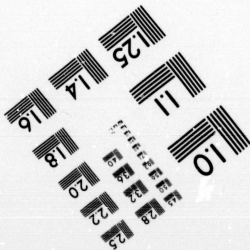
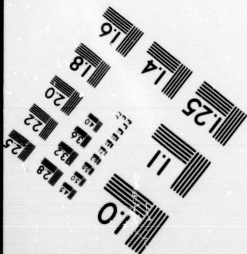
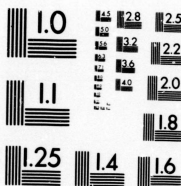


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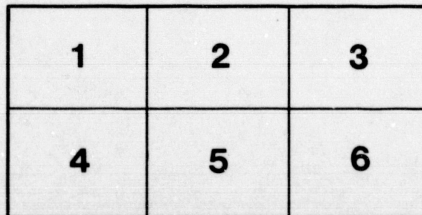
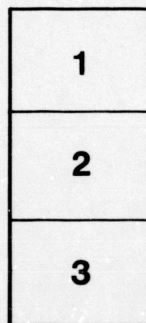
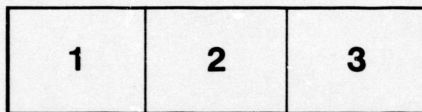
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# POTTER AND CLAY

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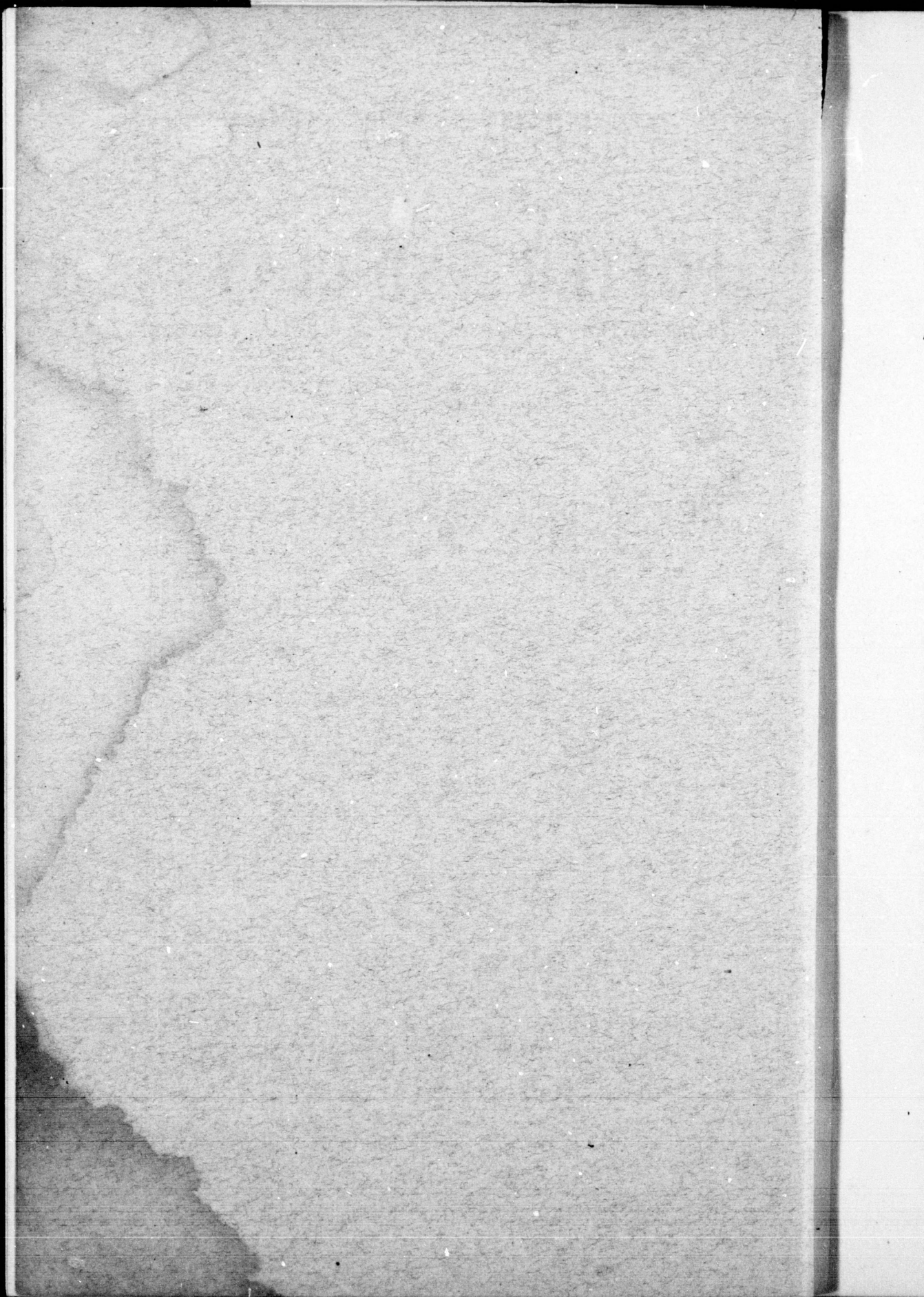
REV. J. BALDWIN BROWN, B. A.

