

IS THERE GROUND FOR THE GMA OF
A PROBATION AFTER IT?

The practice of building articles of faith upon isolated texts is deservedly falling into disrepute. The expression "proceedeth from the Father" John xv. 26, is not now relied upon for proof that the Holy Spirit is divine. We are feeling with growing length that, properly understood, what the old div called the analogy of faith is the safer guide to the intent of Scripture teaching. In considering the subject before us, individual texts may be specially misleading if following one class of passages we definitely bind all others thereunto. This we can see by taking some typical texts, such as the following:—

Eph. i. 10 with Col. i. 20, bear upon face of them the doctrine of ultimate and universal redemption. 1 Thes. i. 9 as plainly may be made to announce annihilation, whilst Rev. xxii. 10, 11 may be quoted as indicating the fixedness of the state as last decreed. The truth is that the classes of passages thus summarised, *taken separately*, may be so uttered no uncertain sound each in its own kind. Which may be justly taken as the limiting one by which of the three shall the others be harmonised? Or, is there a concurrent voice of Scripture, which the rather be taken as the interpreter and harmoniser of what otherwise may appear as discordant texts? for if the entire tenor of the Gospel teaching can be seen in its bearing upon the doctrine of eternal suffering as the penalty of sin, and upon the specious regarding after-death probation, we may suspect a surer ground of confidence than any built about individual texts can afford. It will be the endeavour of these paragraphs to enquire if such a ring can be found; to discover a general tone of teaching which forbids any departure therefrom by which the interpretation of individual texts may be limited.

In making this enquiry the key not taken from that parable which more than all others the Gospel in essence. The parable of the two sons, Luke xv. justly characterized as "a divine epitome of the wandering of man and the love of God, such literature has ever equalled, such as no ear can have ever heard elsewhere." "The Pearl of Blessings." The presumptuous claim of the rebel boy, rebellion given, the riot and its brief enjoyment, the tiny famine, the lonely degradation, the thought home, the father's far off sight and warm embrace reveal a world of love and tender sympathy, such as before has been concentrated in human speech. As lost, he is found! and among the angels, joy over sinner repenting. But that very parable suggests a solemn consideration, *there was no running meet the prodigal until he had turned his wandering footsteps home*; there were no marks of compassion until repentance had been manifested. Human turns, earth is iron and the heavens are brass. There can be no loving embrace until the lips have said "Father I have sinned."

The difficulties which pit the Calvinist against the Arminian theology and *vice versa* are arrayed against this consideration, but apparent contradictions confessedly exist as contemporary faith contradiction must therefore lie in our misapprehending them. As yet we have not reached that perfect of speech, which enables us so to state as not to tear contradictory our conceptions in their relation each other of such facts as the sovereignty of God the will of man; measured and infinite space; finite and the infinite. As these difficulties confound against all possible philosophies and theologies, we need not detain us here nor close our eyes to the fact that though the shepherd seeks the sheep, the wolf the silver, the sheep is not carried by force means, nor the prodigal compelled unwilling to perform the journey home.

"Though God be good and free given,
No force divine can love compel
And though the song of sin forbids
May sound through lowest hell
The sweet persuasion of His voice
Respects thy sanctity of will
He giveth day; thou hast thy choice
To walk in darkness still."

This is the constant tenor of Scripture teaching: "Return unto me and I will return unto you." Jehovah's hand is not shortened that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God. "Say unto them, as I live saith the Lord Jehovah I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live, ye, turn ye

from your evil way for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." "Come, and I will give you rest," and that pathetic wail than which the God forsaken cry from the cross speaks no deeper agony, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered and ye would not."

In that felt power of will which baffles all our definitions whilst our consciousness attests its presence, may we not discern an endowment potent for evil, infinite in its possibilities for good and which once possessed, save by the destruction of the possessor cannot even by omnipotence be taken away? When the father divided between his sons the living, the absolute propriety thereof was in the children's hands, nor could he have required the younger son to continue the usufruct of his goods under the paternal eye without again assuming control. True, the authority of a father might be urged, motives of filial relationship be pressed, but if the son willed the prodigal life, what power remained in the father's hand? And if man wills the evil when the good would yield strength to grow like unto itself, what remaineth but a fearful looking for of judgment?—and what is judgment but the legitimate results of persistent folly, wilful rebellion? That the younger son did not contemplate the wasting of his substance, the desertion of the friends of his riotous hours, the famine and the degradation, we may well concede, had he realized the same even in measure he would have paused ere he crossed the father's threshold, yet who will say that those evils which befell him were aught but the just and legitimate results of his selfish folly, and if he did not know that wilfulness would lead to ruin, we instinctively feel he ought to have known, at least, that wilfulness was wrong, therefore his condemnation or judgment was just, he earned the misery that eventually overtook him.

