

# Sin and Grace.

## A STUDY OF EPHESIANS ii. 1-10.

**I**N this section of his epistle, Paul contrasts in very vivid and pointed language the sin of the world and the grace of God. By ourselves, we are dead in sin and walk according to the dictates of the Prince of this world. By the grace of God in Christ, we are enabled to rise from the dead and sit down in heavenly places. It is only as we keep the contrast in mind all the time and impress it upon ourselves as a contrast that we shall realise the profundity of Paul's thought or the great sweep of his doctrine of grace.

### I.

First of all, he tells the Ephesians what sort of men and women they had been before they met Christ. "And you, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins, wherein aforesime ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the Prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience, among whom we also all once lived in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest."

In the study of this section, there are several points of importance to be noticed.

(1) We have the comparison between Jew and Greek such as is constantly coming out in this Epistle. One of the fundamental conceptions of it is the unity of the universal church, the one-ness of all peoples in Christ. The days of religious exclusiveness are gone. Men have to be redeemed by the same gracious God, whatsoever be their tribe or colour, and until they are so redeemed, they are under the control of the same evil power. "You," i.e., the Greeks, were dead in trespasses, and "we," i.e., the Jews, also walked in the lusts of the flesh.

(2) The grammatical structure is peculiar. But it is to be doubted whether this is deliberate. Paul is a jerky writer, starting sentences he does not finish, and breaking off in the middle of a line in order to develop the thought suggested by some stray word. That is what has happened here. He began to develop the thought that the Gentiles, though they were dead in sin, were made to live in Christ, and then the idea struck him that the Jews were in exactly the same position. And so he finished his sentence, not

realising that the main verb had not yet appeared. He began a new sentence in verse 4. But, in spite of the grammatical difficulty, the meaning is perfectly clear.

(3) Two interesting figures of speech appear in this section. One is "according to the fashion of this world." This last word strictly means "age," "dispensation," and was used in later Gnostic thought to define the various emanations, linking up, in descending order of dignity, the Absolute with the world of finite things. Some scholars have said that there is a trace of this thought in the use of this particular phrase here. This is to be doubted. Gnosticism had indeed begun to appear as early as this, and was attacked by Paul. The proof for that is to be found in the Epistle to the Colossians, and traces are to be found in the Epistle to the Ephesians. But the doctrine of Aeons is a later growth, and apparently is not to be found in the New Testament. What Paul really means is that Gentiles who once lived in sin lived according to the rule and procedure of this world, using "world" in the predominant New Testament sense of the present universe as broken away from divine influences and given over to the control of sin.

"The Prince of the authority of the air" is another interesting figure of speech. According to Dr. Moffatt, it probably owes its origin to Zoroastrianism. The idea of the air as the abode of evil spirits is to be found in other places in the New Testament, as in Rev. xvi. 17, Eph. vi. 12. But this doctrine is not to be confined to Zoroastrianism. The idea of Beliar as prince of the power of the air entered into Judaism fairly early, and it is from there that Paul probably derived the conception. But in this figure of speech, there are serious things involved, both for the interpretation of the New Testament, and also for the understanding of its environment.

In the first place, account must be taken of Paul's dualism. There seems to be a sheer break between the material and spiritual worlds. The man of sin is under the power of the material world, and salvation consists in the miraculous transportation of him out of this world into the spiritual world which is ruled over by God. I say miraculous because man cannot effect the transition himself; it has to be done through the agency of God. Paul, of course, is not alone in this doctrine. He is followed, and followed far more consistently, by John. For this is only one side of Paul's thought. There is another side of him, when he is more under the influence of the prevailing Christian conceptions. The source of this dualism is ultimately Greek and Asiatic. First, there is the usual Greek contrast between the spiritual and material worlds. And then particularly, there is the Zoroastrian contrast between the good and evil spirits, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. Dualism

is an adjunct to Christianity, and is not its prevailing attitude. It is foreign alike to Jesus and to the earliest thought.

The second factor in this figure of speech is the influence of magical conceptions. It is quite a mistake to study the religious literature of Judaism and the philosophical systems of Greece as though they alone provided the atmosphere of early Christianity. Superstition was there as well, and magic and astrology. Christianity was born into a world of magic, and willy-nilly had to use the language of magic to teach a message of beauty and life. And one of the great glories of the earliest believers was that they set themselves definitely and implacably against magical influences. The great pity is that their children have not been as true. The general opinion of the ancient world was that the soul was the breath, and that at the moment of death, the breath and therefore the soul was carried off into the atmosphere between the earth and the sky. Thus the air was filled by wandering spirits, *daemons*, with power to help or injure men, according as they were fed or neglected by those left on earth. All alike had capabilities of good and evil. This was the view in the earliest animistic stage. But under the influence of later conceptions, order began to be imported into the spiritual world, and a distinction drawn between the two armies of the good and the evil spirits, each under their own leaders. All this sort of thinking helped to create the atmosphere of early Christianity, and must be taken into account in the exegesis of the New Testament.

