

*THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT IN THE  
NEW TESTAMENT.*

IX.—RATIONALE OF THE ATONEMENT.

IN my last paper I considered certain theories claiming to explain the teaching of the New Testament about the death of Christ and to link this teaching with other teaching of the Bible about God's administration of the world and with the principles which underlie the moral sense of man. All these theories, although each containing important elements of truth, we found to be, in different ways, inadequate to explain and unify the facts of the case. Our questions returned to us unanswered, (1) Why could not God pardon sin, apart from the death of Christ, by royal prerogative? (2) How does the death of an innocent victim harmonize with the justice of God the pardon of the guilty?

Before attempting to answer these questions, we must remember that already we have proved, by documentary evidence admitting no doubt, that Christ taught that it was needful for Him to go up to Jerusalem and put Himself in the hands of those who, as He knew, would kill Him, and taught that the need for this voluntary sacrifice of Himself lay in man's sin. We also found proof that St. Paul taught that the need for this costly means of salvation from the penalty of sin has its root in the eternal justice of God. And, inasmuch as justice is the divine attribute specially concerned with sin, this partial explanation suggested by the great Apostle at once claimed our approval.

This explanation, however, satisfactory as it is within its own limits, does not satisfy our eager inquiry. We must now proceed to ask, with profound reverence, why could not God pardon sin, by mere prerogative, apart from the death of Christ, as a father forgives a penitent child?

A reply to this question is suggested by the analogy of human government. Practically, a king cannot pardon a guilty criminal. What men call pardon is merely a disguise veiling the perplexing incompleteness of the evidence, insufficient either for condemnation or for acquittal, or a recognition of extenuating circumstances which the sentence could not take into account, or occasionally a bribe to induce accessories to betray the principal offender. This last is never given except with extreme reluctance, and is always felt to be a partial failure of justice. When guilt is certain and there are no palliations, even the most merciful government is deaf to appeals for mercy and the sentence is invariably carried out. In such cases, to pardon the guilty would invoke a cry of indignation which would shake the firmest throne.

We notice also that impartial administration of punitive justice is expressly commanded in the Bible. So Proverbs xvii. 15: "He that justifieth the wicked and he that condemneth the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord."

The reason of all this is not far to seek. "When the guilty goes free, the innocent is injured." The security of the state demands the certain and speedy punishment of all who break its laws. For certainty of punishment is a strong deterrent from crime. To remove or weaken this deterrent, is to disorganize and break up society. National welfare demands the maintenance to the highest degree in national life, and as far as possible in the thought of each citizen, of the inevitable sequence of sin and punishment.

It is now evident that, in human government, to pardon the guilty is not only unjust, as running counter to a principle underlying all law, but unkind. Mercy to an individual is cruelty to the nation. The greatest kindness is a strict administration of justice. For this will deter from crime many who are morally weak and thus save them from infinite

injury; and it will save from their violence those who would be its victims.

This impartial administration of justice always secures respect for the governor. And respect for the governor always strengthens a government. On the other hand, the governor who fails to carry out the punitive regulations of the law is looked down upon with contempt even by those whom he pardons. And this contempt weakens both his government and the state. Even in parental rule it is frequently, perhaps always, expedient that a disobedient child, even though penitent, experience the ill result of disobedience. In such cases, parental love prompts and demands punishment. "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." Everywhere in human life it is of the utmost importance to maintain the invariable sequence of sin and sorrow, of righteousness and happiness.

All this sheds light upon God's government of the world. For, just as the principles of right and wrong which underlie all government, so deeply interwoven into human consciousness, are manifestly of superhuman origin and authority, so the absolute necessity of government for human welfare proves it to be an ordinance of God. We cannot think of God except as acting upon, and by His action maintaining, those principles of justice which are universal among men. That which in man would be unjust and contemptible, we cannot conceive to be consistent with the character of God. We therefore cannot doubt that the principles which underlie good human government underlie also God's government of men.

If the above inference be correct, the justice of God would forbid pardon by mere prerogative; and the justice which forbade it is but one aspect of that love which is the essence of God and which seeks ever the highest welfare of His creatures. All analogy assures us that the love of God

demands maintenance of the invariable sequence of sin and sorrow by an impartial administration of the prescriptions of the Law, and therefore forbids the pardon of sin by mere prerogative.

This result is in close harmony with the frequent teaching of the Bible that all sin will and must receive due retribution.

Looking at the matter from another point of view, we may say that the creation of free and intelligent agents made needful for their highest good, as a deterrent from sin, the threat of punishment of sin, and that the truth of God required the due infliction of the threatened punishment. Thus both the justice and the truth of God, these being an outflow of His love, forbade the pardon of sin by mere prerogative.

