

Love's Triumph.

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Romans 8: 38, 39: "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God."

These rapturous words are the climax of the apostle's long demonstration that the gospel is the revelation of "the righteousness of God from faith to faith," and is thereby "the power of God unto salvation." What a contrast there is between the beginning and the end of his argument! It starts with sombre, sad words about man's sinfulness and aversion from the knowledge of God. It closes with this sunny outburst of triumph; like some stream rising among black and barren cliffs, or melancholy moorlands, and foaming through narrow rifts in gloomy ravines, it reaches at last fertile lands, and flows calm, the sunlight dancing on its broad surface, till it loses itself at last in the unfathomable ocean of the love of God.

We are told that the Biblical view of human nature is too dark. Well, the important question is not whether it be dark, but whether it be true. But, apart from that, the doctrine of Scripture about man's moral condition is not dark, if you will take the whole of it together. Certainly, a part of it is very dark. The picture, for instance, of what men are, painted at the beginning of this epistle, is black like a canvas of Rembrandt's. The Bible is "Nature's sternest painter, but her best." But to get the whole doctrine of Scripture on the subject, we have to take its confidence as to what men may become, as well as its portrait of what they are—and then who will say that the anthropology of Scripture is gloomy? To me it seems that the unrelieved blackness of the views which because it admits no fall, can imagine no rise, which sees in all man's sins and sorrows no token of the dominion of an alien power, and has, therefore, no reason to believe that they can be separated from humanity, is the true "Gospel of despair," and that the system which looks steadily at all the misery and all the wickedness, and calmly proposes to cast it all out, is really the only doctrine of human nature which throws any gleam of light on the darkness. Christianity begins indeed with, "there is none that doeth good, no, not one," but it ends with this victorious psalm of our text.

And what a majestic close it is to the great words that have gone before, fitly crowning even their lofty height! One might well shrink from presuming to take such words as a text, with any idea of exhausting or of enhancing them. My object is very much more humble. I simply wish to bring out the remarkable order, in which Paul here marshals, in his passionate, rhetorical amplification, all the enemies that can be supposed to seek to wrench us away from the love of God; and triumphs over them all. We shall best measure the fullness of the words by simply taking these clauses as they stand in the text.

I. The love of God is unaffected by the extremest changes of our condition.

The apostle begins his fervid catalogue of vanquished foes by a pair of opposites which might seem to cover the whole ground—"neither death nor life." What more can be said? Surely, these two include everything. From one point of view they do. But yet, as we shall see, there is more to be said. And the special reason for beginning with this pair of possible enemies is probably to be found by remembering that they are a pair; that between them they do cover the whole ground, and represent the extremes of change which can befall us. The one stands at the one pole, the other at the other. If these two stations, so far from each other, are equally near to God's love, then no intermediate point can be far from it. If the most violent change which we can experience does not in the least matter to the grasp which the love of God has on us, or to the grasp which we may have on it, then no less violent a change can be of any consequence. It is the same thought in a somewhat modified form, as we find in another word of Paul's. "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord." Our subordination to Him is the same, and our consecration should be the same in all varieties of condition, even in that greatest of all variations. His love to us makes no account of that mightiest of changes. How should it be affected by slighter ones?

The distance of a star is measured by the apparent change in its position, as seen from different points of the earth's surface or orbit. But this great Light stands steadfast in our Heaven, nor moves a hair's breadth, nor pours a feeble ray on us, whether we look up to it from the midsummer day of busy life, or from the midwinter of death. These opposites are parted by a distance to which the million of miles of the world's path among the stars are but a point, and yet the love of God streams down on them alike.

Of course, the confidence of immortality is implied in this thought. Death does not, in the slightest degree, affect the essential vitality of the soul; so it does not, in the slightest degree, affect the outflow of God's love to that soul. It is a change of condition and circumstances

and no more. He does not lose us in the dust of death. The withered leaves on the pathway are trampled into mud, and indistinguishable to human eyes; but He sees them even as when they hung green and sunlit on the mystic tree of life.

How beautifully this thought contrasts with the saddest aspect of the power of death in our human experience! He is Death the Separator, who unclasp our hands from the closest, dearest grasp, and divides asunder joint and marrow, and parts soul and body, and withdraws us from all our habitude and associations and occupations, and loosens every bond of society and concord, and hales us away into a lonely land. But there is one bond which his "abhorred shears" can not cut. Their edge is turned on it. One hand holds us in a grasp which the fleshless fingers of Death in vain strive to loosen. The separator becomes the uniter; he rends us apart from the world, that he may "bring us to God." The love filtered by drops on us in life is poured upon us in a flood in death, "for I am persuaded that neither death nor life shall be able to separate us from the love of God."

