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Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. RICHARD ROTHE, D.D.

CHAPTER V. 9-12.

'If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for the witness of God is this, that He hath borne witness concerning His Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made Him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning His own Son. And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life.'

VER. 9. Having thus shown upon how sure a foundation faith in the Messiahship of Jesus rests, John now calls attention to the responsibility which he incurs, who, in spite of this attestation, withholds such faith. This responsibility is so great, because the witness, whose power to convince we in such a case question, is the witness of God Himself. Not to admit the validity of the witness of God, under the same conditions under which we ascribe validity to the witness of men, is an insult to God. That it is really the witness of God Himself, which in this case is in question, John does not at first prove. He says: 'If we' (according to universal custom) 'receive the witness of men' (namely, as soon as there are two or three witnesses, vers. 7, 8), 'the witness of God is greater' (more weighty, more convincing, iii. 20; John v. 36), *i.e.* we must receive the far more weighty witness of God. But it might not be evident to the reader, how the apostle could speak here of a witness of *God*, seeing that as yet he has been silent upon that point. He accordingly, in the last clause of this verse, introduces the connecting thought in the form of a proof of the assertion we have just been considering, an assertion which, without some such proof, would really be far from evident. It is really the case, he says, that the point in question here is as to the reception of a witness of God; for the witness of the Spirit, of the water, and of the blood, to the Messiahship of Jesus, is a witness of God; and, indeed this, the general summing up, as it were, of all the testimonies borne by God to the Messiahship and Divine Sonship of Jesus, is the only witness of God Himself. (Apart from the testimonies of God to *Jesus* there are in history no direct testimonies of *God Himself*.)

'This' (as in vers. 3, 4, 11, 14; John xvii. 3) refers, not to what has gone before, but to what follows; the witness, which He (God) hath borne

concerning His own Son, this (and nothing else) is the witness of God. But can John with good reason regard the threefold attestation of the Messiahship of Jesus, specified in vers. 6-8, as a witness of God? Yes. The water directly involves a witness of God to the Messiahship of Jesus. So also the Holy Spirit, which bears witness to Jesus as the Lord (Rom. i. 4; 1 Cor. xii. 3, etc.), being given by God, is a direct witness of God Himself. But the blood also is unmistakably such a witness, inasmuch as the bloody death of Jesus was expressly declared by God to be a real atoning death, and consequently a real Messianic work, namely, by the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

In this verse John calls attention to the fact that we believe men more readily than we believe God. Considering the great difficulty which Christianity finds in overcoming the scepticism of men, we might be inclined to assume that men are far from being credulous, but are very careful before accepting any truth. But the credulity of the world goes perfectly hand in hand with its unbelief. It is precisely those who believe God that are the judicious, calm judges of human affairs, and that usually keep themselves aloof from any prevailing credulity. A main reason of our believing men more readily than God is to be found in the fact that one readily believes only that which one is fain to believe. This fact is very humbling to us. God and divine things are not desired by our heart, whereas worldly things *are* desired. We accordingly feel ourselves repelled by the former and attracted by the latter; we have no interest in assuring ourselves of God, but are rather satisfied with obscurity in respect of divine things; a God, who is only an object of probability, is more to our mind than a God who is the object of absolute certainty. Another reason is the fact that the evidence of spiritual

perception tells less upon us than the evidence of sense perception. From this we see that we are by nature flesh and not spirit. And thus it happens that, notwithstanding the clear revelation of God to us, we complain of the lack of evidence in favour of it. This complaint is at least unreasonable. God cannot reveal Himself to us with greater evidence without undoing our inmost being. A revelation of God, which should constrain us in a sensible manner to acknowledge it, is absolutely impossible. We should not hope for any such revelation. Instead of looking for a clearer revelation of God, we should rejoice that even now we are able to believe in a revelation, the witness of which is not of a sensibly constraining kind. We shall certainly be convinced some day of the truth of God by means of a sensible appearance; but then the free faith, which is becoming to our real human nobility, will no more be possible. We shall believe then, only because we can no longer avoid believing. John proceeds here upon the assumption that the witness of God is greater than any other witness. Should there be any conflict between the witness of God and the witness of men, he would turn the scale in favour of the former. This, indeed, is the only reasonable decision on the part of every one who still believes in God at all. Every other authority has to yield to Him. When we see how little this is the case with us, we may infer how little faith we have.

It is worth noting that John expressly reduces all the witnessings of God to His witness concerning Christ. In the revelation given in Christ he sees the sum and substance of all divine revelation. If anyone should be willing to admit the natural, and even the earlier historical, revelations of God as being a divine witness, but should refuse to admit this with regard to the revelations in Jesus the Son of God, he would still be without genuine faith. And yet it is a common experience that it is easier for us to believe in the preparatory revelations than in those given in Christ; and that we have frequently greater difficulty in recognising God, where He enters most clearly within our circle of vision, than where His revelation of Himself is presented to us at a distance. We are so fain to estimate the revelations of God according to our own notion of Him. But in this respect also we ought to have come of age. If we reject the witness of God concerning His Son, we should not confide in our faith in other witnessings of God,

as, *e.g.*, in those given in conscience or in the world around us.

