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The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ROMANS.

ROMANS V. 20.

And the law came in beside, that the trespass might abound; but where sin abounded, grace did abound more exceedingly.

THESE words of St. Paul unfold to us some daring as well as profound thoughts. 'The law entered that the offence might abound.' And God sent it; God would have the offence abundant. The sin was already there. Deep in the constitution of humanity the poison was already working, and God would have it developed, in broad, full, strong manifestation. The driving of evil out to the surface, where all can see it in the broad daylight, is, as in some deadly forms of fever, the first step towards the cure. But there is the revelation of a daring as well as a powerful intellect in the broad simplicity of the statement. 'The law entered that the offence might abound.' Paul had not ventured to entertain the thought unless he had known, as no man, save perhaps Luther, has ever known, the superabounding, the overmastering power of grace.

The infinite tenderness of God to sinners is the broad and blessed fact of the gospel. To the uttermost, to the lowest depth of wickedness and misery, to the crumbling edge of the pit of perdition, to the last step, the last cry, the last gasp, He is able, willing, waiting, with intense desire to save. God's utter hatred of sin, and His fixed determination to uproot sin, lie underneath the everlasting gospel. By righteousness alone, God's righteousness, can a soul be saved. But if sin be in the heart let it work itself out, let the poison spread through the whole system, let the corruption taint the whole world, then grace shall reach it, grace shall rule it, grace shall cure and save its victims; and so, 'as sin hath reigned unto death,' grace shall 'reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Before entering upon the main theme it is necessary to glance at the thoughts which the text brings before us in regard to the Mosaic Law. The Law had a shadow, as we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, of good things to come. The metaphor is most expressive. It was a shadow,

unreal in itself, though testifying to a reality; dim in its intimations of what at last was to be fully manifested—a shadow, gloomy and sometimes threatening, but only the other side of a resplendent light, and a love full and free in which all humanity would rejoice.

1. *The Law seemed even to defeat itself.*—Instead of making men good, it often provoked their evil propensities. The 'Thou shalt not' of the Divine commands, crossing men's passions and desires, prompted the 'I will' of an unchartered licence; just as the sign-board, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted,' tempts some to climb the fence and enter the forbidden territory. Thus the Law worked in men all manner of self-assertion, and actions contrary to both its spirit and letter: 'the law came in that the trespass might abound.'

2. But that was not the object of the Law. *Its first object was to make known God's will* and so to enlighten man's conscience. Owing to the entrance of sin into the world man's foolish heart was darkened. In the progress of the centuries the earth became corrupt, and evil in the life brought about confusion of thought in respect to questions of morality and religion. The conceptions even of men like Abraham and Jacob, though enlightened by Divine revelation, were extremely primitive, and undeveloped. The Law given by Moses altered that. It revealed a holy and a jealous God, and it erected a standard of morality which covered man's life, and showed him what he was to shun and what he was to pursue and practise.

3. In consequence the Law, in quickening conscience, *produced a knowledge of sin.* It showed men the contrast between what they were and what God required, and taught them to look at their conduct not only as it affected themselves and others, as vices which enslaved, or misdeeds which did their neighbours wrong, but as offences against God, as affronts to the Majesty of Heaven. The Law convinced men of sin; it exhibited an ideal from which they fell short.

The village painter struts before his glowing daub with an exultation that is fed by the praise and wonder of his still more ignorant neighbours. But he happens to visit London.