These considerations answer fairly our first question.

A much more difficult question remains. If it be inconsistent with the justice of God to pardon sin by mere prerogative, how is this inconsistency removed or lessened by the death of the innocent in order to save the guilty from the due punishment of their sins? It must be admitted that such transfer of punishment would not be allowed in human government; nor would it ordinarily serve the purposes of justice. But that which would not be permitted in the human administration of justice was, as I have proved, according to the express teaching of St. Paul and the implied teaching of the rest of the New Testament, actually ordained by God as the means of saving the world. This difference between human and divine administration of justice demands now our best attention.

Our question is not answered by the conspicuous teaching of St. Paul and St. John that the death of Christ reveals the wonderful love of God to man, and that the love thus revealed changes into love towards God the hard heart of man. As examples of this teaching, I may quote Romans v. 8, "a

proof of His love towards us God giveth, that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us"; and 2 Corinthians v. 15, "the love of Christ constraineth us, having judged this, that One died for all, therefore all died." Similarly 1 John iv. 10, 19, "herein is love, not that we loved Him, but that He loved us and sent His son to be a propitiation for our sins . . . we love because He first loved us." For this important truth does not explain St. Paul's teaching in Romans iii. 26 that the death of Christ as a means of man's salvation was required by the justice of God; nor his teaching in Romans vii. 4, Colossians ii. 14 about the relation between the death of Christ and the Law. Nor does it explain the necessity which moved Christ, as recorded in Matthew xvi. 21, etc., to go up to Jerusalem and put Himself in the hands of those who, as He foresaw, would kill Him. Moreover, love never prompts a needless sacrifice, or a sacrifice needful only to reveal its own intensity or to obtain for its object something which might be had at less cost. Indeed we sometimes resent, and always regret, useless expenditure on our behalf. On the other hand, when a great benefit, which could not otherwise be ours, or deliverance from great and imminent peril or loss, is obtained for us at great cost, this sacrifice on our behalf, combined with a benefit worthy of the sacrifice, fills us with gratitude. The costliness of the means used by God to harmonize with His own justice the justification of sinners and thus make it possible proves clearly that no less costly means would attain the same result. Our question therefore comes back to us unanswered, why was so costly a revelation of God's love needful for man's salvation?

For an answer, we turn again to the great passage, Romans iii. 25, 26. St. Paul here asserts that God gave Christ to be a propitiation through faith, in His own blood, in order to afford proof of the righteousness of God; that He was moved to give this proof by His own apparent tolerance of

sin in days gone by ; and that the ultimate aim of this proof was to harmonize with His own justice the justification of believers. In other words, the immediate purpose of the death of Christ was to manifest the justice of God in view of past forbearance which seemed to obscure it and in view of the Gospel which announces God's reception into His favour of all those who believe the words of Jesus. The concluding words of verse 26 imply that the justice of God itself demanded this manifestation, that it would have been unjust of God to allow His justice to remain obscured and to pardon sin without giving, through the death of Christ, this public proof of His justice.

It is worthy of note that in human government justice demands not only impartial administration but administration manifestly and conspicuously impartial. Whatever obscures the justice of the ruler hinders, and whatever reveals it helps, the ends of justice.

The question before us now is, Does the death of Christ as a means of man's salvation give proof of the justice of God? If so, justice demanded it as a condition of man's salvation. For justice ever claims, even for the good of the governed, to be openly manifested. Moreover, the justice of God seemed to be obscured by the pardon of sin.

Now justice is the divine attribute which underlies the sequence of sin and sorrow and death. Whatever reveals the inevitability of this sequence reveals God's impartial administration of His own laws. I shall endeavour to show that the death of Christ, following His union with a race smitten with the deadly curse of sin, does reveal this inevitable sequence and thus reveals God's impartial administration in a way which elicits our profound reverence for the character of God and serves a definite moral purpose.

Let us look again at the sequence of sin and sorrow. So deeply rooted in our moral nature is our conviction of this sequence that we cannot doubt that the sequence itself is

ordained by the Author of our being. Nor can we doubt that it is universal and inevitable. We notice also that frequently, indeed usually, sin brings sorrow not only to the sinner but to others, often to innocent persons, especially to those closely related to the guilty one. So frequent is this result of sin that it must be by the ordinance of God. And this far-reaching effect of sin reveals, even more than does the suffering of the guilty, the tremendous and deadly power of sin. The pain thus inflicted on the innocent, by a wide-spread and divinely-ordained moral sequence, is in some sense a vicarious punishment of sin.

The injury wrought by sin upon those associated with the sinner is, in spite of its manifest hardship, a real gain to the race. For, a world in which none suffered except by their own fault would be a far less effective school of moral discipline. In view of this gain, we cannot doubt that even this strange connection of sin and innocent suffering was ordained by the wisdom and love of God for the good of mankind.