Author of "The Soul's Exodus and Pilgrimage,"  
"The Battle and Burden of Life," &c.,

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# POTTER AND CLAY

A SERMON PREACHED

*In the Brixton Independent Church, London, England.*

BY THE

REV. J. BALDWIN BROWN, B. A.

AND REPRINTED FROM

MISREAD PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE.

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THE MILTON PUBLISHING LEAGUE.

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1876.



The following Sermon was preached in London, England, some six years since, by that distinguished independent Minister, the REV. BALDWIN BROWN; and was first published in an invaluable work, entitled, "MISREAD PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE."

Its recent appearance in a Canadian Monthly Periodical, has provoked a most animated controversy between Theologians of different Schools; and the vehemence with which the Sermon has been assailed, has produced a demand which this issue is intended to supply.

April, 1876.

1876  
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## POTTER AND CLAY.

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"Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast Thou made me thus?"—  
Rom. ix. 20.

Most unquestionably yes, if "the thing formed" be a thinking, sentient being, and be formed to moan and groan and writhe eternally. If St. Paul means here that God has the right to make, and exercises the right to make, one soul to eternal salvation and another to eternal perdition, the doomed reprobate would have supreme right to say, *Why hast Thou made me thus*, to its Creator, and to utter in the face of the universe its protest against the righteousness of such a God. That soul might writhe in the grasp of One whom it could not but regard as an almighty tyrant, and might close its lips in sullen despair; but its right (if anything of the nature of right would in that case be left in the creation) to question the decree of its Creator would be indisputable; and as indisputable its right, if it had but the power, to rebel against His reign.

And yet this is what, by our current interpretations of this passage, we make St. Paul to mean; this is the false witness for God which a powerful if not popular school of theology makes him bear. This ninth chapter of the Romans is confessedly one of the dark and difficult passages of the New Testament. Consciously or unconsciously we avoid dwelling upon it. We either omit it, or we hurry over the deeper questions which it propounds. We have an uneasy feeling that there is a very dark and terrible meaning hidden somewhere in its language, a meaning which would perplex and perhaps bewilder us if

we took it fairly into our understandings and laid its burden on our hearts. And so we shut the door on it and try to forget it. How many readers of the Bible, who just read for their own comfort and consolation, fairly face the questions which these words seem to propound?

How many ask themselves resolutely, could St. Paul have meant by them what the dominant school of theology for ages past has supposed him to mean, or if not, what other and nobler meaning can we honestly draw from his words?

The popular interpretation with a large and influential school is something like this. The right to God, as Creator, is absolute. He only can be an end to Himself. He has one thing to consider and aim at, His own glory; and if His glory is attained by the salvation of an elect company and the perdition of a great multitude not chosen but *left* to perish, for no special malignity or deformity of their own in comparison with the saved, and sentence? *Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God; shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast Thou made me thus*, is a valid bar to appeal of man's reason against the decree: for it is simply, blankly impious to question the wisdom or the justice of His ways. It is to be noted, however, that the bar to the question and protest is always offered by those who have the best of all possible reasons for acquiescence. It is the saints, the elect few in all ages, the predestined heirs of glory, who lift up pious hands in horror when a poor reprobate outcast, with misery within him and hell before him, dares to moan out to his Maker, *Why hast Thou made me thus*.