(4) Paul speaks of both the Greeks and the Jews as "dead through their trespasses." The construction implies that it was living in sin that had brought about death. But the most important thing is the meaning of "dead." There are, in the main, two interpretations. Meyer says that "dead" is proleptic: when you had through your sins drawn upon you death, had become liable to eternal death. Ellicott denies this, and says that Paul means spiritually "dead." Paul certainly does not mean that. When he speaks about death, he means death. He does not mean anything so weak and flabby as spiritual death, whatever that may mean, for those who use the expression always give the impression that they have interpreted something by giving it a fancy label. By death, Paul means nothing less than the exact opposite of everything he means by life. But Meyer also can hardly be right. The worst of Meyer is that he is so accurate, so accurate as often to be wrong. Paul did not use words as scientifically as the German scholar thinks. He is going on to speak of the way men are made alive in Christ, and he wants to point the contrast between what they are now and what they were once. And so he says, in his vivid way, that they had been dead. We can leave it there.

(5) A sentence that requires careful study is to be found in the words, "We were by nature children of wrath even as the rest." This has often been taken as evidence of the doctrine of original sin. There ought to be no need at this date to repel this doctrine, which, in the exaggerated form in which it has often been presented, has had pernicious effects, but it may be well to look at it insofar as it has tried to gain support in this particular passage. That Paul is not, at this point, at any rate, propagating the doctrine of original sin, can be accepted as certain, for two reasons.

(a) Such an interpretation puts far too much meaning into "by nature," which is by no means in an emphatic position, and means little more than "naturally." The word is quite neutral, and simply refers to the natural constitution of a thing, apart from any influences, good or bad, that may operate on it from the outside. There is a similar use of the word in Rom. ii. 14, Gal. ii. 15, iv., 8. Thus, on linguistic grounds alone, this interpretation falls to the ground. The text does not mean "we are, by an inborn tendency, children of wrath"; it means, "we are, as a sheer matter of fact, here and now, seeing that we happen to be what we are, subject to the wrath of God."

(b) The interpretation also does not harmonise with the context, which speaks of the actual sin of the Jews, and not of some inborn tendency which cannot be escaped. It is because the Jews had at one time indulged in sin that they became subject to the wrath of God. This, moreover, is the usual doctrine of Paul, and, for the matter of that, of the whole Bible.

But though this interpretation must be ruled out of court, there are two points that must be remembered.

(a) Paul regards sin seriously. Sinful men and women are really under the wrath of God. There is a sheer contrast between the holy nature of God and the impure life of men. God cannot do other than set Himself in opposition to sin, and His opposition, by the infallible working out of divine laws, is bound to come down severely upon those who choose a life of sin. This needs to be put strongly in days like these, when there is great emphasis upon the Fatherhood of God and little upon His Sovereignty. To Paul, as to his Master, the wrath of God and His love were inextricably bound up together. We may not be able to think through the two consistently, but they must certainly be held together.

(b) Paul regards man, unless he is under the influence of the Spirit, as being very much under the influence of the Devil. He has two different conceptions of salvation, springing from two different ways of looking at sin and human nature. One is ethical and the other is metaphysical and mystical. The first view was

Jewish, and Paul shared it, more or less, with Jesus and the whole of the early Church. The real evil of the world was sin: it was moral disobedience. There were other evils in the world, but they were all the consequences of sin. In the Messianic Age, men would be forgiven their sin and be delivered from it, and by this deliverance would be able to enter into the Messianic Kingdom. But Paul has another way of looking at the facts. Man has a radical fault of nature. He belongs to earth, and shares in the imperfections of earth, and from that he must be delivered and be transported into a higher realm of being, that of the Spirit. It would be hard to find Paul, at any point, consistently following either of these theories. They are rather to be found side by side with each other. And here the contradiction is apparent. Man has free choice. He has the power to choose whether he will follow the higher impulses of the Spirit or the lower impulses of the flesh. Adam chose to follow his fleshly impulses, and that choice was perpetuated right through the race, until, through the predomination of the lower desires, we became creatures of the flesh. That is, man has, by his own choice and gradually through history, come under the wrath of God. But Paul has other points of view which do not harmonise with this. One is that the whole human race was mystically present in Adam, and that it fell when he fell. But there is another conception in Paul's mind, and this more important, and we have justification for the discussion of it here in that he speaks of the lusts of the flesh and of man doing the will of the flesh.

