

*“IT BECAME HIM.”*

(HEB. II. 10.)

THE thought expressed by the three words, “It became Him,” is so contrary to modern feeling, and has been so much overlooked by modern exposition, that it is worth our while to examine it carefully. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews plainly states in these words his conviction that the sufferings and death of the incarnate Word were suitable to the greatness of God. He says: “It became Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering.” This is a distinct statement that the sufferings of Christ were in harmony with the greatness of God. A remarkable assertion, and one which at first view excites wonder and doubt. If the writer, in order to prove his point, had appealed to the love of God, his argument would have satisfied the mind of the reader very readily; but when he declares that the pain of Christ was becoming to the nature of God, because God is the absolute Being, he seems only to create a difficulty.

The description of God given in this passage, as the Being “for whom are all things, and through whom are all things,” is one which would be received more or less perfectly by most thinkers of our century. It is a definition which appeals at once to the modern mind. But at the same time this conception of God—a conception which lifts Him infinitely above the level of men—is one great reason why moderns have so much difficulty in believing in Jesus Christ as a real revelation of the God-head. When God is regarded as the infinite, eternal source of all nature, and when nature is thought of in all the immensity revealed by

modern science—an immensity of space in which the earth is but a speck, an infinity of evolution in which the whole history of man is but an incident—it seems, at first sight, an absurdity to speak of the humble, painful life and death of Jesus of Nazareth as a revelation of the Deity. Yet it is to this very conception of God’s greatness that the appeal is made in the words, “It became Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”

The first consideration suggested by this difficulty is that the writers of both Testaments never separate the moral greatness of God from His greatness in nature. In this thought the two are inseparably united. It is unnecessary to pause in order to prove this at length. Hebrew thought everywhere looks at God’s relation to the world from the moral and spiritual standpoint; and in the New Testament the Divine offices of our Lord as Saviour of men are almost always described in physical language. And so we are doing no violence to the sense of the passage if we understand the writer to mean that the method of redemption harmonizes with that supreme moral splendour which must belong to Him for whom and through whom are all things. To the apostolic mind God’s infinite greatness in nature carries with it, as a matter of course, a moral character equally elevated.

The modern mind, on the contrary, is so overwhelmed in the immensity of the physical facts and conceptions accumulated by recent discovery, that it has almost lost the sense of the supremacy of morals. The ordinary devotee of evolution has not grasped the first thought of Pascal’s *Pensées* that even though the universe crush man, yet man is greater than the universe, for he knows he is crushed. And still more does the evolutionist fail to understand how completely man is raised above the merely physical by his

faculty of estimating moral value. Once it is learned how fundamental is the position which the synthetical unity of the *ego* occupies in all knowledge, the supremacy of the spiritual is established; and very soon a further step will be taken, and it will be understood that the infinite Power behind nature is not a mere unknowable absolute, but a being of whom must be predicated intelligence and morality. And then will appear the truth and value of Rabbi ben Ezra's confidence :

" Rejoice we are allied  
 To that which doth provide  
 And not partake, effect and not receive !  
 A spark disturbs our clod ;  
 Nearer we hold of God  
 Who gives, than of his tribes that take, I must believe."

When we have thus gained a standpoint from which a modern student of philosophy can appreciate the thought and feeling of the apostolic age, we are in a position to examine the remarkable assertion of the passage before us, that the sufferings of Christ were in harmony with the greatness of God.

We have just had a glimpse of a very good reason why the intelligent and moral nature of man can be regarded as a more or less imperfect index to the nature of God. Let us then in the present instance guide ourselves by this index, remembering only that the infinite greatness of God may multiply indefinitely the persuasive force of a motive.

In this place an illustration may be useful. Suppose that a man falls into grievous sin and consequent misery, and that his evil case comes to the knowledge of another, who feels bound to do his best to save the sinner. It is obvious that the first thing the would be deliverer must do is to enter into sympathy with the object of his pity. And the stronger the relations of sympathy he establishes, the greater his chance of success. But it is not enough that

he should be able to sympathise with the sinner, the sinner must be made to feel that sympathy. Now it may be perfectly true that God, knowing as He does the thoughts of all hearts, is by His very nature in perfect sympathy with every human soul, but how is man to be made to feel the reality and intensity of the Divine sympathy? When a good man desires to make some degraded fellow creature aware of his brotherly feelings, he is ready to sacrifice himself and his pleasures in many ways, in order to attain that end; and often it needs great self-denial and long-suffering before a hardened sinner can be brought to feel that some one better, happier, and more fortunate than himself really takes an interest in him and desires his improvement. And in all such cases, the greater the moral nature of the benevolent man, the more profound will be his sympathy and the greater his self-sacrifice.

Now the climax of such sympathy and such self-sacrifice is the incarnation of Christ. It is impossible to imagine anything more God-like. Just as God transcends men in wisdom, power, and goodness, so does the incarnation transcend every possible human action as an expression of sympathy with the fallen. We cannot conceive anything better calculated to convince the sinner of God's interest in him. The very greatness of the sympathy which could express itself in such a manner makes it suitable to God. To suppose it improbable that God should do such a thing is to think meanly of His moral nature. It is not honouring Him to imagine Him incapable of such an action, nor is it a lofty conception of His greatness to think Him too little in His sympathy to become man.

