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THE GREATEST OF THESE IS—WHAT?

I PUT it that way—"The greatest of these is—What?"—because translators of 1 Corinthians xiii. 13b have had difficulty in finding the right word with which to translate the Greek. That is not to be wondered at. Paul had great difficulty in finding a word to express what he wanted to say. He had exhausted his vocabulary in the chapter in trying to explain what he meant. But there was no single word either in the ordinary Greek language or among its religious phraseology to express this crowning feature of Christian thought and life. The followers of Jesus Christ had to coin a word for it—*ἀγάπη*. It was not in use among the Greeks. There was nothing of what it stands for in the character of any of their Gods—in Zeus or Athene, in Apollo or Aphrodite—nor in their worshippers. No wonder that the translators differed as to the best English word to convey the wealth of its thought to their readers.

The compilers of the authorised version selected "Charity"—"the greatest of these is charity". But what did the public speedily do with and understand by that word? They emptied it of its fullness and reduced it to one phase of it, viz. almsgiving, and the cynic was soon busy with his sneer—"Cold as charity". But the translators never meant that, or anything like that. Frigidity? "The coals thereof are coals of fire which have a most vehement flame; many waters cannot quench it, neither can the floods drown it." No: "Charity" will not do.

So for want of a better, the Revisers and many with them chose "Love." "The greatest of these is Love." But here again the proneness of men to rob words of their noblest meanings and prostitute them to base counterfeits came into play. Love was debased as if it were another name for lust, of which it is the very antithesis. Lust is foul, selfish, bestial; Love is pure, seeketh not her own, is divine, Godlike. Rescue love from every polluting association. Keep it only for the highest level, and there may be said of it what the poet says of the thought expressed by the word whose place it takes:

Meek and lowly, pure and holy,
Chief among the blessed Three,
Heavenborn art thou, Charity.

Faith, Hope, Love. The greatest of these is—what? Is—love.

Love is like an adjective. At school more than eighty years ago we had Lennie's Grammar, and it said that adjectives had three degrees: positive, comparative, superlative—good, better, best; great, greater, greatest. The same is true of love. There is love positive, comparative, superlative.

There is human love, love positive. Men and women know what that is. Here is a woman who knows that love is more than words, is active, not passive, is practical. She says:

I wad dae—what wad a no?—
For the sake o' Somebody.

And here is a man, not a whit behind, for he sings:

For bonnie Annie Laurie
I wad lay me doon an' dee.

And what is this our Lord, the Son of Man, says to His disciples? "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends." Here you have human love at its best, with the stamp of God upon it. It is already past the comparative stage. It is beyond comparison. Greater love does not exist than that a man should lay down his life for his friends.

But love is more than human. Love is Godlike, for God is love.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind,
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

"Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us." "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." When love comes to God, how its range has extended! It is Fatherly love and goes out to all mankind.

But there is something more to be said about divine love still. When man for the first time realises that he is face to face with God, he is awestruck; he is afraid. His instinct is to say with Peter, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." No, no, says Paul. Listen to this. "God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Sinners! The very thing that scared Peter, Paul meets with this. When we turn to the passage in Romans (Romans v. 6-10)

where Paul says this, we see what is meant by sinners. He uses several words to describe the objects of God's love here. They were "without strength", moral failures, "ungodly", "enemies". Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. That is the best human love can do. But God's love goes out to His enemies. Is it true? What is this we hear from Calvary, ere the Crucified commits His spirit to His Father? Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. "Faith, Hope, Love: these three, but the greatest of these is Love." Love cannot exist without Faith and Hope, but Faith and Hope are worthless without Love. Follow after Love.

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