He is attracted to one of the exhibitions of paintings. The great masterpieces awe and humble him, for though he cannot apprehend their excellence, he can see enough for his own condemnation. The law—the Perfect of beauty as expressed in these high reaches after itself has entered his soul, and has made the imperfections and offences of his own poor work to abound. And in all such cases the offence abounds in proportion to the entrance of law. And since law, or rather that Perfect which law represents, can only be gradually apprehended, the abounding of offence will at first be narrow, but it will widen with every increase in the knowledge of law. And we have already seen that this has been the case with the conscience of sin in the world. The first great step, then, in the process of man's salvation is to make him know himself as a being almost infinitely below the standard of perfectness in thought and feeling and act. He must be led to see, with more or less distinctness, that his heart is desperately wicked, since all its movements are obedient to the selfish law. He must be led to desire with more or less earnestness that these movements may become obedient to the love of God; that he may have a new heart and a right spirit. And when these changes are wrought—when there is crushed from the depth of his being the agonizing cry, Behold I am vile, I abhor myself! the work of salvation has already commenced, and the heart has begun to stretch out its hands after a purity that is not in itself.¹

4. With this knowledge of sin there arises a consequent fear of punishment. The Law had its sanctions. It pronounced a sentence against the guilty. And the force of its denunciations and threatenings was greatly increased by the direct sovereignty which was exercised by Jehovah over His people. The Law written on tables of stone was no dead letter; it was not an abstract system of ethics, powerless to carry out its mandates, it was linked with a Divine government which marked disobedience with active disapproval. To the accusations of conscience were added the positive inflictions of penalty by Him who ruleth in His power for ever. We believe that all spiritual laws execute themselves, and that misery attends transgression in the way of natural and inevitable results, but over and above this, God often made bare His arm and vindicated His authority by terrible things in righteousness. The visitation of the serpents in the wilderness, the conviction and destruction of Achan in the camp, the calamities which befell David for the sin by which he displeased the Lord, the ruin which ultimately involved the whole nation because of its apostasy and idolatries—these were acts of retribution which at once put a seal to the conviction of sin which came by the Law, and proved how contrary all sin was to the ineffable Divine Nature.

¹ W. Robinson, *The Philosophy of the Atonement*, 25.

On the banks of a river there stands a mill where poisonous chemicals are manufactured. And for a long time the drainage from the mill into the river carries sickness to the villagers half a mile down, who use the water. But the mill-master knows not the mischief done by his mill. Then at last the poisoning of the water is perceived. And if still he permit the evil, his innocent hurt of others has become a guilty hurt. The knowledge of that hurt is an entrance of law which makes the offence abound.²

5. It may be added that *law produced sorrow and regret* in those whom it awakened to a sense of sin. There can be no true sense of sin, however it may have been brought about, without some degree of sorrow. It may be only the sorrow of humiliation that we should have fallen short and dishonoured ourselves; it may be a selfish sorrow in which the chief concern is that we have become caught in its miserable consequences; or it may rise above this into a recognition of our failure towards God, expressing itself in the heart-felt confession, 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned'; but whether shallower or deeper, and whatever its cause, there will be some inward pangs and self-reproach. That is how God has made us. He has implanted within us a conscience which acknowledges the Divine law, and a heart which is pained by departure from it.

But now let us turn to the contrast which Paul institutes between (1) Abounding Sin, and (2) Superabounding Grace.

I.

ABOUNDING SIN.

There is a trend of thought to-day which makes light of sin, regarding it as the mere negation of good, and excusing it on the ground of heredity, or unfavourable environment. But all such representations of the subject, which are sometimes advocated with the desire of exalting human nature, really lower and belittle it. It is because man is a spiritual being that transgression in him is not a trifle or a misfortune, but a big thing and his fault. The existence of sin will be denied by none. The signs of it and the havoc it has wrought are everywhere apparent.

This is a world of ruin; it bears the mark of disorder in all its elements.³

1. *Sin abounds in that it has affected all mankind.*—There is no man that sinneth not. As we move

² W. Robinson, *The Philosophy of the Atonement*, 28.

³ J. Liefchild.

in life we come into contact with men and women distinguished for various excellences, and yet they have sinned. There are no garments free from stain. Only One has ever lived amidst the conditions of our mortality of whom it may be truthfully said, 'He did no sin.'

2. *Sin has persisted through the centuries.*—History traces man's course from early times, but it is always a story of man's folly and wickedness. Sin, having once entered the world, maintained itself generation after generation, and in spite of the restraints of the Divine government, the accusations of conscience, the lessons of experience, and the influence of the Christian gospel, still reigns in human hearts, and controls human lives. Sin abounds in the quality of persistency.

