

*ST. PAUL'S USE OF THE ARGUMENT FROM
EXPERIENCE.*

THE place of the opening verses of the fifth chapter of Romans in the general argument of the Epistle has always presented a crux to interpreters. The problem has sometimes been complicated by the intrusion of the textual question of whether the verbs in this passage are to be read as indicatives or subjunctives. The difference in reading is, however, a matter of itacism, and of an itacism from which none of the great witnesses to the text are free. To condition the solution of the problem of the logical sequence of thought upon the discrimination of omicron from omega by such witnesses, would be somewhat like suspending higher concerns upon the correctness of the pronunciation of *S* by lisping lips. Manifestly, the textual question here must itself be resolved by the demands of the thought-sequence; that is, it is the internal and not the external evidence which must here rule. We are safe in throwing ourselves back upon the main problem of the place of these verses in the argument of the Epistle, without allowing ourselves to be confused by the textual question, which is of no more than secondary interest.

The general disposition of the matter of the Epistle is tolerably clear. In the opening chapters, the necessity of a justification by faith and not by works was exhibited (i. 18,—iii. 20). Then the nature and working of this method of justification was expounded (iii. 21—31). Then the Apostle presents a series of considerations designed to show that this method of justification by faith is indeed God's method of saving men (iv. 1—v. 21). It is in this section that our present passage falls. The first consideration offered is drawn from the case of Abraham, and operates to show that God has always so dealt with his people. For that Abra-

ham, the father of the faithful, was justified by faith and not by works, the Scriptures expressly testify, saying that "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him unto righteousness." This is the immediately preceding paragraph (iv. 1-25) to our present passage. In the immediately succeeding paragraph (v. 12-21) appeal is made to the analogy of God's dealings with men in other matters. It was by the trespass of one that men were brought into sin and death: does it not comport with His methods that by the righteousness of One, men should be brought into justification and life? Our present passage (v. 1-11) lies between, and ought to furnish an intermediate argument that justification by faith is God's own method of saving sinners.

It is because commentators have not seen such an argument in it, that they have found it so difficult to discover the progress of thought at this point. If we are to read the verbs as subjunctives, it is no doubt impossible to understand them as propounding an argument. But if they be read as indicatives, just the intermediate argument for which we are in search will emerge as the most natural sense of the passage, when looked at in the light of the contextual indications. The Apostle had not presented the argument from the case of Abraham in a purely historical spirit. His pre-occupation was with its bearing upon the case of his readers. Its relation to them is therefore very richly drawn out, and culminates in the closing declaration that it was not written for Abraham's sake, only that it was written that his believing was imputed to him unto righteousness, "but also for our sakes to whom it is to be imputed, who believe on Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification." Here is the point of attachment for the new argument. "It is because, then, we have been justified out of faith," the Apostle begins, throwing the participle forward to the head.

of the sentence, with, as Meyer puts it, "triumphant emphasis": "it is because, then, we have been *actually and truly justified* out of faith, that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and exult in hope of the glory of God." There is obviously an appeal to the experience of his Christian readers here, strengthened by its indicated relation to the normative case of Abraham. The Apostle is not arguing that a Christian ought to have peace and joy. Far less is he exhorting Christians to have peace and joy. He is appealing to their conscious peace and joy. And on their conscious possession of this peace and joy, he is founding his argument. They had sought justification, not on the ground of works of righteousness which they had wrought, but, like Abraham, out of faith; and the turmoil of guilty dread before God which had filled their hearts had sunk into a sweet sense of peace, and the future to which they had hitherto looked shudderingly forward in fearful expectation of judgment had taken on a new aspect,—they "exult in hope of the glory of God." It is on this their own experience that the Apostle fixes their eyes. They have sought justification out of faith. They have reaped the fruits of justification. Can they doubt the reality of the middle term? No: it is because we have been justified, says the Apostle,—*really and truly justified*,—out of faith, that we have this peace with God which we feel in our quieted souls, and exult in this hope of the glory of God in which we are now rejoicing. Not only the case of Abraham, but their own experience as well, will teach them then that it is out of faith and not out of works that God justifies the sinner.

If this be the meaning of the passage, it will be observed that the argument which is here employed is what has of late obtained great vogue among us under the name of "the argument from experience." It is not without interest that we note the prominent use which the Apostle

makes of an argument which some appear to fancy one of the greatest discoveries of the nineteenth century, while others seem to look upon it with suspicion as an innovation of dangerous tendency. Like other forms of argumentation, it is no doubt capable of misuse. It is to misuse it to confuse it with proof by experiment. By his use of the argument from experience, Paul is far from justifying the position of those who will accept as true only those elements of Christian teaching the truth of which they can verify by experiment. There is certainly a recognisable difference between trusting God for the future because we have known His goodness in the past, and casting ourselves from every pinnacle of the temple of truth in turn to see whether He has really given His angels charge concerning us, according to His Word. It is to misuse it, again, to throw the whole weight of the evidence of Christianity upon it, or to seek to enhance its value by disparaging all other forms of evidence. Such exaggeration of its importance is a symptom of that unhappy subjectivism which is unfortunately growing ever more wide-spread among us, which betrays its weakened hold upon the objective truth and reality of Christianity by its neglect or even renunciation of its objective proofs. When men find the philosophical or critical postulates to which they have committed their thinking working their way subtly into every detail of their thought, and gradually taking from them their confidence in those supernatural facts on which historical Christianity rests, it is no wonder that they should despairingly contend that "the essence of Christianity," being vindicated by the immanent experiences of their souls, is independent of its supposed supernatural history. It is needless to say that this desperate employment of the argument from experience has no analogy in the usage of Paul. With him, it does not take the place of the other arguments, but takes its place among them. He appeals,

