

## ELECTION VERSUS CALVINISM

Having on the last occasion left unfinished the consideration of the ninth chapter of Romans, we cannot perhaps do better than return to it before dealing with any fresh topic. It is a chapter full of important instruction in the ways of God—ways which, as Yahweh Himself tells us by Isaiah, are as much higher than our ways as heaven is higher than the earth: ways therefore which fail to engage the sympathies of the purely natural mind, but which, nevertheless, are more beautiful and ennobling and ultimately beneficial than all the best ways of man.

One of such ways we have already seen—that the seed or family for which He purposes the final inheritance of the earth in an immortal state, are not developed on the mere hereditary principle. They are not to come into Abraham's inheritance merely because they have Abraham's blood in their veins, but because, being Abraham's children by descent or adoption, they are also characterised by that faith and docility with which in Abraham God was well pleased, and which he counted unto him for righteousness. We must on reflection be able very heartily to pronounce this an excellent "*way*." How infinitely superior to the principle which regulates the succession of property—ay, of crowns and sceptres—in the human system of things. A man is heir to a certain estate or a certain throne merely because he is of a certain parentage. It matters not how unfitted he may be for the position. He may be a bad man, an imbecile, or a tyrant: he is secured all the same in the full enjoyment of his rights and possessions. The consequence may be seen in the wretched condition of things upon earth.

But the "*heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ*," to whom the future in all the earth belongs, are men not only of legal title but of the highest moral qualification. The legal title is in fact made to hang on the moral qualification; for the legal title will be quashed if the other is defective. Their status depends not on their extraction but on their fitness for the privileges of the extraction. The children of promise only are counted for the seed. If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. If any man have not the faith and character of Abraham, he is not his seed and heir according to the promise, even if he have the blood of Abraham or the highest title which adoption can give. He must "*do the works of Abraham*" (John 8:39).

How glorious will be the result of the application of this rule! Every member of the developed family, when Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets, will appear in the kingdom of God, will be a tried and true man, not only holding, in the grace of God, a true title to his position as a noble in the future age, but possessing those moral characteristics which will make him a blessing to all in subjection to him, a constant sweetness to all his glorious equals, a joy to Christ, and a glory to God.

You say, "What? Will they not be forgiven men, and therefore men who in their day have erred and come short?" Yes, yes: "*there liveth not a man that sinneth not*" (1 Kings 8:46; Eccl. 7:20).

*"It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed"*  
(Lam. 3:22).

But then, realise this: only certain are forgiven. The question is, who? The answer in all the Scriptures is, "*Those who confess their sins and forsake them,*" "*those who are of broken and contrite heart,*" "*those who forgive others,*" and who, having been forgiven much, love much, and labour much in the Lord and for the Lord. These do the works of Abraham—works of faith and obedience: these have the spirit of Christ. They are a great contrast to the withered branches who bring forth no fruit: who are in the lukewarm state which the Lord hates.

But not only are the children of the promise, in preference to the children of the flesh, counted for the seed: we have to look at another of the ways of God in the statement of Paul, that the working out of the plan was so arranged “that the purpose of God according to election might stand.” Rebecca was told before the birth of Jacob and Esau, that the elder should serve the younger. Paul deals with this as if it were an arbitrary selection; and answers the objection on this ground. He as much as says, “Granting that God chose one before another of His own prerogative, is there unrighteousness with God in this?” (verse 14). Has He not a right to do as He will with his own?

*“Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour, if it so please him?”*