3. *Sin abounds in the estrangement which it creates between man and God.*—Man was made for God and might have formed his highest happiness in fellowship with God, walking with Him, as Enoch did. But no sooner had man sinned than he shrank from God, and by sin's evil operation threw off the Divine authority, and eventually became rebellious and defiant. For, as Paul writes, 'Man did not like to retain God in his knowledge.' This is always the effect of transgression. It separates the soul from God, awakens sentiments of antagonism, leads to false views of the Divine character, and results either in the adoption of anti-Christian errors or in utter indifference and neglect of all religion.

It is a fact—and the explanation is to be found in an evil conscience—that there is something in human nature which would drive man away from his Maker. When his better feelings would prompt him to fall down before God, a hand from behind is felt to be holding him back, and he hesitates and procrastinates till the time for action is over. Thus, when nature is displaying its loveliest scenes, he would be inclined to look to that light in the heavens whose beams gladden them all; but the eye is blinded by its excess of purity, and turns back instantly to the less dazzling landscapes of the earth. In the hour of adversity the desponding feelings which, for the health of the soul, should be allowed to flow out towards God, are repressed and bound up from all inspection, and they fester within till they pollute the heart and rankle the temper, and burst out in misery and crime.

Under these influences, sometimes clashing, and at other times concurring, man acts in one or other of two ways. He concludes that God is taking no notice of him, and he follows the bent of his own inclinations; or, in the dread of punishment, he betakes himself to superstition and idle ceremonies, to excruciating sacrifices and acts of will-worship, supposed by him to be fitted to pacify an angry God. Some give themselves up to the one, and some to the other, of these impulses; some are Sadducees, and others are Pharisees;

some are Epicureans, and others are Stoics; some are Infidels, and others are Devotees. The majority of mankind flit between the two, between unbelief and superstition; now, when in health, giving themselves to the wildness of the one, and now, in trouble, clinging to the strictness of the other, and generally remaining in a kind of neutral territory, like the false prophet's coffin, seeming to hang by the heavens, but truly upon the earth. Mme. De Sévigné expresses, with her usual *naïveté*, the feelings of multitudes: 'I wish very much I could be religious. I plague La Mousse about it every day. I belong at present neither to God nor the devil; and I find this condition very uncomfortable, though between you and me the most natural in the world.'¹

II.

SUPERABOUNDING GRACE.

Sin and grace are the two great words of the Christian religion. They lie at the very heart of the gospel of Christ. To fail in the understanding of the one is to miss the meaning of the other. Wrong views of sin always issue in false interpretations of grace. The Epistle to the Romans has come to be regarded as the very core of the gospel, because it deals so completely with these two fundamental words. The fifth chapter sums up the great exposition in its broadest issues as represented in Adam and Christ. Between these two there is a parallel and a contrast; a parallel in the representative character of their works, and a contrast in the operation and issues of their representative acts. The sin of Adam involved the whole race in ruin; the righteousness of Christ restored men to the justification of life. That is the parallel. Apart from any consent or effort, all men are involved in the curse of the first and the atonement of the second. The act of the one is the act of all, and the results of the act are shared by all. The contrast is set forth in the five times 'much more' of the chapter. The disobedience of Adam spread sin over the whole race, the obedience of Christ gathered the sins of all unto Himself. From Paradise there went forth the stream of death; from Calvary there flows the river of life. The grace of God in Christ has cancelled sin and destroyed the works of the Devil. Grace has abounded over sin.

