

*OF SPIRITUAL BONDAGE AND FREEDOM.*

(JOHN VIII. 31-36.)

As the result of certain very lofty and solemn utterances touching Himself, which had just been forced from our Lord, "many of the Jews" in His audience had conceived a half-persuasion that His claims were after all true. A certain sort of faith had commenced to sprout within their minds. Sick of controversy, Jesus seized this advantage. He addressed them as men half won to be disciples. The result was disappointing. His first words jarred upon their national pride. The discussion was at once re-opened. By degrees, as usual, discussion grew into bitter recrimination, till that ended in open violence.

The whole of this significant controversy we cannot exhaust in a single paper. But the opening of it is of singular interest; for it drew from our Lord some most weighty and memorable words, such as all His disciples have need to remember.

When our Lord, resuming His address, turned Himself to those Jews on whom some impression had been produced, He knew of course that their faith might prove no more than a passing impression or a fitful whim. His object therefore must be to persuade them to persevere. For it is not by fits of well-disposed feeling, or half-convinced belief in Christ, that any one can deserve to be called a disciple of His. The test which alone discriminates genuine faith from such as is impure or spurious is its continuance. Just as the stony ground crop was detected in the parable, so in practice the proof of any man's being a real believer is that he holds on, or continues to receive the word of Christ, and to obey it to the end of life. "He said therefore to those Jews who had believed Him, If ye abide in My word, then are ye truly My

disciples." At first the personal Saviour is to be accepted by our faith as what He claims to be—the Son of God sent from above to save us; with a supreme right therefore to have every word of His believed and every command of His obeyed. It is plain that if you are wholly and utterly sincere in thus accepting Christ, you do virtually at the same time accept all that He has to say to you. Consistency requires you of course to credit the whole teaching and do the whole bidding of One whom you take for a Divine Saviour, the sent Son of the most high God. But perhaps your faith in this Messenger of God is not of that thorough sort which will carry you through, and subdue you to His word. Well then, experience will test it. He calls on you to continue in His word. Keep on listening and obeying. Little by little, let His teaching penetrate your heart and colour your conduct. Learn by experience the effect of living as He bids you. His truth thus reduced to practice will break the bonds of evil habit and base desire and passion and spiritual fear, and every other dark power which has hitherto tyrannised over you. More and more as you come to know the truth, "the truth will make you free"!

This is Jesus' word to all young converts, or those who think themselves such. Do not suppose everything is gained. Do not too easily trust your own incipient faith. Try yourselves, whether you can work out Christ's will in daily life without growing tired of it, without finding the difficulty of it too much for you. At first it must be hard. There is a bondage to be broken you have little conception of: the bondage of an evil will, stiffened now into evil habits, very hard to exchange for good ones. But do not be discouraged: the truth is the liberator. Abide in the truth as it is in Jesus; let it work fully; it will make you free.

The mistake which some ill-advised young disciples com-

mit is to be too soon satisfied with a certain sort of freedom. When the gospel of pardon comes to any one's heart with power, it sets him free at once from the bondage of a fearful conscience, from the burden of remembered guilt, and from the unspeakable terrors of the wrath of God. That is a liberation so wonderful and unexpected, that the new convert, in the first sense of relief, leaps and springs for joy, ignorant or excusably forgetful that there are any fetters left still unbroken. But there are. And usually it is not long before they begin to gall. The bondage to the law indeed, as an accuser, and as a condition of God's favour, is broken. But bondage to sin is not yet broken, or only in part. The old customs of desiring, choosing, and taking pleasure in what is at variance with God's holy will, are all of them so many chains wound round about the heart and will of a sinful man. These are not to be snapped in an instant. They have to be unwound by degrees and with infinite pains, that the will and the affections, when disengaged from the former bondage to sin, may be made glad and willing servants of God unto righteousness. There is no royal road to such eventual liberation of the soul. It can be done only in one way; that is to say, by a patient, watchful, persistent, and lifelong continuance in the word of Christ: so "shall ye know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

These Jews did not catch His meaning. It was, in fact, one of the Master's deep words, which the world has been trying ever since to fathom, with very imperfect success. We are still a great way from understanding all the connexions betwixt God's truth and man's freedom; or in how many ways, religious, intellectual, social, and political, real liberty is conditioned by obedience to spiritual truth, and can only follow in the train of that. Still, it was a sign that conscience still slumbered in these men, that the idea of a personal emancipation from the yoke of their own sins

never so much as occurred to them. Their thoughts went at once to their political emancipation from the foreigner.