To the human race thus constituted, the Son of God occupies, as the writers of the New Testament agree to assert, a unique and very close relation as its Creator and Lawgiver and Judge. It was He who called man into existence, wrote upon the hearts of all men the great principles of morality; linked together moral sequences, and will pronounce and inflict the punishment of sin.

At His incarnation the Son of God entered into still closer relation to our race. He took upon Him flesh and blood and all the conditions of human bodily life. He shared with man that flesh and blood on which rests, in consequence of man's sin, the doom of death. This partnership involved, unless the incarnate Son was to be sheltered by special divine intervention from the consequences of His own act, suffering and death. It involved also close contact with man's sin—a contact which could

not but be infinitely painful to the pure human spirit of Jesus. In Him, pure human nature experienced to the full, while still unstained by its pollution, the painful and shameful consequences of sin. The inevitable result of this close nearness to man was mental and bodily agony, followed by death. And these inevitable results of the incarnation were foreseen and willingly endured by the Son of God.

This intimate union of the Creator Son with His creature man was probably part of the original purpose of creation, and was probably needful for the accomplishment of that purpose and for the highest interest of men. For we may well believe that an intelligent creature can attain his full development and happiness only {by closest possible union with his Creator. Had man not sinned, this union would have involved neither death nor suffering. Through man's sin, this union of the Son of God with man, needful for man's highest development, involved all that Christ actually suffered.

The Son of God became Man. He thus became conscious, by actual experience, of bodily pain. His pure human spirit felt, as none but the pure can feel, the shame and degradation of sin. And the testimony He bore to God's claims upon man exposed Him to the fury of bad men. No hand from heaven was reached out to save Him from these various consequences of His entrance into a body doomed to die and into a race dominated by sin. On Him sin worked out its full consequences until the human body of the Sinless One hung dead upon the cross. In other words, in the incarnate Son, the sequence of sin and suffering, ordained by Himself as Creator, was maintained inviolate, and ran its full course although in doing so it struck with infinite agony the Son Himself.

If, as suggested above, the close union of the Creator Son with His creature man was needful for man's highest

good, the sufferings of Christ just described were, on account of man's sin, needful for the same. In full view of the inevitable consequences of so doing, the Son willingly entered into human flesh. And, that God permitted the full consequences of sin to run their course, even though they struck down His only-begotten and beloved Son, reveals in the strongest manner we can conceive the inevitability of this sequence. In Christ's death we see the essential deadliness of sin and its inevitable result as we could not otherwise have done.

This manifestation of the inevitable sequence of sin and sorrow serves a great moral purpose. The forbearance of God in not inflicting speedily the full punishment of sin in former days, and His proclamation of pardon for all who believe the good news announced by Christ, might seem to indicate a tolerance of sin itself by God, as though it were not essentially evil and deadly. The cross of Christ forbids the suggestion. That sin slew the Author of life when He came, for our salvation, in some sense under its domain, is the strongest motive possible for avoiding all future contact with sin.

Thus the death of Christ reveals the justice of God. By revealing the inevitable sequence of sin and death, a sequence which could not be broken even by the incarnation of the Son of God, it reveals the divine attribute underlying that sequence. In the death of Christ we see the Father not overriding, but submitting to His own law. We see the Strong One submitting to the restraints which for their good He imposed on those under His control. Such submission and self-restraint always secure for a ruler our profound respect. Pardon of sin under such circumstances cannot loosen any moral obligation. For He who proclaims pardon maintains at infinite cost to Himself the moral sequences on which rests the highest well-being of men.

As an illustration of the subject before us, appeal has often been made to a famous story about Zaleucus recorded by Valerius Maximus<sup>1</sup> which tells that, when the lawgiver's own son had been found guilty of adultery, a crime for which the punishment prescribed was loss of both eyes, Zaleucus, in order to save his son's sight and yet maintain the letter of the law, ordered one of his son's eyes to be put out and one of his own. It is true that, by so doing, he evaded inflicting the full intention of the law, which was total blindness. But, whatever this story be worth, whether true or false, it proves conclusively that voluntary endurance of suffering by the innocent may serve the interests of justice as effectively as full punishment inflicted on the guilty. For the mutilated face of Zaleucus would proclaim, if the story be true, his inflexible determination to administer impartially his own laws. In view of such self-sacrifice, none would dare to break the law in hope of escape from punishment. In other words, the self-inflicted punishment rendered morally harmless the partial forgiveness of the crime. Similarly, the death of the Son of God reveals, even more clearly than would the death of all the guilty ones, God's purpose to maintain the sequence of sin and suffering. Moreover, just as this story is a tribute of honour to Zaleucus, so in all ages the servants of Christ have seen in His death a manifestation of the justice of God which has secured their profound homage. And this vindication of divine justice has, in their minds, rendered morally harmless the forgiveness of sins announced in the Gospel.