One of the most debatable points in Pauline theology is the exact meaning attaching to "flesh," and to the contrast between body and soul. On the one hand, there is a large body of scholars who assert that Paul's psychology is Jewish to the core, and that it is only to the superficial student that he presents the Greek dualism. Paul does not look upon the body as the principle of sin, but only as that part of human nature which sin finds it the easiest to attack. On the other hand, there are scholars who think that Paul presents a dualistic philosophy, looking upon the flesh as being in direct antagonism to the spirit, as two opposite ethical principles. In my judgment, Paul, here as elsewhere, is inconsistent with himself, for, while in one mood, he is a genuine Jew, in another he is under the influence of Hellenistic thinking.

First of all, we cannot always be certain what he means by "flesh." Sometimes, he seems to regard it as synonymous with "body." But sometimes, it seems to stand for everything we mean by man, insofar as he lives without conscious obedience to the law of God. Thus, in this particular passage, the desires of the flesh are put on the same level as those of the understanding. Also, when he gives a list of the works of the flesh in Gal. v. 19,

the majority of the works he mentions are in no sense of the term physical.

Hebrew thought looks upon man as a being of body and soul, in which the elements of his nature are so closely bound up together that they can never be found apart. There can be no bodiless soul and no body without a soul. It was because of this that Hebrew thought about immortality inevitably moved along the line of the resurrection of the body. Sin is ethical; it belongs to a man's will, and it is by the renewal of the will that the power of sin is broken. The term "flesh" stands for man in his human, weak, creaturely, capacity. The desires of the flesh are ethically neutral. Whether they become sinful or not depends upon how and to what extent and under the dominance of what motives they are satisfied. The body is a necessary part of the complete human personality. There is no such thing as an ethical dualism between soul and body. The Hebrew never interprets salvation as the salvation of the soul from the crippling influences of the body. The outcome of Jewish thought was that, after the resurrection, man, complete in soul and body, would enter into the Messianic Kingdom.

In many ways, Paul shows that he has accepted this conception. He seems often definitely to shut out the idea that the body is the seat of all evil. Thus, many of the sins which he ranks as fleshly are not physical: they are most essentially mental. He believes in the sinlessness of Jesus, whom he acknowledges as born of a woman, and who apparently, in other ways, lived a normal human life. Then, also, he looked upon the body as the Temple of the Holy Ghost, which he could not possibly do if he thought of it as inherently evil, and he urged the Romans to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God, which he could not do if he looked upon them as full of sin. In all this, he is a true Jew. The body is a necessary element in the personality. It may certainly be the weakest element, but it is not inherently evil. It ought to be and can be redeemed.

But he often shows himself to be under the influence of an entirely different world-view. Man is corrupt, not only because of the piling-up of several instances of sin which have gradually built up a barrier between himself and his true home in God, but also because of a radical fault of nature. The flesh is corrupt and man is under the influence of the flesh. Salvation consists in the deliverance of man from the world of the flesh and his translation into the life of the Spirit. To destroy the power of the flesh is the same thing as to destroy the power of sin. It is in this mood that Paul can say that salvation consists in the mystical union of the believer with Christ.

Thus we have given to us one side of the contrast. We were

once children of wrath. We were dead in our sins. We walked according to the dictates of this world. We did the desires of the flesh. It may be that Paul has painted the picture with colours that are too black. The literature of the Jews shows us a people who were zealous according to their lights, obedient to what they conceived to be the will of God. They might be narrow and fanatical. They might give a gross national interpretation to ideas which the prophets intended to be taken in a spiritual and universal sense. But they were not lacking in culture and spiritual grasp. And the Gospels show us that many were hungering and thirsting after righteousness and longing for the coming of the Kingdom. And it cannot be said that the non-Jewish world was completely vicious. We have ample evidence of honesty and sincere pursuit of the truth, of the love of beauty and goodness, of the respect paid to the cultured gentleman, in Greece, and of the presence of peace, good government, quiet courage, and the domestic virtues, among the Romans. And Paul does not deny all this. Judging by the literature of the time, thought was mainly agnostic and pessimistic. Paul knew that the heathen had a law in their hearts and that they had been, to some extent, obedient to that law. But in view of the severe criticism he passes upon the life of the time, we need to bear several facts in mind.

