in police work in London, for unnatural vice seems to be hereditary.)

But this is abnormal. Notwithstanding indulgence in "natural" vice, there is in man a latent sense of self-respect which may be invoked. Even a great criminal is not insensible to such an appeal. For, although his powers of self-control may be almost paralyzed, he does not call evil good, but acknowledges it to be evil. And thus to borrow the apostle's words, he "consents to the law that it is good." But, if he does so, it is because he recognizes it to be the law of his own better nature. He is thinking of what is due to himself. Speak to him of what is due to God, and the latent enmity of the "carnal mind" is at once aroused. In the case of one who has had religious training, the manifestations of that enmity may be modified or restrained; but he is conscious of it none the less.

Thoughtful people of the world, I repeat, do not share the doubts which some theologians entertain as to the truth of Scriptural teaching on this subject. For, every waking hour brings proof "that the relationship between man and his Maker has become obscured, and that even when he knows the will of God there is something in his nature which prompts him to rebel against it." Such a state of things, moreover, is obviously abnormal, and if the divine account of it be rejected, it must remain a mystery unsolved and insoluble. The Eden Fall explains it, and no other explanation can be offered.

THE ROOT OF SIN

It might be argued that an unpremeditated sin-- a sin in which mind and will have no part-- is a contradiction in terms. But this we need not discuss, for it is enough for the present purpose to notice the obvious fact that with unfallen beings such a sin would be impossible. As the Epistle of James declares, every sin is the outcome of an evil desire. And eating the forbidden fruit was the result of a desire excited by yielding to the tempter's wiles. When a woman harbors the thought of breaking her

marriage vow she ceases to be pure; and once our parents lent a willing ear to Satan's gospel, "Ye shall not surely die" (<Gen 3:4>), "Ye shall be as gods knowing good and evil" (<Gen 3:5>), their fall was an accomplished fact. The overt act of disobedience, which followed as of course, was but the outward manifestation of it. And, as their ruin was accomplished, not by the corruption of their morals, but by the undermining of their faith in God, it is not, I repeat, in the moral, but in the spiritual sphere, that the ruin is complete and hopeless.

RECONCILIATION, THE GREAT NEED

Therefore also is it that while "patient continuance in well doing" is within the human capacity, <Rom. 2:6-11> applies to all whether with or without a divine revelation; but of course the test and standard would be different with the Jew and the pagan, and the denial of this not only supplies an adequate apology for a life of sin, but impugns the justice of the divine judgment which awaits it no amount of success, no measure of attainment, in this sphere can avail to put us right with God. If my house be in darkness owing to the electric current having been cut off, no amount of care bestowed upon my plant and fittings will restore the light. My first need is to have the current renewed. And so here; man by nature is "alienated from the life of God" (<Eph 4:18>), and his first need is to be reconciled to God. And apart from redemption reconciliation is impossible.

NEO-CHRISTIANISM

A discussion of the sin question apart from God's remedy for sin would present the truth in a perspective so wholly false as to suggest positive error. But before passing on to speak of the remedy something more needs to be said about the disease. For the loose thoughts so prevalent today respecting the atonement are largely due to an utterly inadequate appreciation of sin; and this again depends on ignorance of God. Sin in every respect of it has, of course, a relation to a savage; and as man is God's creature the standard is, again of course, divine perfection. But the God of the neo-Christianism of the day-- we must not call it Christianity-- is a weak and gentle human "Jesus" who has supplanted the God of both nature and revelation.

The element of the folly in religious heresies affords material for an interesting psychological study. If the Gospels be not authentic, then, so far as the teaching of Christ is concerned, intelligent agnosticism will be the attitude of every one who is not a superstitious religionist. But if the records of the ministry be trustworthy, it is certain, first, that the Hebrew Scriptures were the foundation of the Lord's teaching; and secondly, that His warnings of divine judgment upon sin were more terrible than even the thunders of Sinai. During all the age in which the echoes of those thunders mingled with the worship of His people, the prophetic spirit could discern the advent of a future day of full redemption. And it was in the calm and sunshine of the dawning of that long promised day that He spoke of a doom more terrible than that which engulfed the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, for all who saw His works and heard His words, and yet repented not.