Ver. 10. The first clause of this verse belongs very closely to ver. 9, and should have been made a part of it. In order to make it perfectly clear that the witness of God, of which he has just spoken, is a reality, a real, actual witness of God, and not merely something inferred from a series of apologetic reflexions, John expressly adds: He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness of God spoken of actually and experimentally in himself; he bears it about with him as a reality of which he has experimental knowledge, and of which, therefore, he cannot doubt. Of course, the unbeliever cannot have such an experience of this witness. What John means is certainly this: in the Spirit which he has received from God, and which dwells within him; in the Spirit, which, according to vers. 6-8, is an essential element in the witness of God, and which bears witness in him concerning Christ, and also authenticates the evidence of the water and the blood,—in this Spirit the believer has the witness of God in a real, actual manner, as the object of an experimental certainty. This at least thoroughly agrees with John's usual way of thinking (iii. 24, iv. 13). *Hath the witness in himself* must be taken in its literal sense (Rom. viii. 16). John throughout associates with faith the idea of an experience of its object. To have faith is not merely a witness, which man bears to the object of his faith; it is also at the same time a witness which man receives from the object of his faith. Herein consists the inner self-assurance of faith; seeing that every direct experience brings with it its own evidence. This peculiar nature of faith emerges in proportion as it grows and develops. In its first beginnings faith is no doubt mainly the acceptance of a witness that comes to us from without; but the element of trust, which is involved in this acceptance, contains within itself the beginning of an experience of the object of faith. This trust is due to the fact that we have been drawn to and attracted by that object; it rests upon the feeling that there is an essential connexion between us and that object. In the same proportion in which we accept this witness, our inner susceptibility to the workings of that object increases; and thus there is ever growing a self-assurance of faith, which renders it superior to all doubt.

John now calls attention to the greatness of the sin of which we are guilty, if we refuse to believe in the witness of God to Jesus. In such a case we are not merely unbelieving, but we actually make God a *liar*. 'He that believeth not God' forms the antithesis, not to the preceding 'he that believeth on the Son of God,' but to the reception of the divine witness spoken of in ver. 9. He who thus does not believe God has hereby directly accused God of falsehood, which is assuredly an outrage, for he has refused to believe in an express and solemn testimony, which, by means of a definite declaration, asserts itself to be plain truth. (John distinguishes between a solemn testimony and an ordinary statement, which does not *expressly* claim for itself the character of truth.) He who refuses to believe such a solemn testimony of God, which expressly asserts itself to be plain truth, can do so only on the assumption that, in this case, God has consciously and deliberately said what is false—*i.e.* that He has lied. Accordingly, when we consider the matter carefully, the refusal of faith in God and in His witness cannot possibly appear to us so trifling a sin as it at first sight seems. We look upon inability to believe God as something excusable, whereas it would seem outrageous to everyone to accuse God directly of falsehood. And yet, if we are guilty of unbelief, we find ourselves in the latter case. To the testimonies of God concerning His Son which were then extant, there has since been added the long series of harmonious testimonies in the whole history of the Christian Church. No calm observer can deny that the course of human affairs, which has certainly been under God's guidance, makes it exceedingly reasonable on the part of men to believe in Jesus as the Christ. If God does not desire that men should believe in Jesus, He has led them into a terrible temptation. If, therefore, we would keep the idea of God pure, we must ascribe to Him, in connexion with His preservation of the world, this aim—that the whole history of our race should lead to the recognition of Christ as the Redeemer of humanity. In treating of this argument from history, we usually adduce whatever is opposed to our faith, and overlook whatever favours it. Before, however, we consider the weight of our doubts we should satisfactorily answer to ourselves the question, how it has come to pass that this faith has taken so deep a hold upon humanity. If we do so, we shall have to confess that Christianity is not *sine numine*.

Ver. 11. Vers. 11 and 12 contain a new reason for crediting the witness of God concerning Jesus, and consequently for believing in Jesus as the Christ. This witness of God is, namely, at the same time, His witness to the fact that He has given us eternal life, and that, too, in His Son. He has done so, however, in Him alone, and therefore the possession of true life is absolutely dependent upon the possession of the Son. This thought occurs very frequently in John (i. 1-3, ii. 25, iv. 9; John i. 4, vi. 33, 68, x. 10, 28, xvii. 2, xx. 31, etc.; cf. Acts iii. 15).

