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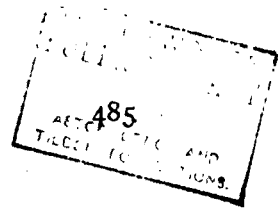
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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

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Divine Goodness in Severity.



ARTICLE V.

DIVINE GOODNESS IN SEVERITY.

BY THE REVEREND HENRY M. TENNEY, D.D.

TRUTH is spherical. To see both hemispheres at the same time, to give to each its relative value and to understand their relations to each other, is difficult. Regarding the one hemisphere we lose sight of the other. If the goodness of God is prominently before our minds we fail to recognize his severity. If the severity of God is manifest we forget his goodness and grace. This disposition leads us to put our own estimate upon different parts of the Bible. In the Old Testament there are abundant evidences of the divine goodness; but the law, with its stern "thou shalt not," is prominent; and in its histories, judgments and retributions so appear that popularly the Old Testament seems to be the book of the severity of God; while, because of its revelation of saving grace in Jesus Christ, the New Testament seems to be the book of the divine goodness. We forget that it was foretold that Jesus would be for the fall, as well as for the rising again, of many in Israel; that he himself declared that he came not to bring peace, but a sword; and that if at the beginning of his ministry we have the beatitudes, we have the woes and the judgment scenes and the "depart from me" at its close.

In the stern days of our Pilgrim and Puritan fathers, when they were face to face in a death-grapple with the forces of oppression and evil, it was an easy thing for them to recognize the divine severity. They believed in

it both as a fact and as a necessity. The imprecatory Psalms did not read to them just as they do to the ease-loving and pleasure-seeking and conscienceless of our time. They read differently now to those who are trying to live as Christians, and to make others Christians, in the heart of Turkey and Cuba, and to those who have to do with Turkey and with Spain. But to those who are living out of the conflict, in circumstances of ease, the divine goodness so fills the vision that severity seems incongruous and contradictory. It hardly seems possible to such that love can have a stern aspect and that it can deliver blows. We call the fathers Old Testament Christians, and in so doing we discount their religion; and in our own practical religious life we find very little place, it may be, for the Old Testament. We boast ourselves New Testament Christians, not realizing what New Testament Christianity in its fullness really is.

It cannot be amiss for us, therefore, to dwell upon these two characteristics of the ways of God with men, and to note the relation which the divine goodness and the divine severity sustain to each other.

But is God severe? Is the divine severity a fact? We shrink from asserting it; and yet, if it is a fact, it becomes us to face it, and understand it, and adjust ourselves to it. To ignore an important fact is to prove one's self the fool that the Bible declares such to be.

If we believe in a divine being at all, if we are not sheer atheists, and if we admit that God has anything to do with the ordering of things in this world, we have but to look out upon the world to be compelled to see the divine severity revealed on every hand. The volume of human suffering,—how stupendous and appalling it is! And God permits it to be. The world, and man, are so constituted that under certain conditions tremendous suffering is a necessary incident. And this suffering is not due

chiefly or largely to the fact that this is a finite world, and that we are finite and limited beings in it. There is suffering that is due to these limitations. Our bodies are frail. They are liable to accidents and unpreventable diseases. Age brings weakness and the decay of the powers, and consequent hardship. But leaving out of the account these disabilities which are strictly incidental to such a life as this is in the flesh, taking account only of preventable sufferings, how vast is their volume! Why does not the Almighty prevent them?

These sufferings as we analyze them are seen to be of two kinds. The one kind comes by way of deprivation. Men are deprived of so much of the blessing and happiness of life that it seems easily possible for them to be made to enjoy! We lose and miss so much that we feel that we ought to have. Is there not a divine severity in the withholdings of providence? How are we to reconcile this with the fatherhood of God? And then there are the sufferings of infliction—the more positive pangs of body, and mind, and conscience; the social and national alienations and separations and bitternesses and conflicts, with the multiplied and endless woes which they involve. Is not God awfully severe in his inflictions, as well as in his withholdings? Is there not reason for the universal fear of God which exists outside of Christian lands? Is not our God indeed, as Paul declares, a consuming fire? Take as an example a single individual. Here we are with these bodies, and with their physical cravings and appetites. These appetites are essential to both individual and social life and health and well-being.

We want, and we must have, food and drink. There is abundance in the world that is wholesome. But let there be indulgence in alcoholic drinks or narcotics,—and often there is a craving for these,—with what tremendous severity is the victim handled! How does the appetite in-

crease and become inflamed and imperious! How does it rob the man of the desire for that which is nutritious and healthful, and bind him and goad him as a very slave to its own gratification! How does it corrupt and disorder his whole physical being, and harden his heart also, and deaden all the finer sensibilities of his nature! How does it reach out also in its retributions and destroy for him all the blessedness and prosperity of home, and rob him of the respect of his fellowmen, and of his self-respect as well! How does it isolate and imprison him, and torture and destroy him! He becomes an Ishmaelite. Every man's hand is turned against him, as though war were declared against him. Men who want service, and are willing to pay for it, advertise that for him they have no use. The great corporations boycott him in advance. And how do all who are associated with him suffer also because of him! The man and the woman who sin against the law of the family—how do nature and mankind together conspire to poison and despise and repudiate them! With what awful severity are those treated first or last who are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God!