(1) He is a preacher, who is trying to save people from sin, and the only way a preacher can do that is by showing them the sorryness of their own state. All the great preachers have interpreted the world by means of the great contrast of sin and grace. They have been blind to the positive good of men because of the bigness of their sin, and blind somewhat to the difficulties of the Christian life because of their emphasis upon the grace of God.

(2) Paul sees everything from the point of view of God, the destiny of the soul, and the conduct of man. He has no purely intellectual or aesthetic interests. The Greeks might make beautiful statues, but they made them to the honour of false Gods. The Jews might be zealous according to their light, but they were trying to build up life on impossible principles. Paul gets to the core of the whole business, and condemns Judaism and Hellenism alike for the inevitable tendency of the principles they accepted as true.

(3) He is not trying to give the exact judgment of the historical scholar. He is rather bringing the sin of the world into direct contact with the grace of God in Christ. We should have to take more facts into account than he did, and be more exact in our examination, and more circumspect in our judgment. We should not have to fix our attention all the time on the baser side

of ancient life, but be open to see the ideals of philosophers, the beauty of poets, and the leading of God everywhere. We ought to take into account all the facts, be honest in depicting virtue and equally honest in depicting vice. Such an endeavour would alone reveal a sound historical sense and a sound view of God.

## II.

After showing the past evil state of the Jews and the Greeks, Paul goes on to describe the difference that has been made to their position by the gracious dealing of God. "But God, being rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, quickened us together with Christ (by grace have ye been saved), and raised us up with Him, and made us to sit with Him in the heavenlies, in Christ Jesus; that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus: for by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in order that we might walk in them."

Paul has many ways of interpreting the work of God for man. Here he explains it by saying that God has made us alive in Jesus Christ, so that we are capable of sitting by the side of Him in the heavenlies. Obviously, it would be a mistake to tie Paul down to the literal meaning of his words here. He is speaking as a poet and a seer. But some light may be thrown on the meaning and origin of his words.

He says that the redeemed will live with Christ in the "heavenlies." That he means by this something local can be seen by the fact that he claims that after His resurrection, Jesus went to dwell in them. But he also looks upon the heavenly sphere as being in some sense super-sensual, since Christ dwells there, whom he no longer wishes to know after the flesh but after the spirit. Further, the "heavenlies" are of an eternal order, free from the transiency of earth. Again, the conflict between good and evil goes on in the heavenlies. It seems that Paul has not clearly made up his mind on the matter. He is confused by the twofold way of looking at the after life, as both the resurrection of the body and as the immortality of the soul. But this much can be taken as certain. He believes that the Christian will share in Christ's future state of glory. The origin of this thought must be sought for in several different directions.

(1) There is the Jewish thought that the Messiah will dwell



with the redeemed and rule over them in the Messianic Kingdom. Messianism went off on an entirely new line in the Christian Church, owing to the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah, but the Jewish idea of the Messiah ruling over and dwelling with the saints in the new age was predominant in the Christian view of things.

(2) Paul has warrant for his view in the mind of Jesus. It is very uncertain how far he was acquainted with the actual teaching of Jesus, and also to what extent he consciously modelled his own message on it. It is also uncertain what exactly the eschatological teaching of Jesus was. But this much can be taken without much question. Jesus proclaimed Himself as Messiah, and as Messiah, He was soon to come to earth again and rule over the Kingdom of God. In that Kingdom, the saints would dwell, and some of them would be given positions of honour and authority. This thought filled the mind of the early Church. It is to be found even in the Fourth Gospel, much as primitive eschatology and Messianism are superseded there. There can be no doubt that Paul shared in the tradition.

(3) The Apostle was influenced by his belief in the resurrection of Christ and His living reality in the heavenly world. Jesus was alive. He had authority and power. He was clothed in glory. He could come into touch with men. All that was unquestionable. But Paul did not look upon all that as isolated fact. Jesus was the first-fruits of them that slept, the guarantee of the resurrection from the dead and of a blessed life of triumph to all those who put their trust in Him.