We see here how highly John values that which we call Christianity. It is, according to him, the possession of an eternal life bestowed by God, and by no means merely a kind of moral illumination. It is not merely a doctrine or a hope; it is not a mere sum of new ethical motives and impulses, but a complete, perfect life. It is a life, too, that is eternal in its nature, and consequently independent of the conditions of our present physical existence; it is not directly affected by the decay of our physical natural organism. It has its real foundation in itself, because it is spiritual life. It is eternal life, which we ourselves have not begotten in us, but which God has bestowed upon us. It is also wholly dependent on Jesus, the Son of God, as its source; dependent, *i.e.* on the person of the Saviour Himself, not merely on an individual work performed by Him. It can only be received and possessed along with the Son Himself. Christianity is nothing else than a real living union with Christ; there is no such thing as a Christianity detached from Christ. We can do Christianity no worse service than to lower it from this height, in order to make it more level with the intelligence of men, and to bring it under the same categories as other religions. For then it must suffer the fate of all other religions: it must decay when once it has served its purpose, and has raised men's minds above its own standpoint. The Christian must be born again into the eternal life of Christianity, and this takes place, not by means of an idealism of the human spirit, but by faith in the historical, individual Christ. Here it is, where a lofty idealism is inseparably united with an equally definite realism.

Ver. 12. John now gives a confirmation (drawn from his own experience) of what he has said concerning the witness of God in ver. 11. Such being the witness of God, he says, he (and only he) that

hath the Son hath really this eternal life. So true is it that God has given us eternal life, and that He has given it to us in a specific and exclusive manner in His Son (ii. 23). One cannot have fellowship with Christ without at the same time having the life. The apostles were the first to pass through this experience. In attaching themselves confidently to Christ, they experienced a transformation in their own inmost life which made them conscious of their previous state of existence as being death, and of their present state of existence as being life that was real and in itself imperishable. This fact is constantly repeated when we come into contact with Christ; and this would of itself compel us to acknowledge that there is in Christ Himself such a fountain of eternal life as can be only in God Himself. Only the end of the world's history will give a perfectly unambiguous objective decision of the controversy between Christ and the unbelieving world. Whenever humanity attaches itself to Christ it will really be born again to perfect eternal life.

The assertion that 'he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life,' even the unbeliever should

readily acknowledge. He cannot deny that he has not the life, that his condition is not one satisfying in itself; nor can he deny that he cannot see how his condition is naturally to become one more satisfying. This, indeed, he does not deny; but he does deny that this is owing to the fact that he does not have the Son of God; and to convince him of this is impossible to human power by itself alone. Nevertheless all Christians must endeavour to do so as far as they are able, and more especially by manifesting in their own manner of living that they are continually entering into the fuller possession of such a life. For if faith in Christ is what characteristically distinguishes them from the world, the reason of the characteristic difference in their way of living must be sought therein. The more we are surprised that men do not comprehend that the reason of their dissatisfied condition is to be found in the fact that they do not attach themselves to the Son of God, we must all the more feel ourselves stirred up to let this true eternal life be made manifest by means of our whole existence. This convinces the world more than our reproaching it for its unbelief.

Sermonettes on the Golden Texts.

BY THE REV. R. C. FORD, M.A., GRIMSBY.

Meekness in Trial.

'The cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?'—JOHN xviii. 11.

THIS incident shows how the world meets suffering, and how Christ meets it. Peter, an untamed Christian, resents an injury speedily. On a slight he will clap his hand to his sword, and on somewhat greater provocation will aim a blow at his enemy's head. Christ exemplifies His own teaching on the Mount. Though Peter's conduct seems at first to be stronger and more manly, the longer we think of it the nobler does Christ's example seem. Peter is like the cur which bites the stick with which it is beaten. Some evils are conquered by suffering rather than resisting them.

I. EVERY LIFE HAS SOME INDIGNITY TO SUFFER.—See the dumb animals that pass along the streets. Think of the slavery and cruelty of heathen lands.

Remember the poor in our own land, who hardly dare call their souls their own. Bullies and tyrants are to be found in most schools, workshops, and many homes. How many there are who chafe under tyranny, and are galled by the yoke! Every Christian has to bear some portion of that contradiction of sinners of which Christ bore so much.

II. YET SUCH EXPERIENCE CAN BE LIKENED TO NO MORE THAN A DRAUGHT.—A cup is but as much as can be drunk at one time. The word 'cup' is used to express one's experience. 'In the hand of the Lord there is a cup . . . the dregs thereof all the wicked of the earth shall drink them.' 'Take the wine cup of this fury at my hand.' There is also the 'cup of salvation,' and the 'cup of blessing.' The experience referred to under the image of a cup is oftener sorrowful than joyful. The blessing of life is a *well*, or a fountain of living water. Peace is spoken of as a