He quotes Yahweh’s declaration to Moses,

*“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”*

From which he deduces the conclusion,

*“So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.”*

Now, all this is very important and very reasonable, but it is far from giving countenance to Calvinistic ideas of election. It is the importation of Calvinistic ideas that makes the argument obscure or the chapter difficult. The idea before Paul’s mind is only properly to be seen side by side with that which he was opposing. It is a very simple one: that the development of God’s family upon earth is an affair of **divine purpose** upon divine principles of selection, and not a matter of human plan or human working out at all. Both the Jews and Greeks assigned to man a large part in their respective conceptions of the working out of futurity. Human merit according to the Greeks, human pedigree according to the Jews, had all to do in determining the evolution of spiritual destinies. Paul’s argument is that it is an affair of divine pre-conceived purpose altogether; apart from which, man could have done absolutely nothing; and that the purpose is according to election or choice, that is, a purpose based upon certain principles of choice. Where Calvinism is wrong is that it ignores **the principles which regulate choice**. It makes it purely an exercise of “sovereign will,” which it truly is in the sense of being unconstrained and irresponsible authority; but it fails to take into account what God has revealed concerning the way He exercises His election, selection, or choice. The cases of Jacob and Esau, and Pharaoh cited by Paul, illustrate the point. They were all the result of a divine purpose: but the purpose was formed in harmony with moral fitness. If Esau’s rejection was proclaimed beforehand, it must be noticed that Esau turned out a wild man and a lover of sport—a thing in advance to Him to whom *“all his works are known from the beginning.”* If Pharaoh was raised up and hardened that God’s power might be exhibited, it must be recognised that Pharaoh was a fit subject for such a use. He was not a humble-minded, reasonable, obedient man, but a man of self-sufficient and wilful heart, and all was known to God beforehand. If a believing, obedient Jacob had been treated as an Esau; if an Abraham had been dealt with as a Pharaoh, we should then have had the confounding proposition of Calvin illustrated. We should not have had a *“purpose of God according to election,”* but a purpose **“not according to election”**: for no principle of selection would have been visible in such a procedure. If it be asked, “Were not these men—Esau and Pharaoh—what they were as the result of the divine purpose beforehand?” the answer is, that it is vain to go behind the beginning of matters in that way. We can only deal with things as they are. It is vain to trouble ourselves with the inscrutable causes. It is a matter of some concern and some advantage to see that the works of God when accomplished are developed in harmony with the principles which He has declared to regulate His acts. If it be said that this is not facing but shirking the difficulty involved in the idea of a divine purpose, we can only take final refuge in Paul’s question,

*“Hath not the potter power over the clay, to work it into any shape he pleases?”*

Grant the potter and the clay, and there is an end to all controversy. The point to see clearly is that vessels, when the potter has made them, are not put by him to a use inconsistent with their nature, but in harmony with it.

*“Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?”*

Thus incisively does Paul state the final challenge of the objector. It appears unanswerable like many other sallies of sophistry. It fails through not recognising that the working out of God's purposes with persons leaves room for the exercise of human will as well, and that in this margin of individual volition, it is not unreasonable that God should distribute praise or blame as the case may call for. There is much presumption in the objections brought forward on this subject, which are best met by Paul's rejoinder,

*“Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? . . . What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom he hath called not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”*

What answer can there be to this? Only one that is truly reasonable: If God, willing to manifest the attributes of His character for human acquaintance, chose to constitute men and create circumstances for the effectual accomplishment of that purpose, there is not only no room for cavil, but occasion for highest gratitude and praise. The Possessor of heaven and earth can do as He pleases, without rightful challenge from any of the souls He has made; and when what He pleases to do, as a whole, is so wise and good and glorious, it is the part of the creatures of His hand to stand still and adore.

This will certainly be the attitude of those whom Paul styles “vessels of mercy.” Who those are we may easily learn. Vessels of mercy are those to whom mercy is shown. This mercy is a sparing and a favouring where no right to such exists. This will be done to those who take a reasonable attitude. Though God says, “*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy,*” He does not mean that His mercy is capriciously bestowed. It is bestowed on very well defined principles.

*“His mercy is towards them that fear him.”*

*“To the merciful man, thou wilt show thyself merciful.”*

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”*

Such are the plain declarations of the word, illustrated and confirmed by the statement of Jesus that “*if we from the heart forgive not every man his brother his trespasses, neither will the Father forgive our trespasses.*” The mercy of God will be shown towards those who take a reverent and docile attitude towards Him, and a merciful attitude towards men. Such are “vessels of mercy,” filled with the mercy of God and overflowing with it towards others. Such only are the children of God.

They are “*not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.*” For a long time they were “of the Jews only,” and only a very small remnant of them. As the eye travels backwards, it picks out the Nehemiahs, and the Daniels and the Jeremiahs, and the Davids and the Samuels, and the Joshuas and the Moses and the Josephs, and by the eye of a legitimate imagination, it sees clustered round those illustrious names, like the seven thousand in Elijah's day, many unnamed and to men unknown children of faith and righteousness, vessels of mercy “*afore prepared unto glory.*” Still, in proportion to the mass of Israel, they were few and uninfluential, and outside Israel, they were not to be found, for “*the sons of the strangers,*”

