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Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY PROFESSOR RICHARD ROTHE, D.D.

CHAPTER II. 12-14.

“(12) I write unto you, little children, that your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. (13) I write unto you, fathers, that ye have known Him who is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, that ye have overcome the evil one. I have written unto you, children, that ye have known the Father. (14) I have written unto you, fathers, that ye have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, that ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the evil one.”

WITH the close of ver. 11 the line of thought is plainly broken off, and there is no clear connection between it and what follows. Up to that verse John has steadily kept by the thought expressed in i. 6, which he has worked out in its manifold relations. He had stated it in the interest which guides him throughout the whole of his epistle, the interest, viz., of stirring up his readers to endeavour after a right completeness in their Christianity. He is far, however, from feeling this interest satisfied by this one development of his main thought; he has many other points of view from which he can and will promote it. Only, these different points of view do not present themselves to him in a definite logical connection. He accordingly places them alongside of one another externally, which leads to the direct connection being entirely broken off. This is what happens here also.

Just as John began (i. 5) by telling his readers what was the purport of the apostolic proclamation which he had to make to them, so here also he once more states to them in another pregnant formula the sum and substance of what he has to write to them. Put briefly, it is as follows:—He would have them know that they lack none of the conditions necessary to a *complete* Christianity, to the strict earnestness and joyous confidence of such a Christianity. He adds that this is not the first time that he writes this to them. Accordingly, the expression, “I write unto you,” refers in a general way to the present epistle as a whole, and not to the immediate context. What he says is not “because your sins are forgiven you,” but “that your sins are forgiven you.” For he does not mean to say: “that which I here write unto you has its ground in the assumption that you are really Christians.” He rather expressly declares to them that what he here writes to them afresh was already well known to them, to wit, that he himself had already written it to them. In point

of fact, John does not aim in our epistle at the communication of information which would be new to his readers. On the contrary, he aims solely at bringing clearly before their consciousness the *most fundamental* Christian convictions; convictions which must have fallen into the background of their consciousness, seeing that in their life they exhibited an incompleteness, a sluggishness, lukewarmness, and joyouslessness in their Christianity, which would inevitably have been excluded by these convictions, in proportion as they really lived in their soul. His readers must be reminded upon what a peculiarly lofty standpoint they as Christians already actually stand, in order that they may feel how highly they as Christians could and must esteem their mission in the world, and how the hindrances to the completeness of their Christianity, which they imagine they cannot surmount, are no longer existent for them as *Christians*. Of all the conditions necessary to a strict earnestness in their Christianity they lack nothing, and consequently what is of importance for them is, not that they gain a new standpoint, but that they heartily abide and advance upon that which they have. It is from this point of view that we must consider all that follows.

He first of all addresses his readers as *little children*. This is a general, loving form of address to his readers, in which, as in vers. 1 and 28, he embraces all the special classes of them. To think of the children of the Church is altogether inadmissible. By the terms *fathers* and *young men* he merely denotes the two main classes into which, in his way of looking at it, the whole Church, addressed as “little children,” falls. That which he now expressly and afresh presents to the whole of his readers as the common, fundamental consciousness of the Christian, in which every one of them should share, is the assurance of the forgiveness of sins which has been obtained through Christ. In the words, “for His name's sake,”

Christ, not God, is meant (iii. 23, v. 13; John i. 12). Here, as always, His *name* denotes His unique character, His dignity and worth as being the expression of His unique existence; here, indeed, it specially denotes His character as Redeemer and Propitiator in respect of sins. On account of this His character the readers have been forgiven their sins. John conceives of this forgiveness of sins as being essentially appropriated by means of faith on the part of man (v. 13). This consciousness of having received, and of possessing forgiveness of sins, and that, too, full forgiveness, for the Redeemer's sake, is in point of fact the fundamental Christian consciousness. Now, however, its direct and necessary consequence is the further consciousness of being radically freed and separated from sin, of neither being able nor needing to give place to it any longer; and it is for the express purpose of again exciting this latter consciousness vividly within them that John anew writes to his readers of the old truth, with which they were already all familiar. It is true they could hardly have forgotten it; but in its definite individual reference to themselves, considering the incompleteness and halting character of their Christianity, it had naturally become vague. John impresses upon it afresh the seal of his apostolic authority: "Ye *have really* forgiveness of (all) your sins. Of that make yourselves absolutely certain upon my assurance."