How they could venture to say of the Hebrew people, "We have never yet been in bondage to any man," I do not very well know. Not to speak of the seventy years their ancestors had spent in Babylon, was not Judæa at that moment administered by a Roman procurator and garrisoned with Roman troops? People however possess a strange faculty for closing their eyes to the meaning of unwelcome facts. The Hebrews are a people who maintained as long as possible, and to an almost preposterous degree, the sentiment of national independence. Fretting beneath many a yoke, they long refused to acknowledge any, or to own, even when compelled to serve, a foreign lord. The more galling Rome's over-lordship was, and the more ready they were to revolt, and the more hopeful of a Messiah' to set them free, so much the less were they prepared tamely to accept the title of slaves. Men often will not brook a name when they must needs endure the thing. And, after all, political servitude had not deprived them as individuals of their personal liberty. "Slaves, indeed!" they probably thought: "what though unhappy circumstances have for the moment seated a Roman officer in the seat of our national kings, that does not enslave a freeborn son of Abraham. It is but foregoing certain privileges to meet a temporary emergency; but Hebrews never can, never shall be slaves!"

Into this political question our Lord does not follow them. He brings them back to the spiritual sense of His words. The offensive epithet which in its civil acceptation they had disowned, He fastens down upon them in a religious and moral meaning. They had claimed two things: first, to be Abraham's children; second, to be freemen: two things connected thus, Abraham's seed, and therefore free. In His rejoinder Jesus proceeds to

strip them of both titles, in the spiritual sense of them. But He takes the two in reverse order, and reasons thus : First, not free in God's house ; and therefore (second) not true sons of Abraham. The proof which He alleges on both these points leads Him to some very interesting positions. But it is only of the former I can speak in this paper. What we have to consider for the present is His proof in vers. 34, 35, and 36, that the Judæans of His time were not, in the spiritual and only deep sense of the word, *God's freemen*.

The proof rests upon another of our Lord's axiomatic utterances : " Every one that committeth sin is the bond-servant—rather, is a slave—of sin." These words go to the root of the fall of man. To understand them, let us revert for an instant to Adam's experience in the hour of his lapse from obedience. God had made Adam free. That freedom consisted in his perfectly voluntary acceptance of the Divine will as the regulator of his conduct. His own nature, being modelled on the Divine, acted best—most freely, that is—when it moved in cheerful and easy harmony with the mind of God. In other words, as all creatures, when allowed to act with perfect freedom, follow the law of their nature, so did man follow the moral will of God. For him to obey God was nothing else but the natural outcome of those godlike dispositions and aptitudes for virtue which were native to him. He had been made for innocence and for virtue : to serve the Holy One was " perfect freedom." Now, when the man, seduced from his allegiance through foreign influence, accepted the will of another, instead of the will of God, he did violence against his own constitution. He acted at the bidding of a will contrary to the order of his own truest and highest nature. Against his better knowledge, his inborn sense of right, and that instinct of duty which was the divinest thing within him, the man consented to do what the tempter bade him, what

nothing within himself could have prompted save his lower animal desires. In such a fatal and unnatural surrender of his reason, his conscience, and his faith to what was in reality beneath him, there was involved a loss of true liberty. True liberty is not self-will ; it is free obedience to natural and legitimate order. But he who exchanges the lawful control of his sovereign for a shameful and unnatural subjection to foreign dictation, is a slave. Hence the bowing down of man's free and righteous will at the feet of the arch-rebel and arch-liar was a surrender of himself into bondage. It meant that henceforth (so far as man was concerned) falsehood might tyrannise over truth, wrong over justice, suspicion over faith, hate over love, the baser over the nobler, the flesh over the spirit, the transient over the everlasting.

Of course we shall seriously misconceive the loss of moral liberty which our Lord says was brought about by that fatal surrender, if we think of it as implying any constraint exercised over a man *against his will*. Nothing compels any of us to sin if we do not choose. Mere physical compulsion has no power to force sin upon the will, or inflict any injury at all upon the soul. Unhappily the bondage spoken of is far deeper, and by so much more wretched and more hopeless. It is the will itself which has come under the power of evil ; so that the man, grown enamoured of sin and habituated to it, cannot choose but do it. We are unable to do what is spiritually good, because we are invincibly indisposed to do it. To be sure, this leaves to every man a vast range of choice. Within the realm of ungodliness, or of insubordination to the perfect will of God, there lie innumerable departments of conduct, some better and some worse. A man may live temperately or riotously, honestly or fraudulently, cleanly or vilely ; he may make much of his life for useful and honourable ends, or little of it ; he may pursue any path of labour or of gain

or of pastime which he fancies; he may listen to the voice of his conscience and the requirements of virtuous society, or despise them: yet in no case will he be able (unless God's grace enable him) to restore himself to the loving service of God as his Father and his King. His life will still lie outside the circle of perfect allegiance, will be still a life enslaved to the sin of ungodliness. "They that are thus in the flesh cannot please God."