And the internal smitings are as severe as the external, and harder even to bear,—the goadings of conscience, the stings of remorse, the sense of degradation, the inflamed and heated imaginations, the struggles and hopings and despairings! There is a severity in sin, and a bitterness in its fruits, which here and now are awful. Escape from life offers no relief; for escape from life here is not escape from self, nor from moral beings like ourselves, nor from God.

And this divine severity with respect to individuals in given conditions is only representative, as we know, of the severity of God with respect to groups of individuals organized in societies and nations where like conditions exist.

We look to India as it was, and as to a great extent it

still is. There caste is to be found, and infanticide, and child-marriage, and wife-burning, and the nameless horrors and sufferings attendant upon the really religious life of that people. Why all these horrors? The answer is to be found in the fact of error in the spirit and truth and form of their religion. And into this error, for the most part, the people were born. They know no better. Is not God severe upon religious error, even that which is the result of ignorance? The very worst forms of heathenism, cannibalism itself even as we are told, have a religious foundation and significance. It is the judgment of God upon falsehood in religion.

We look to Turkey. That country ought to be one of the most fertile and prosperous of the nations of the earth. Its people ought to dwell together in unity and in peace. Why is it barren and waste? Why does the blood of the thousands of the massacred cry to God unavenged from the ground, and the orphaned mourn without hope for their martyred parents? What a position of ignominy and abhorrence does Turkey occupy among the nations of the earth! Spain is hardly behind Mohammedan Turkey. Why are her colonies east and west in rebellion, her peoples rent in warring factions, and her wealth squandered to bankruptcy? Why have these United States been driven to break the friendly relations of generations, to arm to the teeth, spend wealth in warships and in the equipment of armies, and give of her sons for the conflict which is waging? All these things come because of offenses. There has been a false or merely formal religion, the practical denial of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, a petty and puerile pride, the selfish seeking of personal and dynastic ends instead of the enlightenment and elevation and blessing of the people. And certain it is that on such things, and on such peoples, God is hard. He is a consuming fire. There is such a thing as the

wrath of God. There is such a thing as the drinking of the wine of the wrath of God.

When we magnify, as we should, the love of God, let us not forget that these are facts of appalling significance. They are not mere figures of speech. And all of the ills and evils which come as consequences of human acts, are they not of the same character,—revelations of the severity of God?

I know that this fact of severity is one that we dislike to connect with our thought of God, and that there are many who are accustomed to deny that God has anything to do with these withholdings and inflictions. With the woe of intemperance and immorality, and with the riot and wreck of war, it is said that God has nothing to do. All these are but the outcome of the wickedness of men. And there is truth in the disclaimer. These ills do not come from God without the agency of men. Men do produce the conditions; but when men have produced the conditions, God, working through the laws and forces which he has ordained, produces the results. It is divinely ordered that if men will cut themselves off from the vine they shall wither as branches and be consumed. In a universe instinct with the presence and power of God these retributory results cannot be apart from him. They are the expression of his judgment of those who, by what they are and by what they do, are guilty of the offenses which provoke the retributions. They are the revelations of God in and through the laws which he has established as the laws of life. By his judgments God gives expression to the honor in which he holds his own laws, and to the abhorrence in which he holds those who violate them. Such retributions are not less the work of God because they are inflicted automatically, through the operations of the violated laws themselves. The man who plans and sets his torpedo so that his enemy's ship shall strike it and

be sunk by it while he is at a distance, is as truly the destroyer of the vessel as though the work were done by his own hand. It is done by his mind and skill and purpose. So also it is with these retributions which seem to us to be merely natural. They are inflicted because God in his wisdom and skill has so made this world and us who live in it that when the conditions are realized the blow of retribution falls according to his purpose.

But, turning to the side of the divine goodness, let us ask ourselves if we would be willing, all things considered, to have our heavenly Father any less severe than he is? Were the order of things in this world to be so changed that these withholdings and inflictions and retributions could never be suffered by mankind under any conditions, could we regard it as an evidence of the divine goodness?

Doubtless our first impulse is to answer, "yes," to this question. But a moment's reflection will show that severity is shown only under certain conditions. What are those conditions? Conditions of the violation of the laws of our being, which are the laws of God, always. It is transgression upon the track of which retribution follows. Obedience never brings woe, but always blessing. Would we have it otherwise? Would it please us to have a condition of things in which it would be equally well with us whatever we might be or do,—however carefully we might keep, or flagrantly we might break, the laws of our being? Would we like to have bodies which would be affected alike by foods and poisons; minds which would never cause us to suffer because of ignorance; consciences which would never rebuke our wrong-doing; social conditions in which infidelity and hatred would have no other effect than do fidelity and love; and souls to which it would be all the same whether God is supreme with us or repudiated altogether?