But we cannot cut short our argument at the incarnation. That great miracle was but the introduction to a life of poverty and suffering and a death of shame. In former days it appeared a strange thing to men that the most Divine life ever lived on earth was a humble, suffer-

ing life of self-abnegation, crowned by a dishonoured death. To the Jews it was a stumbling-block, to the Greeks foolishness. And surely it must have seemed a strange thing that any could believe such a life and death the most noble of human histories! A Solomon who adorned his regal splendour with moral purity as well as superhuman wisdom would seem to the average mind a much more suitable Christ than the poor, despised Prophet of Nazareth. In contrast with this very natural feeling we ought to be thankful to observe how unanimously the best thinkers of our time, whether Christian or not, agree that the picture of the suffering Messiah, as afforded to the imagination in the life of Jesus, is the highest and holiest model ever presented for human imitation.

We have seen that when one man wishes to lift another from degradation, he must be prepared for self-denial. Through suffering of some sort the saviour must approach the sinner, in order to touch the heart and gain its confidence. And the greater the moral nature of the saviour, the greater the sacrifice which he will be willing to make for the object of his pity. There have been men who renounced all the joys of life, and gave them up for ever, that they might help the miserable or raise the fallen; and when we have heard of them our hearts have been stirred to their depths at the thought of such greatness, and we have felt that nothing could better prove true nobility of soul than willingness to enter upon great and continued suffering for the sake of others. Let the same principle be applied to the life of Christ. He voluntarily enters upon a long course of the most terrible suffering, both of body and mind, for the sake of debased creatures who do not love Him. His suffering exceeds all other suffering, and His self-denial all other self-denial; and for that very reason His life is becoming to the greatness of God.

The death of Christ is but the crowning proof of this

divinity of His life. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." In every such instance in which one man dies for another we are convinced we have seen a hero, a man of surpassing greatness. But the death of Christ goes beyond every other heroic death. In all its circumstances it is, as an act of self-sacrifice, worthy of the supreme goodness. It is becoming to "Him for whom are all things, and through whom are all things." It is, in one word, Divine.

Perhaps it may be objected that the infinitely great difference between God and man cuts the ground from under this probability. The incarnation, it may be urged, is improbable, in spite of the Divine heroism of Christ, because God is the infinite, all-embracing Absolute, while man is finite in all his conditions and circumstances. The difference, it will be said, is one of kind, not of degree. There is no doubt indeed that it would utterly vitiate the argument if it were admitted that the difference between God and man is altogether one of kind, and not of degree. That is, to get rid of the ambiguity of expression, if it were admitted that God and man have no attributes in common. The agnostic view of God's nature as unknowable—an absolute completely out of relation to man's thinking faculties—destroys, of course, every attempt to reason from the human to the Divine, and makes revelation impossible. But from the Christian stand-point, which rests upon faith in God's intelligence and goodness, and which, let us thankfully acknowledge, is quite in harmony with the best philosophical thought of Germany and England, the great difference between God and man will be found but to heighten the probability. For if the terms intelligence and morality can be applied to God in the same sense as to man, and if, at the same time, it be remembered that where man is finite God is infinite, then it becomes evident that a degree of goodness and

self-sacrifice which would seem impossible to us is but suitable to the greatness of God.

Suppose, for instance, that a man became aware of a race of creatures, gifted with intelligent and moral faculties, but infinitely below men in all their conditions, some insect tribe, hateful and disgusting in their habits. Suppose that he found it would be possible to sacrifice the dignity and comforts of manhood and become one of them, and enter into their life and degradation, and by so doing raise them to a vastly higher condition. Could any man be found to make so great a sacrifice? It is not likely. And for this reason, that, if such a deed were possible, men are not great enough to sacrifice themselves on behalf of beings so far below them. We should draw back from such a sacrifice, because our moral stature is not grand enough. It would take a nobler morality than man has yet attained to act in so God-like a fashion.

Now such a supposition gives but a faint image of the sacrifice Christ made in His incarnation and death. Yet that sacrifice is not thereby rendered improbable, but all the more worthy of "Him for whom are all things, and through whom are all things." The life and death of Christ as depicted in the gospels and expounded by the writers of the New Testament is, in fact, worthy of the greatness of God, and of His greatness alone.

At the present day unbelieving thought may be divided roughly into two classes. One, agnostic, revelling in mere physical evolution, and thoughtlessly and hastily dismissing all philosophical and theological inquiry as so much waste of intellect. The other, whether basing its belief on transcendental criticism or not, holds firmly to faith in God and the reality of man's spiritual existence; but denies, with a sort of wondering incredulity, the superhuman elements in the life of Christ. To minds of the latter class the passage before us should make a strong appeal. It

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provides a connecting link between their philosophy and the fulness of Christian faith. If they believe in God's intelligence and moral nature, they ought surely to pause before rejecting as false the history of a superhuman life which is in harmony with their own conception of Deity, which comes to them enforced by a vast body of evidence, which has been the primal source of spiritual inspiration to the best men of the best races for nearly two thousand years, and which has nothing opposed to it but a prejudice that the miraculous can never have happened because it does not happen in our ordinary experience.

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