Surely we must lay it down as a fundamental principle that a Creator is under an obligation as well as a creature. Even of the great God the writer of the treatise to the Hebrews is not afraid to say that there is a course which it became Him to pursue. If a man, for instance had it in his power to call into being, at will, either a bright, strong, healthy, joyous, nature to which life would be one long delight, or a sickly, deformed, malignant, wretched object, to whom life would be one long pain, and he chose deliberately to call the wretch into being and not the angel, would not all righteous souls have the right to cry shame? How many noble men and women are there who resolve, and maintain their resolve, not to marry because there is some dark mental or physical infirmity in their blood; and they will not risk the possibility of their spreading the taint in new and untouched homes. We honour their resolution as just and noble; but we dare, some of us, to attribute

to God a principle of action which traverses all its justice and nobleness. We believe too many of us, that He is capable of bringing into the world, age after age, millions of immortal souls, inevitably doomed to an eternal anguish, of which the undying worm and the unquenchable fire are faint and far off images: and that then He claims the right to silence their question and choke their protests by a naked and tremendous assertion of His sovereignty, which leaves them to moan in sullen or to madden in furious despair.

If I could believe what men have believed and preached about God, it would simply madden me. No words could utter the protest of one's spirit against such a jealous capricious tyrant as some dare to represent Him. It is this false witness for God which has been at the root of the unbelief and atheism which are the chronic maladies of Christian Society. And the unbelief, would have been far sadder and deeper than it is, if the personal spirit and ministry of these perverse theologians had not corrected the narrowness and bitterness of their dogmas; if, dark and selfish as their creed may be, their lives had not shone with a benigner, yea with a diviner light. The difficulties are dark enough, even on the largest and most loving view which we can take of the methods and the ways of God. But a just view of the arguments of the apostle in this passage may help us to see, not the exact harmony of every word and act of the Divine Ruler with the principles of righteousness—that is more than we can hope to discover with our partial and narrow vision—but harmony is possible, and the direction in which it lies. Whereas if we allow ourselves to think that Paul is here treating of the eternal salvation or perdition of beings who have the power of suffering or of enjoying intensely, to whom life may be one long eternal draft of bliss, or one long eternal moan of pain, and that he closes the mouths of those appointed to perdition by the sentence, "*Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God, whose rights over his creatures are absolute,*" we lay down a principle which I at any rate find it impossible to reconcile with any honest ideas of righteousness of any sort, rather than believe which about the God whom I worship and serve, I would pray for annihilation, that I might be out of the bounds of the universe in which such principles are recognized by its Ruler, forever.

But happily this is not the true teaching of the Scriptures. A careful consideration of the real bearing of this dark, difficult, and as commonly interpreted, tremendous passage, will convince us that St. Paul is not treating of the salvation or perdition of individual