Regarding these altogether general fundamental Christian truths of which the apostle speaks, we are only too ready to believe that we are thoroughly acquainted with them. We must, however, be continually learning to apprehend them in all their purity and precision, and in the first instance, in their precision as presented to our thinking faculty. In our way of representing them to ourselves that which is specifically Christian disappears only too readily in that which is naturally human. It is so very natural for us to translate the great proclamations of the gospel into the language of the ideas with which we are familiar. As an inevitable consequence we obscure them to ourselves; and in this respect it is of great importance to be continually tracing back our Christian notions to their original source, the holy Scriptures, to be transporting ourselves back vividly into the standpoint of the first believers in Christ, and to be reproducing their religious views in our consciousness in all their original simplicity. This clearer

apprehension of Christian truth is also a keen critic of our whole ethical condition. In an ethical respect nothing cuts so deep into us as those simple fundamental truths of the gospel in their unadorned form; just as nothing is so effective in awakening our conscience as a clear view of the person of the Redeemer Himself. Moreover, the longer a Christian lives, the convictions and thoughts, in which he recognises the real means of salvation, are continually becoming fewer in number; but in the same proportion they also grow in purity and distinctiveness. Thus the assurance of the forgiveness of sins is the Christian's fundamental conviction; justification from sin is the ground of the whole Christian condition. For the whole of one's susceptibility to Christ proceeds from the consciousness of sin, from the condition of being separated from God by means of it, and of the experience of divine wrath because of it. The first thing whereby the Christian regains fellowship with God can only be the doing away of this his separation from God, the assurance and experience of God's forgiving grace. This is also the sole basis of sanctification; the two are psychologically inseparable. Whenever our zeal in the matter of our sanctification subsides, we should not merely recall to mind that sanctification is a necessary consequence of justification, but we should also question whether we still really possess justification. For the first evidence of the latter is a confident alacrity and gladness in the work of sanctification. Thus, then, his readers lack nothing necessary to a strict earnestness and zeal in their Christian life; and this is not the first time that John writes thus to them, for a little further on he alludes to a previous written communication to them.

In what follows John now gives express prominence to two *special* aspects of this general fundamental Christian consciousness, and shows their peculiar bearing upon two main classes of his readers. These main classes he denominates as "*fathers*" and "*young men*." These designations are to be understood of age in the literal sense, not of age in respect of Christianity, nor of different stages in the Christian life. And in point of fact difference of age modifies the standpoint of the Christian and the complexion of his Christianity in a peculiar manner. From the nature of the case, advanced age is characterised predominantly by the contemplative tendency that looks within,

youth by the practical tendency that turns to that which is without. Christian age is engrossed predominantly with Gnosis; Christian youth strains itself predominantly in the fight with the power of sin and with the world, whose temptations have still for it the charm and might of their first freshness. It is in accordance with this psychological fact that John assigns to the fathers and to the young men their respective parts. It is true that the knowledge of God and the fight against the evil one cannot be absolutely separated—the one demands the other. But all the same the one or the other is predominant according to the Christian's age. John holds that this is the case, and shows that in this respect also Christianity adapts itself to all the developments of the natural human life, in order to make it manifest in its full form.

To the fathers he writes: "*Ye have known Him which is from the beginning.*" Christian age turns back again from the activity of life to its central point, gathers together all the single rays of its consciousness into the thought of God, all the movements of its life into quiet intercourse with God. And now John assures the fathers that in their Christian knowledge they already really possess the true knowledge of God, the perfect Gnosis and theosophy; from which it follows (and, indeed, he declares that fact to them in order that they themselves may be able to draw this practical consequence for their behaviour) that they do not have to look elsewhere, say in the pretended Gnosis, for the true and perfect theosophy, and that they must not let themselves be misled in respect of their evangelical knowledge of God, and their joyous confidence in it, by the boastings and persuasive arguments of that Gnosis. *He who is from the beginning* is accordingly not Christ, but God. Moreover, it is with a purpose that God is thus designated here. John means to say: In Christ ye have really known the absolute God Himself, the absolute, divine, original Existence, not merely a derived and subordinate power (like, e.g., the demiurge of the Gnostics), as the Gnostics objected to the Catholic Christians. Of course he is not speaking here of the dialectical knowledge of God, which he could not regard as concluded. But that which forms the content of *all* knowledge of God is the direct and immediate possession of every Christian, who, with his Redeemer as his Guide, has run the race of the

Christian life. It is absolutely impossible for a man to obtain a richer and fuller content of knowledge of God than that which he beholds of God in Christ, so far forth as he has learned fully to understand the latter Himself by an ever-deepening intimate fellowship with Him.

To the young men, on the other hand (and, therefore, to early manhood), he writes: "*Ye have overcome the evil one.*" He assures them that through their faith in the Redeemer they have really conquered the devil; from which it follows (and this very inference John demands of his readers) that they can and should fearlessly and inexorably face the world, along with its prince, and every temptation to sin, seeing that these have no more any power over them, and that they must not, as cowards, shrink back from the strictness and severity of the demands made upon them by unadulterated Christianity. It is thus that one must encourage men to the fight against sin, and not by toning down sin and its power. If we adopt the latter method the true abhorrence of sin is deadened, and the fight against it seems to be something indifferent. In Christ the Christian possesses all the might which he requires for the complete conquest of sin. In point of fact he has already routed sin completely; and a dread of it would now be a cowardly flight. Thus, no doubt, John's readers have the needed strength against sin; but they must also take heed that they do not forget this. The *evil one* is Satan, the prince of this world (iii. 12, v. 18, 19; John xvii. 15).