It may be now urged that judgment, condemnation, the felt famine is disciplinary, and that under the paternal government of God all punishment leads ultimately to reformation. Let us examine this presentation. The pain felt as the hand is pressed against the sharp edge of a razor is a monition of the destructive process going on, and the instinctive shrinking back nature's instant protest against the destroyer—but you persevere in the pressure, and allow the bright red blood to gush unstanched forth. What then? The pain did warn, the punishment discipline, but warning and sympathy alike were unheeded, death must come; and the entire analogy of nature forbids the hope of miraculous interference to the end that in any other than her own appointed way her penalties and their consequences are to be avoided. And is the next world to introduce new principles of action? On God's part is He to change? If sin does exist and He punishes *now*, is He to be more merciful and pure so that His changed nature shall make both impossible *then*? If consequences are by Him affixed to developments of character *here*, is it by any means to be made plain that like consequences are inconsistent with His attributes as they are to be *there*? But man is to change—How? Can clearer light or stronger motives be presented than than now? Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. What stronger tie can bind us then which does not exist here and now? If with the wreck and ruin wrought by sin before us, and the strong voice from Calvary urging by all the considerations love and mercy can move, men still refuse and persist, on what ground can a hope be built that those voices will be listened to then? Does not all experience declare that habits indulged in tend to permanence, that

"There is a time, we know not when,
A point, we know not where,
That marks the destiny of men,
For glory or despair."

Nor must it be forgotten that the entire New Testament teaching bears out the solemn truth of the aspect of the parable of the two sons already insisted upon, namely, the prodigal goes out from "that perfect presence of the Father's face which we for want of words call heaven," and is left there in his ill found liberty till himself turns in thought and desire at least his footsteps home.

Are our hearts cheered by the bright prospect of the ransomed and perfected church, and its blest abode by words such as these: "And there shall be no more curse; but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they

need no candles, neither light of sun; for the Lord God giveth them light; and they shall reign for ever and ever? We are forbidden to assume that thereby the curse and light are non-existent, for "without" are dogs, and sorcerers, and whore-mongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie."

And these words have suggestive meanings. "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still."

Still!

"For ever round the mercy seat,
The guiding lights of love shall burn;
But what, if habit bound, thy foot
Shall lack the will to turn?
What if thine eye refuse to see,
Thine ear of Heaven's free welcome fail,
And thou a willing captive be,
Thyself thine own dark jail."

The immutability of a state of evil by habit gained has been generally viewed as an institution of God rather than a consequence of man's transgression, hence such frantic cries as "I cannot believe in a God who will consign any of His creatures to endless woe, and I will not." I should be loth to accept as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus a Being who would cause to any of his creatures a needless pain. As a matter of faith I receive the teaching

"Not a worm is cleft in vain
Not a moth with vain desire
Is shrivelled in a useless fire,
Or but subserves the common gain."

But who sent the prodigal forth as a wanderer? Who ran the riot and the revel? Who made that famine in the far country? Who earned the degradation? If the prodigal change not assuredly eternal righteousness must not deny itself, and there appears nothing in human experience, nothing in God's revelation as thus far read which justifies the thought that man's heart, by habit hardened, is to be softer by-and-by, or that God's justice is to relax its hold upon the soul that sinneth. Scripture, experience, the stern facts of life viewed in all their bearings speak in their prevailing voices of sin's dread earnings being sure, and of a line—the irrevocable limit—"between God's mercy and His wrath."

But what of those who have no chance here? What is meant by that expression "no chance here?" That there are many, very many, whose opportunities are not as ours must be felt, but then their judgment will not be by the measure of *our* opportunities but of theirs, and the Judge of all the earth will do right. How justice and mercy are to be consistently meted out to them belongeth to Him to whom all judgment is committed, and we contentedly may leave all there. Our duty is to seek that they may have the light, and the burden of that responsibility is sufficiently weighty without snatching from God's hand the balance and the rod, a mission from which we may gladly feel ourselves free. In the courts of criminal justice the office of the judge condemning his fellow, to a sympathising man must be extremely painful, it ought to be with a sigh of relief that we can lay the burden of the final judgment in its absolute entirety in the hands of One who doeth all things well.

But for us who know the truth what dread results hang upon the *now*! the now wherein salvation is offered, the now made precious and endearing by a Saviour's love, the now wherein love's great sacrifice pleads. Under the blessings the Gospel brings every cloud has its silver lining, or bears upon its darkened form the rainbow's arch of promise; even through the dark tomb as it sends a cheering ray, only in hell its mercy shines not for hell is self-sought and self-dug. "He giveth day, Thou hast thy choice to walk in darkness still," but why walk in darkness while light shines, or dream of perchance a greater while *now* it comes from around the throne? Why encourage a hope upon a shifting sand, does not wisdom cry and understanding plead? And is not heaven very near to him whose eye is homeward turned? There is, thank God, bread enough and to spare in the father's house and a vacant seat for the prodigal. Why should any leave it in the hope of a peradventure by and-by? Nor let us forget the universal verdict of God in history and in human experience

"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light."

Or as an inspired pen hath put it, "Now is the accepted time, now Salvation's day."—Rev. John Burton, B.D., in *Canadian Independent*.