II. The love of God is undiverted from us by any other order of beings.

"Nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers," says Paul. Here we pass from conditions affecting ourselves to living beings beyond ourselves. Now, it is important for understanding the precise thought of the apostle to observe that this expression, when used without any qualifying adjective, seems uniformly to mean good angels, the hierarchy of blessed spirits before the throne. So that there is no reference to "spiritual wickedness in high places" striving to draw men away from God. The supposition which the apostle makes is, indeed, an impossible one, that these ministering spirits, who are sent forth to them who shall be heir of salvation, should so forget their mission and contradict their nature as to seek to bar us out from the love which it is their chiefest joy to bring us. He knows it to be an impossible supposition and its very impossibility gives energy to his conclusion, just as when in the same fashion he makes the other equally impossible supposition about an angel from Heaven preaching another gospel than that which he had preached to them.

So we may turn the general thought of this second category of impotent efforts in two different ways, and suggest, first, that it implies the utter powerlessness of any third party in regard to the relations between our souls and God.

We alone have to do with Him alone. The awful fact of individuality, that solemn mystery of our personal being, has its most blessed or its most dread manifestations in our relation to God. There no other being has any power. Counsel and stimulus, suggestion or temptation, instruction or lie, which may tend to lead us nearer to Him or away from Him, they may, indeed, give us; but after they have done their best or their worst, all depends on the personal act of our own innermost being. Man nor angel can affect that, but from without. The old mystics called prayer "the flight of the lonely soul to the only God." It is the name of all religion. These two, God and the soul, have to "transact," as our Puritan forefathers used to say, as if there were no other beings in the universe but only they two. Angels and principalities and powers may stand beholding with sympathetic joy; they may minister blessing and guardianship in many ways; but the decisive act of union between God and the soul they can neither affect nor prevent.

And as for them, so for men around us; the limits of their power to harm us are soon set. They may shut us out from human love by calumnies, and dig deep gulfs of alienation between us and dear ones; they may hurt and annoy us in a thousand ways; with slanderous tongues, and arrows dipped in poisonous hatred. But one thing they can not do. They may build a wall around us, and imprison us from many a joy and many a fair prospect. But they can not put a roof on it to keep out the sweet influences from above, or hinder us from looking up to the heavens. Nobody can come between us and God but ourselves.

Or, we may term this general thought in another direction, and say, "These blessed spirits around the throne do not absorb and intercept His love." They gather about its steps in their "solemn troops and sweet societies;" but close as are their ranks, and innumerable as is their multitude, they do not prevent that love from passing beyond them to us on the outskirts of the crowd. The planet nearest the sun is drenched and saturated with fiery brightness, but the rays from the centre of life pass on to each of the sister spheres in its turn, and travel away outwards to where the remotest of them all rolls in its far off orbit, unknown for millenniums to dwellers closer to the sun, but through all the ages visited by warmth and light according to its needs. Like that poor sickly woman who could lay her wasted fingers on the hem of Christ's garment, notwithstanding the thronging multitude, we can reach our hands through all the crowd, or rather He reaches His strong hand to us and heals and blesses us. All the guests are fed full at that great table. One's gain is not another's loss. The multitude sit on the green grass, and the last man of the last fifty gets as much as the first: "They did all eat, and were filled;" and more remains than fed them all.

So all beings are "nourished from the King's country," and none jostle others out of their share. This healing fountain is not exhausted of its curative power by the early comers. "I will give this last even as unto thee." Nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, shall be able to separate us from the love of God."

III. The love of God is raised above the power of time. "Nor things present, nor things to come," is the apostle's next class of powers impotent to disunite us from the love of God. The rhythmical arrangement of the text deserves to be noticed, as bearing not only on its music and rhetorical flow, but as affecting its force. We had first a pair of opposites, and then a triplet: "death and life; angels, principalities and powers." We have again a pair of opposites; "things present, things to come," again followed by a triplet, "height nor depth, nor any other creature." The effect of this is to divide the whole into two, and to throw the first and second classes more closely together, as also the third and fourth. Time and Space, these two mysterious ideas, which work so fatally on all human love are powerless here.