If this is our desire, it becomes us to ask ourselves what

kind of persons we really wish to be. Certainly we do not wish to be the moral and social beings that we now are. We do not wish to be beings with the powers and possibilities which we now possess. But we must wish to be something very different and less,—mollusks or sponges or beings inconceivable and impossible, instead of sons and daughters of God. On the other hand, is it not true that the highest conceivable blessing, both for this world and for the world to come, is for us to be just what we are made to be when we obey in spirit and act the laws of our being? What better thing is there for us in this life of the flesh than that which comes when we are fed with the food that is convenient for us, delivered from the peril and bondage and suffering of poisons and narcotics, and permitted to enjoy the fullness of health and vigor?

In the possibilities of the social life, what is there better than these relations and ties and institutions which God has ordained, and in which heart is united to heart, and life to life, in fidelity and love? The suffering of the innocent because of the guilty, which seems so hard and almost unjust,—how manifestly is it due to the fact of just that strength and solidarity and tenderness of the social relations which make supreme social blessedness possible where there is obedience to the laws of righteousness and love!

And in all the broader relations of men is there anything better conceivable than that which would be realized were the Golden Rule to become the practical rule of life for individuals and nations? Where then would there be the possibility of war? What marvelous possibilities of peace and universal prosperity would be opened up!

Then, as the life and inspiration of all, let there be obedience to the simple law of the religious life,—love supreme to God as revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Is there anything better conceivable for such beings as are we, and in such a world as this, than is thus offered? But

it is all conditioned, as we have seen, upon our obedience to these laws of our being, which are the laws of God; and from these laws retributions, in case of their violation, are inseparable.

This being the case, it may seem to us that it would be better if the laws might be changed, we ourselves remaining as we are. But this, again, is to desire an impossibility. Let the laws of our being be so changed that their violation would bring no penalty, what then? The order of the universe would be broken up, the government of God would be destroyed, and all things resolved back into anarchy and chaos. A world in which there should be no right and no wrong, no friendship and no hatred, no food and no poison, where all should be as each, and each as all, would mean the dethronement of God, the destruction of the universe, and the annihilation of man himself. Such are the absurdities into which we find ourselves running when we attempt to improve upon the existing order. These laws of God—physical, social, moral, and spiritual—are the manifestation of the divine goodness and grace. And the severity of the Almighty in the infliction of suffering when laws are violated, the physical sufferings which follow physical sin, the social disorders and woes, and the strifes and awful wars with their terrible losses and bereavements, are exhibitions also of the divine love. In these severities God himself stands guard over the stupendous interests which are involved in the keeping of his commandments. Retributions are divine warnings. Suffering because of sin is the danger-signal which tells of peril. It is intended to lead us to study to know what is the will of God. It is the pilot and pioneer to new discoveries of the hidden blessings of the divine storehouse. And in our moral helplessness and unwillingness the divine severity is intended to lead us to Christ our personal Deliverer and Saviour.

The most wonderful spectacle which this world presents is the cross of Christ erected in the midst of the ages, proclaiming forever the gospel of hope, pledging deliverance from the guilt and the power of sin through faith, and giving the assurance of life and blessing to whosoever will accept the Christ who was dead and is alive forevermore. And it is by the sufferings which sin inflicts that men are led to look to Christ, even as the serpent-stung Israelites in the wilderness were led by their sufferings to look to the brazen serpent lifted up at God's command by Moses in the midst of the camp.

Whatever may be our use of them, such are the purposes which the chastisements of the Almighty are intended to serve. And for them they call upon us to thank God. What would this world be were the severities of it so eliminated that men could feel that they had nothing to fear? How certain is it that Christ would be ignored, that God would be forgotten, and the laws of God disregarded, and that society would degenerate into heathenism! How certain is it that there would be universal death, instead of the present hope and promise and dawn of life! God is love, but God is not weak. God is love, but he is not sentimental. God pities and will save unto the uttermost the repentant, but he will not condone sin. Were God to do this, he would cease to be love, and to be God. Love is kindly, but it is positive and true to the right. It is patient and forbearing, but it is also stalwart and intense in its indignations. It can withhold the blow when it is right, but it can also strike. Severity is the divine protest against wrong, and the divine appeal for obedience and righteousness. It is the severity of God which reveals the divine earnestness, and which, being lighted up and interpreted by his love, awes us and humbles us and leads us to a godly fear. And in these days of increasing lawlessness and of increasing retributions,

have we, as individuals and as a nation, a greater need than this, that we increase in the fear of God,

“Lest we forget, lest we forget.”

In the face of the forces of the Almighty, how puny is the power of man! How insignificant are the pomp and might of the greatest of the navies and the strongest of the armies! And if we are against the laws of God, instead of for and with them, where is our hope?

“Be not high-minded, but fear. Behold then the goodness and severity of God; toward them that fell, severity; but toward thee, God's goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.”