With the words, "*I have written unto you, children,*" there begins a new difficulty. John repeats almost literally (only with an alteration, that does not affect the thought, and with an addition) what he has just written, only with the difference that, instead of "I write," he now says, "I have written." At first sight this repetition is so surprising that we can easily understand how Calvin and others after him should have suspected the genuineness of the whole of ver. 14. More recent expositors see in this verse nothing more than a mere repetition for the sake of greater emphasis. Our passage, however, can have a good meaning only if it refers to a written communication other than our present epistle. When John elsewhere in the epistle (ii. 21, 26; v. 13) uses the words "I have written" with reference to the epistle itself, it is evident from the context that they refer to what immediately precedes. Here

the only natural supposition is that they refer to previous communications of the apostle to the same circle of readers; and the assumption of previous written communications is not in itself at all improbable. On that assumption John would say: That which I now write you in this respect cannot be at all new to you; I have already written to you on this subject; you should already be familiar with it, and you should long ago have taken measures accordingly. If, however (according to i. 1 ff.), there is a definite connection between our epistle and the Gospel of John, it is unquestionably most natural to refer the words "I have written" back to the latter; and this reference corresponds most appropriately with the contents of the Gospel. "That which I now write to you by way of exhortation in my own name is precisely the purport of the historical account of the Redeemer which I have already published."

To the *children*, i.e. his readers in their totality, John does not now write, as before, that their sins have been forgiven them, but that they have *known the Father*; probably because the designation of them as children made him think of forgiveness of sins in the special aspect in which it is essentially the bestowal of divine sonship. The two facts are substantially the same. The second formula implies: Ye know and have God as *Father*, and therefore stand towards Him in the relation of full,

cordial, joyous fellowship. This, however, is essentially true of the first formula: Your sins have been forgiven you; you stand in the state of justification and of grace. The second word, that to the *fathers*, is repeated literally; the third, that to the *young men*, is repeated in an amplified form, yet without any change in the thought. The victory over the evil one is accounted for by the fact that they are *strong*, and the *word of God abides in them*, i.e. in a way that is peculiarly appropriate to the character of youth. This strength is not merely youthful fulness of vitality, but a divine, spiritual strength. It lies in the fact that the word of God, the sword of the Spirit against the demonic forces, God's revelation of Himself, especially in Christ, abides in them, and continually fills their consciousness. You only need, says John, to preserve Christ continually in your heart in order to be strong in spirit. The Christian youth is still doubtful as to that; he has not yet, through long experience, attained the assurance that the bearing of God's image in Christ in one's consciousness is a source of exceeding great strength. To the Christian man and veteran this is familiar from the long experience in which he has found this to be a truth that never failed him. But what is necessary is an *abiding*; individual and occasional impulses are far from forming this invincible might.

Recent Literature on the Poetical Books of the Old Testament.

JOB.

1. *The Student's Commentary*. Vol. iii. *Job-Song*. Murray. Crown 8vo, pp. 473. 7s. 6d. 1890.
2. *The Book of Job*. Illustrated by Sir JOHN GILBERT. Nisbet. 4to, pp. xxx, 188. 1880.
3. *The Book of Job*. By G. H. BATESON WRIGHT, M.A. Williams & Norgate. 8vo, pp. 242. 7s. 6d. 1883.
4. *A Commentary on the Book of Job*. By SAMUEL COX, D.D. Kegan Paul. 8vo, pp. 552. 16s. 1885.
5. *Job and Solomon*. By the Rev. T. K. CHEYNE, D.D. Kegan Paul. 8vo, pp. 309. 12s. 1887.
6. *Lectures on the Book of Job*. By the Very Rev. G. G. BRADLEY, D.D. Clarendon Press. Crown 8vo, pp. xxxii, 334. 7s. 6d. Second edition. 1888.
7. *The People's Bible*. Vol. xi. *The Book of Job*. By JOSEPH PARKER, D.D. Hazell. 8vo, pp. 454. 8s. 1889.
8. *The Book of Job and the Song of Solomon*. By TALMID. Edinburgh: Thin. Crown 8vo, pp. 85. 1890.
9. *The Cambridge Bible. The Book of Job*. By the Rev. A. B. DAVIDSON, D.D., LL.D. Cambridge. 12mo, pp. lxxviii, 300. 5s. 1891.

The volumes to be noticed in the present survey are, with a single exception, those which deal with separate books of the Old Testament. The exception is the *Student's Commentary*. And it is mentioned because it seems both to deserve and to demand mention. It is not known as it ought to be known. That it has had to fight its way into recognition is solely due to the fact that it is an abridgment. No doubt the *Speaker*, from which it is abridged, is better, if you can afford it. But if