souls, destined to bear the burden of existence sadly or joyfully through eternity, but rather of the perdition or salvation of peoples, of kings, armies, nations, in their temporal political relations, which bear very powerfully indeed on their spiritual and eternal interests, but do not carry the question of the salvation or damnation of the individual beings who compose them in their train. Jacob, Esau, Pharaoh, stand here as representatives of great human communities, and God's ways with them are set forth as the keys to the methods of His providence in dealing with the larger masses and movements of humanity in all regions and in all ages of the world. There are two spheres, so to speak of God's relations to and dealings with mankind. The one is outward and providential; the other is inward and spiritual. The one concerns all order and arrangement of His providence by which He appoints the bounds of man's habitation, with his circumstances and conditions—some of them, as far as we can see, highly favourable, others as highly unfavourable to the culture of his higher nature, and to his spiritual and eternal welfare; the other concerns his relations as a spirit to the Father of spirits, according to which his personal destiny, his bliss or woe, is settled for time and eternity. The first of these spheres of the Divine action is that, as far as I can understand it, which the apostle is contemplating in this chapter; and to this the principles to which he lays down, and the bar which he opposes to question and protest, righteously apply. If the two spheres were identical, if God's spiritual relation to a human soul could be invariably calculated, as we take for granted in much of our popular talk about the heathen and the poor that it may be calculated from the place of his birth or the outward condition of his life, then I confess that I can see no possible justification of the ways of God to man. But, blessed be God! we are able to take a larger, a more loving, a more hopeful view of His method with mankind. The question of acceptance with God is not one of Jew, or Gentile, Catholic, or Protestant, Christian or heathen, but "*in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of Him.*" It was to one of the most idolatrous peoples within the whole civilized world that Paul testified "*He is not far from every one of us.*" Not far for what? To reprobate, to curse, to doom—or to help, to bless, to save? Let me try to illustrate the position by an instance which will easily bring it home to the understanding of the reader. The Roman church—and till recently the whole Christian church entertained the same idea—holds practically that salvation is very much a matter of latitude or longitude, and one of those accidents

which belong to the outer sphere of man's life. Salvation is of the Roman church, the Romanist holds, much as it was held of old that "salvation is of the Jews." There is a heathen nation, let us say, outside the pale of the church; ignorant of Christ, unbaptized, they are doomed, according to a ruling school, to inevitable perdition; but the Church has planted a mission there, and begins to preach and to baptize vigorously. As far as they can baptize there is salvation, where they cannot reach there is perdition; it is a mere matter of accident where the preachers land, and where they first set up their tabernacle. One tribe may live on this side of a mountain range, and be within easy reach; another tribe may be beyond the mountain range, and beyond easy reach; the one through that accident, may be baptized and saved; the other may be left unbaptized to perish. Would the men, who by this mere accident would be left to perish, have no right to say to the Creator, "Why hast Thou made me and placed me here, when, a few miles east or west, my habitation, would have brought eternal blessings within reach of my hand?"

It seems to me that, if this were the principle of God's ways, such a man would have a supreme right to question, complain, and protest against those accidents which made the difference to him of an eternity of sorrow or of joy. But this is the principle on which we constantly assume that God is acting. We may shrink from the naked statement of it; but we should be startled to see how it really lies behind much of our popular modes of thinking and teaching about God and His ways. And we have the same thing close at our own doors. There is an infant dying, and unbaptized; a High Church clergyman is sent for; he is long in coming, the child is swiftly dying. The parents are in an agony of fear lest he should come too late; his foot may stumble, he may miss a conveyance, he may forget the number of the house, while the last sands of life are ebbing away. But he believes, and the parents have been taught to believe, that, on his arrival in time, are hanging consequences of tremendous moment to that infant, which touch the destinies of eternity. I say, again, if this be the principle on which God administers the government of our spirits and settles our eternal future, the thing formed has supreme right to say to Him that formed it, *why hast Thou made me thus*; and to refuse to live, if any choice were left to it, under the government of such a Lord.

But let us look at it in another and in the orthodox way—orthodox I venture to think in the orthodoxy of the truth. Suppose that a man, born by no act of his own in a heathen land, far from the "light of the

*knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,"* could become conscious of all that he was missing by his distance from civilization and the gospel. But suppose that at the same time it could be revealed to him that his eternal salvation depended on conditions quite close to him, and within reach of his hand. Let him understand that a wise, just, and far-seeing Lord had appointed the bounds of his habitation, with all its trials, difficulties and disadvantages, and that the Lord had plans far beyond his ken to develop by these outward arrangements of human society, for him and for mankind; that God would not deal with him according to what he had not, but according to what he had, the wise and faithful use of the small talent entrusted to him; and that there was a long eternity before him, in which present losses would be compensated and the mystery of present difficulties and disadvantages made plain,—I think in that case his right of protest would be taken away. His wise, right thought would be. These outward things belong to a scheme of providential government too vast for me to master, too profound for me to criticise; I do not understand the terms of the problem, I must leave it to the solution of a wiser hand; I trust God to deal with me in loving righteousness as to the welfare of my immortal spirit, the rest I will try to leave to Him without complaint or murmur, until in His own good times and ways He sees good to make the mystery of His dealings plain.