joining themselves to Israel, became Israel. In the apostolic age, even after Christ's ascension, the disciples, as we know, "*preached unto none but unto the Jews only.*" But the day came when "*unto the Gentiles also was granted repentance unto life.*" In the work of extending this privilege, Paul, as we know, performed a prominent—in fact the leading part, so much so as to be called "*the apostle of the Gentiles.*" In this work we have come to be included through those ways of Providence which have brought us into contact with the testimony; and it is our duty and our wisdom to realise what this means with regard to our position and relation to God and man. Are we vessels of mercy prepared afore unto glory? Some say "That is just what we would like to know." They are apt to take a Calvinistic view of the situation and to embarrass themselves with that maundering torment which in past times has sent some people to the asylum: the torment of arguing that if they are not among "*the elect*" it is no use trying, and that if they are, it is superfluous. The unscripturalness of such a view must be evident at once from the constant vein of entreaty and exhortation that runs through the epistles, impressing on the believers the necessity of taking heed "*lest*" they should come short of the promised inheritance (Heb. 4:1). The purpose of God in the matter—even as in the case of Jacob and Esau—is not arbitrary but "*according to election,*" and the election is "according to fitness," and fitness is according to the earnest endeavour of good and honest hearts to "*make their calling and election sure*" (2 Pet. 1:10). Therefore those may know themselves "*vessels of mercy prepared afore unto glory,*" who, examining their own selves, as Paul advises, find themselves answer to the characteristics of those who declared the appointed inheritors of the kingdom and glory of God. Are they "*poor in this world, rich in faith*"? (Jas. 2:5). So far they answer to the right description. Are they rich in this world? Well, their case is not hopeless but it is difficult. It is Jesus who says so (Matt. 19:23), and it is not for us to cloak his words. Paul recognises their case as hopeful but calling for special vigilance (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Jesus also (Luke 16:9). If they are rich in faith and good works, their worldly riches will no more work against them than the riches of Abraham. But "*rich in this world and poor in faith*" is a bad case. "*Poor in this world and poor in faith*" is worse. Rich in this world and rich in faith is beautiful, but the prevalent apostolic type is defined in James' words, "*poor in this world, rich in faith.*" Well then, are they righteous in their lives? Another mark in their favour.

*"The unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God"*

(1 Cor. 6:9).

Even "*the righteous shall scarcely be saved*" (1 Pet. 4:18). The habitually disobedient and unrighteous are without hope except they repent. Then, are they diligent followers of every good work? (1 Tim. 5:10). Do they forsake not the assembling of themselves with the saints? (Heb. 10:25). Do they pray always (Luke 18:1), and in everything give thanks in the name of the Lord Jesus? (Eph. 5:20). Are they "*peculiar*" and zealous of good works? (Titus 2:14). Are they, in a word, followers of Paul, even as he was of Christ? (1 Cor. 11:1). If so, they need not distress themselves about the abstract question of whether they are included among "*the elect*"; for the elect are made up of such as they, and because they are such, and of none else; and "*all*" and "*whosoever*" that are of that stamp will be included.

It may be said that such a standard excludes hope. It would do so if there was no provision for shortcoming. But these "*vessels of mercy*" have to remember that they are vessels of **mercy** after all, and that after all they can do, it is of the Lord's favour that they are chosen unto glory. If their faults were not overlooked, they could not be saved. David gives expression to the idea when he says,

*"If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, who should stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared"* (Psa. 130:3).

The multitude of the redeemed is a multitude who rejoicingly acknowledge in the day of their glory that they have been "*washed from their sins in the blood of the Lamb*"—sins not only

pre-baptismal, but after adoption, as in the case of Peter. Consequently, we must not despond in our weakness, but lift up the hands that hang down, and confirm the feeble knees, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way, but rather let it be healed (Heb. 12:12-13).

It may be said again that this doctrine of forgiveness neutralises the doctrine of moral excellence being necessary to inclusion among “*the elect*.” It may be asked, where the need of righteousness if forgiveness rehabilitates the sinner? The question overlooks the fact that forgiveness itself is conditional. For example, Jesus teaches that a man who is not forgiving will not be forgiven (Matt. 18:35). There are other qualities requisite for the obtainment of forgiveness. Only those who fear God and have a tender heart towards His covenants and His ways—who love Him and hope in His mercy, and are striving earnestly to walk acceptably before Him, will receive the great benefit of forgiveness for Christ’s sake. Only for such will He intercede; and if He intercede not, a man has no hope. There is a great difference between men of the loving, striving, earnest type and those who are callous and lukewarm. The shortcomings of the former—confessed and repented and prayed for, will be overlooked, where the debts of the indifferent and unmerciful will be exacted to the “*uttermost farthing*.” Thus the apparently conflicting doctrines of personal righteousness and forgiveness meet in harmony, each coming up to the boundary line where they meet and fuse in a beautiful blending of colour.

Let us rejoice and be glad at the position we have attained in the matter in contrast with Israel after the flesh. It remains true as Paul says in this chapter, that—

*“The Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness.”*

We were all of us Gentiles following not righteousness, but the passing gratification of an unenlightened mind. In the purpose of God according to election, we have been called to be “*vessels of mercy*.” Let us use every endeavour to make our calling and election sure.

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