The great revelation of God on which the whole of Judaism was built, was that made to Moses of the name, "I Am that I Am." And parallel to the verbal revelation was that symbol of the bush, burning and unconsumed, which is so often misunderstood. It appears wholly contrary to the usage of Scriptural visions, which are ever wont to express in material form the same truth which accompanies them in words, that the meaning of that vision should be, as it is frequently taken as being, the continuance of Israel, unharmed by the fiery furnace of persecution. Not the continuance of Israel, but the eternity of Israel's God is the teaching of that flaming wonder. The burning bush and the name of the Lord proclaimed the same great truth of self-derived, self-determined, timeless, undecaying being. And what better symbol than the bush burning, and yet not burning out, could be found of that God in Whose life there is no tendency to death, Whose work digs no pit of weariness into which it falls, Who gives and is none the poorer, Who fears no exhaustion in His spending, no extinction in His continual shining?

And this eternity of being is no mere metaphysical abstraction. It is eternity of love, for God is love. That great stream, the pouring out of His own very inmost being, knows no pause, nor does the deep fountain from which it flows ever sink one hair's breadth in its pure basin.

We know of earthly loves which cannot die. They have entered so deeply into the very fabric of the soul that, like some cloth dyed in grain, as long as two threads hold together they will retain the tint. We have to thank God for such instances of love stronger than death, which make it easier for us to believe in the unchanging duration of His. But we know, too, of love that can change, and we know that all love must part. Few of us have reached middle life, who do not, looking back, see our track strewn with the gaunt skeletons of dead friendships, and dotted with "oaks of weeping," waving green and mournful over graves, and saddened by footprints striking away from the line of march, and leaving us the more solitary for their departure.

How blessed, then, to know of a love which cannot change or die! The past, the present and the future are all the same to him, to Whom "a thousand years," that can corrode so much earthly love, are in their power to change "as one day," and "one day," which can hold so few of the expressions of our love, may be as a "thousand years" in the multitude and richness of the gifts which it can be expanded to contain. The whole of what He has been to any past, He is to us today. "The God of Jacob is our refuge." All these Old World stories of loving care and guidance may be repeated in our lives.

So we may bring the blessedness of all the past into the present, and calmly face the misty future, sure that it cannot rob us of His love.

"Do whate'er thou wilt, swift footed Time, To this wide world and all her fading sweets."

It matters not, if only our hearts are stayed on His love, which neither things present, nor things to come, can alter or remove. Looking on all the flow of ceaseless change, the waste and fading, the alienation and cooling, the decrepitude and decay of earthly affection, we can lift up with gladness, heightened by the contrast, the triumphant song of the ancient church: "Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, because His mercy endureth forever!"

IV. The love of God is present everywhere. The apostle ends his catalogue with a singular trio of antagonists: "nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature," as if he had got impatient of the enumeration of impotencies, and having named the outside boundaries in space of the created universe, flings, as it were, with one rapid toss, into that large room the whole that it can contain, and triumphs over it all.

As the former clause proclaimed the powerlessness of that other great mystery of creaturely life which we call Space. Height or depth, it matters not. That diffusive love diffuses itself equally in all directions. Up or down, it is all the same. The distance from the center is equal Zenith or to Nadir.

Here, we have the Omnipresence as an idea of eternity. vividness, and not is all softened and of bare rock is when it, when it is thou "Thou, God, seest who sees be but As reasonably might cell to be glad wh him from some t any thought of G 130th Psalm with art there; if I ma there." So may t tremble as he ask Thy presence?" cast over the mar the warm hue of l into this of our te able to separate u

In that great o and have our bein which spreads its in the depths of m ever in our ear might currents before the fixed g unmoved like thos idle hands on the out across the san of love, nor the O and loves us even that we are ever in of all felicity and the day long in th come when we sh in that we shall b

The recognition over all these real too, lords over the which some of the the love of God, helpers, uniting u the dread of death life. So we are d unseen world, and emancipated from careful thought everywhere, and of the many man are yours, . . . God's."

I do not forget have not ventured because they wou of thought to be canvas.

But remember, explained by our Lord." Love illi a love which has a method and a p world. It is not, a vague, nebulous chaotic, half-mad Light which rules am the Light of is all centered an all sinful and hu gathered on a hea that are in the ho merely so much what? Many peo the last clause of and sundry as the veral love of God that universal lo for every man H part, one on man the bestowal of e a human respon gave His only be Him should not p all the universal t our brethren, is Him unites us to shock of change c can stretch to n neither death, n power, nor thing height, nor depth separate us from our Lord."—Sele

Better Than

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