Now let us look at the case which is presented to us in this chapter. Jacob and Esau first appear upon the scene. "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel; neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. For this is the word of promise, at this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son. And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (for the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God, according to election might stand, not of works but of him that calleth;) it was said unto her the elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.'

Now taking a broad view of the bearings of this passage, is it possible to believe that the words, "*Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated,*" express God's decisions as to their eternal destiny? What is the calling of which such frequent mention is made in this epistle? It is to position, privilege, influence—the outer blessings of the kingdom; which, as Peter learnt through Cornelius, God is able to more than compensate by inward spiritual influence. Is there anything in this passage, or in the calling of Jacob and the rejection of Esau, which forecloses the question of Esau's eternal destiny? Surely not. We know but little about him, but the little that we do know presents him in rather a noble and generous light. When he and Jacob met, the outward signs of grace were hardly with the chosen one. To suppose that this national rejection of Esau and election of Jacob carried the eternal destinies of the men themselves, is to darken utterly the whole counsel of God. But then is it not written, "*Ye know that afterward when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears?*" What does that mean?—that God would not let him repent, or would not save him if he did repent? To suppose this is to fly in the face not of the spirit and principle of Christianity only, but also of the express testimony of God as to the law of His dealings with men under the Old Testament dispensation, which is very fully developed in Ezekiel xviii. 20-23 and xxxiii. 11-20. There was nothing in God's decree against Esau which touched either his salvability or his salvation. We call him profane—a man haunting the threshold, and not the shrine; in a national sense it describes him and his people perfectly, and certainly by his contempt of his birthright he set himself on the highway to demoralisation and spiritual death. But the words "*he found no place of repentance*" simply mean that he found no way to change his father's mind about the birthright; he lost the honor and the power of the second father and founder of the sacred line, and he lost it for ever.

From Jacob and Esau Paul passes on to Pharaoh and Israel, in illustration of the principle which God announces to Moses (ver. 15); not at all as defining the mode of His dealing with the chosen race as compared with the heathen, but rather His method within the bosom of the church, the chosen race, itself; destroying some and saving others according to His will,—that is, according to essential Divine righteousness, which comprehends in its bosom pity, mercy, patience, gentleness, and charity. A reference to Exodus xxxiii. 12-19 will show that it is entirely a question of God's methods within the bosom of the church.



The principle on which the "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy*" proceeds he Himself in Exodus xxxii. 31-35 plainly expounds. So that it is God's ways with His chosen people in which Paul seeks an illustration of His method in ruling a wider world.

And here, too, I think that we are greatly too quick to suppose that the "plaguing" and 'destruction' signify eternal as well as temporal death. "*But with many of them God was not well pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness:*" surely, some will say, that implies perdition. It is not so sure. Moses sinned, and God was displeased with him, and his "carcass fell in the wilderness." He fell and was buried outside the promised land. Do we therefore hold that he was excluded from the final and everlasting rest? We see that it is not so sure. We are too hasty in taking perdition for granted; we are harder to each other than God is to us; we know not what manner of spirit we are of, because we know not Him.

The case of Pharaoh may seem to present a different and more difficult aspect. But I am persuaded that precisely the same principles are illustrated by it, the same idea is its key.

We have to do here with a vast national movement, the magnitude and importance of which to the then world it is difficult for us fully to estimate. "History," says Von Bunsen, "was born that night, when Moses led forth his people out of Egypt." It was the first grand step in that progress of humanity which we name civilization, on the path which we are treading still. We, and all the world to the end of time, have to do directly with these great transactions. It was for man and not for themselves, that "*with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,*" God led that people forth. The very essence of the matter was the mighty hand; the most important element in the influence of the exodus on the east at that crisis, and on the whole world's history, was the visible hand of God. God made national pride, prejudice, and selfishness the means of revealing that Hand and illustrating its action. He found in that proud, idolatrous, priestridden Egypt a vessel fitted—not which he had fitted—mark the difference of expression in ver. 22, "*fitted to destruction*" and in ver. 23rd, "*which He had afore prepared unto glory*"—but which He found fitted to destruction. He held it up on high as an example: He humbled it, broke it, crushed it, buried its wreck beneath the Red Sea waves, not because He hated Egypt and would blot it from the face of the earth for ever, but because He loved it in the harmony of the wide human brotherhood; while this stern chastisement of national pride and blindness was a part

of His discipline, whereby he was seeking to bless on a larger scale both Egypt and mankind.