Some years ago I witnessed the construction of a piece of engineering work in South India which illustrates this text strikingly. Travancore, on the western slope of the Ghauts, is well watered; Madura, on the east, was, until lately, dry and parched except during the annual rains. The project

¹ J. McCosh, *The Divine Government, Physical and Moral*, 47.

consisted of three parts: the erection in Travancore of the biggest dam in the world across the bed of the Peryar, by which an immense lake was formed, the construction of numerous channels to the bed of the Vaigay, the only stream on the Madura side, and the boring of a tunnel through the Ghauts to connect the lake with the bed of the Vaigay. The bed of this small stream formed a safe guide as to the course which the great river (*pery*=great, *ar*=river) would take. But there was this difference, the high-water mark, reached only during the monsoon rains, was the mark to which the present stream reaches throughout the year. From its feeble source the water of the Vaigay gradually worked its way to the ocean. But contrast that source and its feeble stream with the great lake and the perpetual torrent that now flows through the tunnelled rock. If the old river extended far, surely this great river will flow equally far; and not only so, for mark the high-water mark of the old river and know that that level will be maintained constantly by the new. Such is the fulness of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.¹

1. Grace puts forgiveness within the reach of all. The gospel, then, round which our thoughts gather, is that man is a spiritual being directly related to God, and that every human soul is an object of God's gracious care. In every man God has a personal interest. He deals with us in the mass, for He sees us with all our surroundings and history, and He makes every allowance. He deals with us one by one, for He loves every man, and has redeemed every man in His Son. God stands related to us not simply through the operation of universal and unbending laws, but by a direct and loving contact. Towards every individual He will reveal Himself with perfect wisdom, perfect righteousness, perfect love. He will not show weak indulgence to any, but a wise and righteous love to all. All souls are His, and there is not one, however far gone astray, however sodden in sin, however involved in the evil network of circumstances and habits, however overpowered and crushed by temptations that proved too strong, however despised and cast out by religious and social Pharisees, but that unhappy soul still belongs to God, and for it the Saviour died. To such souls the All-Merciful is saying, 'Why will ye die?' and when He deals with them it will be in sovereign righteousness and love.

What, then, is the difference between a saved and an unsaved man? Simply this, that one has accepted his pardon and the other has rejected it. Personal acceptance is the only condition of personal salvation. A man may make the Cross of Christ of none effect, and, though racially saved, be personally lost.

¹ Jacob Thompson.

In Queen Victoria's Jubilee year, 1887, I was in Edinburgh. Passing over George IV. Bridge one day, I saw a picturesque procession of civic dignitaries going to the old Cross near St. Giles' Cathedral. There was a great crowd, and I turned and followed them. After a great fanfare of trumpets a Royal Proclamation was read, declaring the Queen's forgiveness of all deserters from the Army and Navy. I, was not near enough to hear the terms of the proclamation, but I understood that all the deserters now pardoned should report themselves within so many days at the nearest military or naval dépôt. I afterwards met two of them going to the Castle. What were they going for? To be pardoned? Nay, they were pardoned already. It had been publicly proclaimed. They went simply to claim the certificate of their pardon; not to beg for it, but to claim it. Is that too strong a word to use of the sinner's forgiveness? Let St. John answer: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'²

2. Grace perfectly reconciles God and man. Instead of estrangement between God and man, through Jesus Christ, there is love and fellowship. God's love flows forth to man, man's love is kindled towards God. Perfect love casts out fear. Not only are the effects of sin counteracted; man is restored to the Divine image, and raised into a Divine sonship. The blessings which accrue surpass man's warmest desires. He learns the meaning of the 'much more' of the Saviour's promise.

There is an expression used over and over again in the Bible to describe the salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ, which gives a view of that salvation, so amazing and so perfectly satisfying, that I cannot help wondering whether any of us have ever yet grasped its full meaning. One thing is certain, that no one who should grasp it could ever be uncomfortable or miserable again. It is the expression, 'much more,' and it is used to tell us, if only we would believe it, that there is no need which any human being can ever know that cannot be 'much more' than met by the glorious salvation that is provided. But we are continually tempted to think that 'much less' would be a truer word; and that, so far from this salvation being 'much more' than our needs, it turns out in actual experience to be much less. And this 'much less' view, if I may so express it, is in danger of making our whole spiritual lives a misery to us.³

3. The truth of our text, while very precious to all, makes its special appeal to two classes of individuals. These are—

(1) *The tempted Christian.*—There have doubtless been times, in the experience of most of us, when we have been living specially near to God, and walking in the light of His countenance, and when, on a sudden, the sin that

² S. Chadwick, *Humanity and God*, 34.