In saying this of course one is speaking of what is possible to human nature *as left to itself*. Thank God! it never has been left entirely to itself. Through His mercy, influences never cease to operate upon the hearts of men which come from above. God's gracious Spirit and His truth are everywhere, teaching, drawing, inclining, and enabling men to do better than otherwise they would do. He makes them discontented with their bondage. He moves them to aspire after a life more pleasing to Him. In Christian circles, His regenerating grace is a factor always powerfully at work. But all this is extra-natural; not a pure and simple outcome from the fallen nature itself, but freely given to us through Christ by the Father's favour. What we ought to do is to welcome and yield to these Divine and helpful influences. If we do not, we rivet upon ourselves the chains of evil. It is shocking to think to what length the bondage Christ speaks of may go, through the yielding by the will time after time to evil desire. By easy steps men get habituated to sin. When habit has dulled the conscience or blinded its eyes, forms of vice grow familiar and cease to outrage, which at first would repel the unaccustomed and the young. In this way too the hold of sin upon its victim grows tighter with the passage of the years; for the oftener a person commits sin, the more does he become its bondservant. In some gross instances, every one can see how appetite or passion comes to wield a dominion that is simply terrible. Confirmed

drunkards, for example, will make sincere pledges of abstinence time after time, and be unable to keep them. The lecherous man continues in his old age to be the slave of lewd and impotent desire. Avarice too creeps stealthily upon worldly-minded old age, even till dotage has made the grasping habit appear ludicrous to the onlooker. Cases such as these none can fail to remark. People do not so readily observe how spiritual sins, such as impenitence, or indifference to the gospel, or neglect of prayer, or deference to the opinion of society, or intellectual arrogance, or engrossment in family ambitions and secular care, may obtain a fixed hold upon the soul and carry it captive. Yet these are the things which hold the citadel against Christ in most people of middle age. Against these God's kindly and varied agency for reaching heedless ears and turning obdurate hearts may be plied in vain, or beat against you only to make you so much the harder, as when one hammers cold iron.

In conclusion Christ goes on to preach deliverance to the captives. "The bondservant abideth not in the house for ever: the Son abideth for ever. If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

It is a parable taken from Oriental manners. In an Eastern household we are to conceive of two lads growing up together: the one, eldest born and free, a son by the proper wife; the other slave-born, a handmaid's child. Both are members of the household and share in the householder's care; but their position is very unequal, in respect at all events of its security. The son by virtue of his legitimate and free birth is the natural heir to the home, with a native right to dwell in it for ever. He represents the family succession, and is the lord in reversion of the paternal seat. Not so the slave-born youth: his standing in the home is wholly accidental and precarious. Liable at any moment to be sent away or manumitted or sold, he



exists as a member of the household on sufferance. Nor can his position be made more secure or permanent by any conduct of his own. Only if it should please the son and heir, administering the household as his father's agent, to release his enslaved half-brother from bondage, and elevate him of his grace to a platform like his own, sharing with him the rights of natural sonship.

Surely this picture is not wholly a fancy sketch. It is far too closely modelled on a great historical type in the early annals of the Old Testament for our Lord not to have had that in His mind. The Jews had just been boasting, "We are Abraham's seed." Now it was precisely in Abraham's house that two such typical youths were found dwelling alongside—the free-born heir and the bondmaid's child. What saith the Scripture? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." A step this which to modern minds, trained in Western habits, appears not a little harsh or even unnatural; nevertheless it illustrates what all Ishmaels were exposed to while slavery and concubinage were recognised institutions, and it serves to lend point to a great spiritual lesson. For what is it our Lord intended by this parable? Plainly no other lesson than St. Paul, acting on this hint, did afterwards work out in his letter to Galatia. God's house is His visible Church or kingdom upon earth. In that family of grace there is but one original and free-born Son, His Father's well-beloved, Heir by birth and right of nature to all the love and goods and honours and gifts of His Divine Father in heaven. Such an Isaac to Jehovah does Jesus claim to be alone. But these Judæans whom He addressed were also in name the children of God through Abraham. Outwardly they occupied a place in the household of the covenant. Meanwhile they abode in God's house, heard His word, and ate of His bread.

What if they were, for all that, in heart and practice, slaves still to sin, as all men are born to be: the sons of a bond-race, in that condition of subjection to the will of the evil one of which our Lord has just been speaking? Is it not clear that if we are that and no more, then we retain our place in the house of God by sufferance only, not by right; tolerated so long as God pleases, but with the fear over us (the fear? nay, the certainty) that we shall be cast out one day?

But by these gracious and wonderfully suggestive words, *if the Son make you free*, has not our Lord opened for us a glimpse into the possibility of our adoption? Granted that He who never committed sin, therefore never became its slave, is alone entitled to abide in His place, and as the sole human Son of God to "dwell in the house of the Lord for ever": still He may have become a member of God's earthly house, and linked Himself thus to our fallen family, on very purpose to raise us (if we will) to His own level! Suppose He is come, this only begotten Son of God, to ransom us from our fatal bondage to our sins; suppose that, by uniting us to Himself, He can confer upon us eventual freedom from this inward and spiritual servitude; suppose that He possesses the power of sharing with us His own Divine and eternal life; suppose that He is minded to make such a union with us that we shall be lifted with Himself into family relationship to the Most High, and be made sons and heirs with Christ—what then? If the Son do thus set us free, shall we not be free indeed; ay, and dwell, we too, "in the house of the Lord for ever"?

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