(4) A good deal must be laid down to the score of Paul's mystical view of things. Redemption meant mystical fellowship with Christ. All the outstanding experiences of Christ were to be repeated in the life of the Christian. The Christian was to be made to live in Christ, to rise together with Him, and to sit down with Him. It is not enough to say that the Christian was to do these things through the help of Christ. Paul's conception of the communion of the Christian with Christ was mystical rather than ethical. He was conscious of an indwelling power which replaced his ego and made him one, not only in ambition and will, but almost in substance, with Christ. This, of course, is an addition to the original Gospel message, due to Paul's Hellenistic training. Many of his converts had already heard of the death and rising again of the Gods, and of the mystical sharing of the devotee in the divine nature. They would understand Paul, therefore. But he was not making Christianity into a mystery religion. He had real facts to go upon. He did really have fellowship with Christ. Also, Jesus was historic and not mythical. Paul drew no elaborate distinction between the

Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but by preserving the real manhood of Jesus, he saved Christianity from the curse of myth and idle dreaming. Then also, his Mysticism is Christ-mysticism and not God-mysticism. And last, he preserves his ethical sanity. The Christian has his life to live. He has duties laid upon him. He has a personality in fellowship with, but apart from, Christ.

Paul says that the salvation of the Christian is the work of the great love of God. In his usual way, he piles up word on word to show how great that love was. First, he lays it down as a definition of God's nature—"God, being," as He is, "rich in mercy," could not possibly do other than He has done in dealing graciously with us in Jesus Christ. Then he tells us the active love that God had for us, the outflowing of it in concrete acts—"through the great love wherewith He loved us." Then in order to show the great power wielded by the love of God, he emphasises particularly the depth of human misery—"even though we were dead through our trespasses, He made us to live with Christ." The "even" is not a mere connecting particle here; it emphasises and qualifies our condition, and suggests that, no matter how much we were living in a state of death, the love of God was strong enough to deal with us and save us. Then he says two or three times over that we are saved by grace. Finally, the whole purpose of God's gracious dealing with us is that through succeeding ages, His goodness might be known. Whatever else his readers miss, Paul does not intend them to miss this, that all they have and are and hope to be, they owe to the goodness of God. The grace of God stands for His free love, working with men, saving them, bringing them all the gifts of His heart, even though they reject God. It is bound up with the work of the historic Jesus. To know God in Christ is to know Him in grace. Grace works on ethical lines, for all the advance we make in character is due to the grace of God in Christ.

Paul further defines the gracious dealing of God with us by bringing it in line with His fore-ordaining. Our salvation is not of ourselves, but of God. It is a divine gift and due to no work of our own. "We are God's workmanship, created in Jesus Christ, for good works, which God prepared beforehand in order that we might walk in them." Here we are shown that the purpose of God does not deal merely with general laws: it enters into details, and regulates the lives of individual men and women. Also, the purpose of God is summed up in Christ. He is the goal of creation, the end and consummation of the work of God. Finally, God has an ethical purpose. He created us for good works. This doctrine is unique in the Christian religion. No other faith promises so certainly to make an ideal practical by the gracious activity of God in the heart of the believer.

But there have been criticisms brought against the doctrine.

(1) The first is that it undermines the free-will of man. The sovereignty of God seems to be taken so far that no freedom is left to man to choose his own life. If that were so, then the message of Paul would be robbed of ethical reality. But it is not so. On occasion, Paul writes as though he were an unqualified predestinarian. But it is only on certain occasions, when he is under the influence of the thought of the greatness of God, or is trying to drive home how much we depend on His grace. Further, he lays so many commands upon Christians, charges them so often to live worthily of their calling, and chastises them so often for not so living, that we can quite easily see that he does not deny the free will of man. Lastly, though he often presents salvation as a finished product, obtained immediately the sinner turns to Christ, he shows that he is speaking ideally, and that salvation is rather a growth, due to the co-operation of man with God. It was one of the paradoxes of Paul, as of his Master, that all is of works and yet that all is of grace.

(2) The second objection is that Paul's doctrine is narrow and arbitrary. It is unjust to confine the grace of God to His work in Christ. And if it be so confined, then God fails in His object, for Christians rarely manifest the works for which God made them. The spirit of this objection can be appreciated, but it is based upon a misunderstanding of Paul. First, Paul is the first to confess that Christians do not live as they ought, and that the results of God's work are still in the future. But he is certain of that future. He has no doubt whatever that the purpose of God will be realised. Then, also, he knows that no nation is without a witness of God. The heathen have a law written in their hearts. The order and beauty of the earth speaks to men of God. The race is one. God made us all of one blood. We are one in sin and one in grace. Paul draws no rigid line between what is true and what is false, otherwise he would not be so eager to interpret Christianity in terms of Greek thought and life. But last, Christ is the principle and goal of creation. God has always been dealing with men in Christ. Jesus was real man, but, to Paul, His earthly life was but a moment in a life which was eternal. The religion of Christ is the final product of the thought and striving of man only because Christ has always been at the back of the striving and has been the centre of the redemptive purpose of God. God has never been other than He is in Christ.

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