³ Mrs. Pearsall Smith, *The God of all Comfort*, 118.

dwelleth in us has seemed to attack us just when we least expected it. The fiercest temptations often come to us immediately after our highest enjoyments of communion with God. They seem to come like a sharp draught of cold air the moment we step out of a warm room, and we hardly know what to do for the best, we are scarcely prepared for it. It will sometimes happen that a temper which we thought we had quite overcome will rush upon us like a lion out of a thicket; or a passion which we thought had been most effectually conquered will come sweeping down upon us like a hurricane from the hills, and our poor little skiff upon the lake seems well-nigh overwhelmed with its furious onslaught. Then, as we look at ourselves, and are surprised to find so much sin in our hearts, we know that sin abounds; what do we do then? At such times, Christians try to nestle closer than ever under the wings of God, and they feel humbler, and they go to the precious blood of Jesus with a more intense desire to prove again its cleansing power; they cry to the Strong for strength, and they feel more than ever they did before their need of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying power. Ralph Erskine said that he was more afraid of a sleeping devil than of a roaring devil; and there was good reason for his fear, for when the devil was roaring, the saints would be more on the watch than when he was quiet. The worst temptation in the world is not to be tempted at all; but when there is a strong temptation, and your soul is fully aware of it, you are on your guard against it. The wave of temptation may even wash you higher up upon the Rock of ages, so that you cling to it with a firmer grip than you have ever done before; and so again, where sin abounds, grace will much more abound.

(2) *The open sinner.*—Let us take the case of the open sinner. What have you been? Have you grossly sinned? Have you defiled your body with unhallowed passions? Have you been dishonest to your fellow-men? Does some scarlet sin stain your conscience. Have you grown hardened in sin by long perseverance in it? Are you conscious that you have frequently, wilfully, and resolutely sinned? Are you getting old, and have you been soaking these seventy years in the crimson dye of sin till you are saturated through and through with its colour? Have you even been an implacable opponent of the gospel? Have you

persecuted the saints of God? Have you tried by argument to batter down the gospel, or by ridicule to put it to reproach? Then hear this text: 'Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound'; and as it was in the beginning, it is now and ever shall be, till this world shall end. The grace of God, if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, will triumph over the greatness of your wickedness. 'All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men.' Throw down your weapons of rebellion; surrender at discretion; kiss the pierced hand of Jesus which is now held out to you, and this very moment you shall be forgiven, and you shall go your way a pardoned man, to begin a new life, and to bear witness that 'where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.'

Richard Jefferies says: 'It is strange to think of, yet it is true enough, that beautiful as the country is, with its green meadows and graceful trees, its streams and forests and peaceful homesteads, it would be difficult to find an acre of ground that has not been stained with blood . . . the nameless skirmishes of the Civil War, the cruel assassinations of the rival Roses, down to the axes of the Saxons and the ghastly wounds they made. Everywhere under the flowers are the dead.'

That is the way of the flowers. They carpet the land, and make us forget about the 'old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago.' They remind us, in their rich profusion, of the abundance that God has provided in the spiritual realm, the abundance of grace that can cover up all the sin and shame of our life—'Grace to cover all my sin.' As every acre of ground has been stained with blood, so every part of our life bears the marks and the stains of sin. Sin is no scarce or stinted thing. Police courts have no monopoly of it, churches have no lack of it. It is not confined to the dark places of the earth and the places of horrid cruelty. It abounds in our own life. Can you pick out any sinless day, any day at whose close you did not need to come to the throne of grace for mercy to pardon and grace to help? But where sin abounded, grace did abound more exceedingly.

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