THE PERFECT STANDARD

And here we may get hold of a great principle which will help us to reconcile seemingly conflicting statements of Scripture, and to silence some of the cavils of unbelief. The thoughtful will recognize that in divine judgment the standard must be perfection. And when thus tested, both the

proud religionist Christendom "exalted to heaven" like Capernaum by outward privilege and blessing, and the typical savage of a degraded pagandom, must stand together. If God accepted a lower standard than perfect righteousness He would declare Himself unrighteous; and the great problem of redemption is not how He can be just in condemning, but how He can be just in forgiving. In a criminal court "guilty or not guilty" is the first question to be dealt with in every case, and this levels all distinctions; and so it is here; all men "come short," and therefore "all the world" is brought in "guilty before God." But after verdict comes the sentence and at this stage the question of degrees of guilt demands consideration. And at "the Great Assize" that question will be decided with perfect equity. For some there will be many stripes, for others there will be few. In the vision given us of that awful scene we read that "the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works" (<Rev. 20:12>).

And this will be the scope and purpose of the judgment of the Great Day. The transcendent question of the ultimate fate of men must be settled before the advent of that day; for the resurrection will declare it and the resurrection precedes the judgment. For there is a "resurrection unto life," and a "resurrection unto judgment" (<John 5:29>). While the redeemed, we are expressly told, will be "raised in glory"-- and "we know that we shall be like Him," with bodies "fashioned like unto His glorious body" (<Phil. 3:21>)-- the lost will be raised in bodies; but here I pause, for Scripture is almost silent on this subject, and conjecture is unsafe, it may be that just as criminals leave a prison in garb like that they wore on entering it, so the doomed may reappear in bodies akin to those that were the instruments of their vices and sins on earth. If the saved are to be raised in glory and honor and incorruption, (<1 Cor. 15:42-44>), may not the lost be recalled to bodily life in corruption, dishonor and shame?

JUDGMENT TO COME

But though the supreme issue of the destiny of men does not await that awful inquest, "judgment to come" is a reality for all. For it is of the people of God that the Word declares "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (<Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10>), and "every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (<Rom. 14:10,12>). And that judgment will bring reward to some and loss to others. Incalculable harm results from that sort of teaching which dings into the ears of the unconverted that they have no power to live a pure and decent life, and which deludes the Christian into thinking that at death he will forfeit his personality by losing all knowledge of the past, and that heaven is a fool's paradise where waters of Lethe will wipe out our memories of earth. "We must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (<2 Cor. 5:10>).

But this judgment of "the [beema (grk 968)] of Christ" has only an incidental bearing on the theme of the present article, and it must not be confounded with the judgment of the "great white throne." From judgment in that sense the believer has absolute immunity: "he cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life" (<John 4:26>), is the Lord's explicit declaration. He gives the "right to become children of God" "to them that believe on His Name" (<John 1:12>); and it is not by recourse to a criminal court that we deal with the lapses and misdeeds of our children.

DEGREES OF REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

We have seen then that man is a sinner in virtue both of what he is and what he does. We do what we ought not, and leave undone what we ought to do. For sin may be due to ignorance or carelessness, as well as to evil passions which incite to acts that stifle conscience and outrage law. And we have seen also that every sin gives rise to two great questions which need to be distinguished, though they are in a sense inseparable. The one finds expression in the formula, "guilty or not guilty," and in

respect of this no element of limitation or degree is possible. But after verdict, sentence; and when punishment is in question, degrees of guilt are infinite.