We have not here to deal with special judgments on Pharaoh, as, so to speak, a private individual sinner, nor deliverances of Israel, as a private and individual saint. Great national movements are in question, which raise the one and depress the other, save the one and destroy the other, but leave the question of the personal relations of the individuals to God dependent on precisely the same conditions as those on which they depended before. And the same principles, the same processes, are at work still in the same sphere. God is constantly humbling, casting down, and for a time destroying nations, because of the folly or madness of their rulers. And in some cases as in the Stuarts of England and the Bourbons of France and Spain, it is as though after a certain point had been reached He hardened the heart of the dynasty as He hardened Pharaoh's, that the inevitable catastrophe might be the more tremendous, and more full of impressive teaching through the visible unveiling of His hand. But to suppose that this dishonouring and casting down the thrones of despots, or the peoples who have patiently submitted themselves to tyrannous sway, implies the determination that those on whom the strokes of judgment fall should die the death eternal, is to contradict every principle which God expounds in the Scripture as the rule of His dealings, and to make it harder, far harder, than it is for men to believe in a merciful and righteous Lord. I maintain then that the questions in this chapter concern national rather than individual interests; the movements, the risings and the fallings, the honour and the dishonour, the salvation and the perdition of peoples, rather than the destiny of individual immortal souls. But let us not dream that we have got rid of all the difficulty, and dissipated all the obscurity, by this explanation. Far from it. There is enough, and more than enough, that is very inscrutable remaining. But at any rate we get rid of blank palpable unrighteousness. There is mystery enough left in God's outward dealings with men and with peoples by the ordinances of His providence; for we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that these outward things do tell very mightily on the inner character and the destiny of men. Why is an Englishman born in England in the full flood of the light of revelation? Why is a cannibal born in the South Seas, with traditions and habits which distinguish him unfavourably from all but the basest of the brutes? Why is this man nursed in a genial Christian home, with a mother's cherishing care around his infant steps and dawning life;

while another is cast forth from a vicious home to patter barefoot on the wet stones, to fight the dogs in the kennel for food, and to grow as familiar with curses and obscenities as the other is with hymns and prayers? Why through all these ages has Christendom been but a bright spot, no more, in the midst of the great circle of heathen gloom? Why am I what I am? why are you what you are? why these natural connate tempers, passions, proclivities? why these special temptations? why these wretched home influences? why these thousand accidents, which make life so sorrowful, so like a dreary, desperate struggle against fate? Or why on the other hand these helps and ministries, this bouyant spirit, this natural glad heart, which makes life a festal march, and fill the atmosphere of the world with light and joy. Who can answer these questions? Who can see where the answer to many of them lies? "*Clouds and darkness are round about Him*"—it must be so while we gaze through the mists, and His ways are far up above us in the height—"but justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne." But to all such questions and protests St. Paul most righteously opposes the rebuke of the text, *Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God.*" You do not understand the very terms of the problem; you cannot comprehend the reason of this order of God's providence; you cannot tell how things are working on you; nor can you know what God purposes to bring out of the most sorrowful lot, the most dire disadvantages in time. You must get up to the height of heaven, and out into the horizon of eternity, to understand it; and till then possess your soul in patience, and be at peace. Dare not to question Him who has under His righteous rule the destinies of universal being; dare not to doubt His love who has sealed it with the gift of His well-beloved Son. "*Consider the years of the right hand of the Most High.*" and be still. Choke the protest, dry the tear, hush the moan. Eternity is thine, to study and to understand the methods of God's discipline, the order of His ways; and to learn to cry as you review the mighty sum of His thoughts,—“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor? or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen.”

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