Sometimes in actual life the suffering of the innocent caused by the sin of others serves a moral purpose. Occasionally, dissolute parents have been aroused to a consciousness of their vileness by the suffering they have inflicted on

<sup>1</sup> Book vi. 5, ext. 3.

their children. Thus innocent suffering has fulfilled a moral purpose.

An illustration of the good moral effect of refusing to pardon the guilty, when that refusal eventually cost the lives of innocent victims, occurred some years ago in Greece. A party of Englishmen were captured by brigands at Marathon. The captors offered to release them on condition of a large ransom and a full pardon. The king was most anxious to save the captives; and was willing, for this end, to pay a large price. But he could not pardon the guilty. For, to permit the robbers to enjoy in peace their ill-gotten gains, would have been an inducement to similar acts of violence by others, and would thus render all travelling in Greece dangerous. Indeed, the discontent which had culminated in the dethronement of the king's predecessor, Otho, had been greatly aggravated by his misplaced mercy in the frequent pardon of criminals, and by the insecurity resulting therefrom. The Englishmen were murdered. But the king's refusal to pardon the robbers struck a blow at brigandage in Greece from which it never recovered. It became at once manifest that the guilty could no longer count on mercy, and travelling in Greece is now said to be thoroughly safe. In this case, the capture was not foreseen, nor was the death of the innocent voluntary. But the interests of justice and of the nation were helped by the death of innocent men caused by the sin of others. And in these points it affords a parallel to the teaching of the New Testament about the death of Christ.

So far we have spoken of Christ's death only as resulting from His entrance into mortal human life. But, for the ends of justice, it was needful that His death should be placed in conspicuous connection with man's sin. This end was attained by His violent death on the cross. For, indisputably, He died because He was good and had

preached righteousness among men who were bad. This all-important connection between His death and our sin would not have been manifested had Christ fled from His enemies and afterwards died a natural death. It was therefore needful for the manifestation of divine justice and for our salvation that He should put Himself in the hands of His enemies. And in this sense we may interpret His own words recorded in Matthew xvi. 21, "He must needs go away to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be put to death."

Whatever estimate be formed of the above attempt to explain that which the writers of the New Testament have left unexplained, abundant documentary evidence compels us to believe that Christ taught that He was Himself about willingly to die in order to save men from the due penalty of their sins; and that St. Paul taught that God gave Christ to die in order to harmonize with His own justice the justification of sinners, and to give proof of this harmony. We have also observed that the teaching of St. Paul explains fully, and is the only explanation of, the teaching of the rest of the New Testament about the death of Christ. And we have now seen that the analogy of human governments affords a strong presumption that God could not pardon sin by mere prerogative; and have seen that the death upon the cross of Him who, in order to fulfil man's original and glorious destiny, Himself became Man reveals the inevitable moral sequence imposed upon man by God for man's good. In this real sense the death of Christ, as a means of saving man, reveals the justice of God, a revelation needful in order to vindicate His justice which seemed to be obscured both by past tolerance of sinners and by the Gospel proclamation of forgiveness of sin.

This explanation, imperfect as it is, does something to harmonize the teaching of the New Testament about the death of Christ with other teaching contained therein, with

the intuitions of man's moral sense, and with the principles of human government.

In a concluding paper I shall consider the extent of the Atonement.

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*PETER'S WIFE'S MOTHER.*

MATTHEW VIII. 14. MARK I. 29. LUKE IV. 38.

"A MAN'S foes shall be they of his own household." This general law of the devoted, of all who stand on a higher level than custom sanctions, was fulfilled in our Lord Himself. They did not believe on Him. They sought to take Him. Their estrangement gave to His enemies the opportunity for at least one sarcastic interruption.

But this estrangement was inevitable, when once His claims were put forward and acceptance was refused to them. For those demands were peremptory. He that was not for Him was against Him. It needs no reference to their possible irritation when the common home in Nazareth became untenable to explain the fact that the anointed of the Lord could not live in close domestic relations with men who rejected his authority and reckoned him to be mad. Henceforth it is clear enough that "His home was not their house."

Many indications combine to strengthen the belief that at least for a time Jesus made "the house of Peter" the centre of His early journeys. There, in humble comfort, Andrew lived happily with his brother, to whom, the moment he found the Christ, his fraternal heart turned with the glad announcement. Although he seems to have been the elder, yet their common dwelling was naturally known