It has been said that no two of the redeemed will have the same heaven; and in that sense no two of the lost will have the same hell. This is not a concession to popular heresies on this subject. For the figment of a hell of limited duration either traduces the character of God, or practically denies the work of Christ. If the extinction of being were the fate of the impenitent, to keep them in suffering for an aeon or a century would savor of the cruelty of a tyrant who, having decreed a criminal's death, deferred the execution of the sentence in order to torture him. Far worse indeed than this, for, ex hypothesi, the resurrection of the unjust could have no other purpose than to increase their capacity for suffering. Or, if we adopt the alternative heresy-- that hell is a punitive and purgatorial discipline through which the sinner will pass to heaven-- we disparage the atonement and undermine the truth of grace. If the prisoner gains his discharge by serving out his sentence, where does grace come in? And if the sinner's sufferings can expiate his sin, the most that can be said for the death of Christ is that it opened a short and easy way to the same goal that could be reached by a tedious and painful journey. But further, unless the sinner is to be made righteous and holy before he enters hell-- and in that case, why not let him enter heaven at once? he will continue unceasingly to sin; and as every fresh sin will involve a fresh penalty, his punishment can never end.

FALSE ARGUMENT

Every treatise in support of these heresies relies on the argument that the words in our English Version, which connote endless duration, represent words in the original text which have no significance. But this argument is exploded by the fact that the critic would be compelled to use these very words if he were set the task of retranslating our version into Greek. For that language has no other terminology to express the thought. And yet it is by trading on ad captandum arguments of this kind, and by the prejudices which are naturally excited by partial or exaggerated statements of truth, that these heresies win their way. Attention is thus diverted from the insuperable difficulties which beset them, and from their bearing on the truth of the atonement.

But Christianity sweeps away all these errors. The God of Sinai has not repented of His thunders, but He has fully revealed Himself in Christ. And the wonder of the revelation is not punishment but pardon. The great mystery of the Gospel is how God can be just and yet the justifier of sinful men. And the Scriptures which reveal that mystery make it clear as light that this is possible only through redemption: "not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (<1 John 2:2>). Redemption is only and altogether by the death of Christ. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (<John 3:16>). To bring in limitations here is to limit God.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

In the wisdom of God the full revelation of "eternal judgment" and the doom of the lost, awaited the supreme manifestation of divine grace and love in the Gospel of Christ; and when these awful themes are separated from the Gospel, truth is presented in such a false perspective that it seems to savor of error. For not even the divine law and the penalties of disobedience will enable us to realize aright the gravity and heinousness of sin. This we can learn only at the Cross of Christ. Our estimate of sin will be proportionate to our appreciation of the cost of our redemption. Not "silver and gold"-- human standards of value are useless here-- but "the precious blood of Christ" (<1 Pet 1:19>). Seemingly more unbelievable than the wildest superstitions of human cults is the Gospel of our salvation. That He who

was "Son of God" in all which that title signifies God manifest in the flesh; for "all things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made" (<Jn 1:3>)-- came down to earth, and having lived in rejection and contempt, died a death of shame, and that in virtue of his death He is the propitiation for the world (<1 John 2:2>, English Revised Version (1885))

Here, and only here, can we know the true character and depths of human sin, and here alone can we know, so far as the finite mind can ever know it, the wonders of a divine love that passes, knowledge.

And the benefit is to "whosoever believeth." It was by unbelief that man first turned away from God; how fitting, then, it is that our return to Him should be by faith. If this Gospel is true-- and how few there are who really believe it to be true!-- who can dare to impugn the justice of "everlasting punishment"? For Christ has opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers; the way to God is free, and whosoever will may come. There is no artifice in this and grace is not a cloak to cover favoritism. Unsolved mysteries there are in Holy Writ, but when we read of "God our Saviour," who willeth that all men should be saved; and of "Christ Jesus who gave Himself a ransom for all" (<1 Tim. 2:3-6>), we are standing in the full clear light of day.

This much is as clear as words can make it-- and nothing more than this concerns us-- that the consequences of accepting or rejecting Christ are final and eternal. But who are they who shall be held guilty of rejecting? What of those who, though living in Christendom, have never heard the Gospel aright? And what of the pagan who have never heard at all? No one can claim to solve these problems without seeming profanely to assume the role of umpire between God and men. We know, and it is our joy to know, that the decision of all such questions rests with a God of perfect justice and infinite love. And let this be our answer to those who demand a solution of them. Unhesitating faith is our right attitude in presence of divine revelation, but where Scripture is silent let us keep silence. (NOTE: The scope of this article is limited not only by exigencies of space but by the nature of the subject. Therefore it contains no special reference to the work of the Holy Spirit.)

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