first, to God's announced intention from the beginning so to deal with His people, and to the historic fact of His so dealing with them. He appeals, last, to the analogy of God's dealings with men in other matters. Between these he adduces the argument from experience, and twists the cord of his proof from the three fibres of God's express promise, our experience, and the analogy of His working. When we unite the Scriptural, experiential and analogical arguments, we are followers of Paul.

But though it may interest, it cannot surprise us to find Paul employing the argument from experience here. It is an argument which is repeatedly given a capital place in his writings. It is to it for example that he appeals, when he cries to the foolish Galatians, "This only would I learn from you, Received ye the Spirit by works of law or by the hearing of faith?" (Gal. iii. 2). They had received the Spirit: of that, both he and they were sure. And they had sought Him, not by works of law, but out of faith: that too they knew very well. Were they so foolish as to be unable to draw the inference thrust upon them, that the seeking that found was the true and right seeking? The Apostle, then, will draw it for them:—"He, therefore, that supplieth the Spirit to you and worketh powers in you, doeth He it by law works or by the hearing of faith? Even as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him unto righteousness. Ye perceive therefore that they which be of faith, the same are Abraham's sons" (Gal. iii. 5-7). An humbler servant of Christ than Paul, and a far earlier one, had indeed long before pressed this argument with matchless force (John ix.). Blind unbelief alone could say to him who once was blind but now did see, "This man was not from God . . . give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." The one, the sufficient answer was, "Whether he be a sinner, I know not; one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see. . . . Why,

herein is the marvel, that ye know not whence He is, and He opened mine eyes!" Greater marvel than the opening of the eyes of one born blind, that men should shut their eyes to who, and what, and whence He is, who opens blind eyes: "If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing." What, after all, is "the argument from experience" but an extension of our Lord's favourite argument from the fruits to the tree which bears the fruits? He who is producing the fruits of the Spirit has received the Spirit; he who is reaping the fruits of justification has received justification; and he who has received these fruits by the seeking of faith, knows that he has received out of faith the justification of which they are the fruits, and may know therefore that the way of faith is the right and true way of receiving justification. We must not pause in the midst of the argument and refuse to draw the final conclusion. If the presence of the fruits of justification proves that we are justified; the presence of the justification thus proved, proves that justification is found on the road by which we reached it. This is the Apostle's argument.

The validity of such an argument lies on the surface. It is useless to tell the famishing wanderer that the pool into which he has dipped his cup is but a mirage of the desert, when the refreshing fluid is already moistening his parched lips. Nevertheless, the validity of the argument has its implications; and this is as much as to say that it rests on presuppositions without which it would not be valid. Men may draw water from a well and be content with this practical proof that the pump yields water, without stopping to consider the theory of suction by which the pump acts. But no pump will yield water if it be not constructed in accordance with the principles of suction: and the understanding of these principles not merely increases the intelligence but also adds to the confidence with which we credit the refreshing floods to its gift. In a somewhat

analogous way Paul's argument from experience will grow in force in proportion to the clearness with which its implications are apprehended and the heartiness with which they are accepted. What are these implications?

In the first place, it is implied in this argument, that there is a natural adaptation in the mode of salvation which he is commending to us for the production of peace and joy in the heart of the sinner who embraces it. Whoever seeks justification by faith will find peace and joy; but this could not be if this mode of salvation had no natural adaptation to produce peace and joy; and the perception of this adaptation, while not necessary to receiving its benefits, will greatly increase the confidence with which we assign the benefits received to their proper source. No doubt the peace which steals into the heart and the exultation which cannot keep silence upon the lips of him who is justified out of faith, are the work of the Holy Spirit in his soul. But there is a distinction between the efficient cause and the formal ground of our emotions. The Holy Spirit does not here, any more than elsewhere, work a blind, an ungrounded, an irrational set of emotions in the heart. A set of emotions arising in the soul no one knows whence, no one knows on what grounds, especially if they were persistent and in proportion as they were strong, would only vex and puzzle the soul. A rational account of them must be possible if they are to be probative of anything. The mode of justification propounded by God through the Apostle is one which is adapted to the actual condition of man: one which is calculated to allay his sense of guilt, to satisfy his accusing conscience, and to supply him with a rational ground of conviction of acceptance with God and of hope for the future. It is because this mode of justification is thus adapted to provide a solid ground for peace and joy to the rational understanding that those who seek justification thus and not otherwise, under the quickening influences

of the Spirit, acquire a sense of peace with God and an exalting hope for the future. And it is only because these Spirit-framed emotions thus attach themselves rationally to the mode of justification by faith, that they can point to it as their source and prove that they who have sought their justification by faith have surely found.

The gist of the matter, then, is that the justification which comes out of faith is experienced as actual justification and bears its appropriate fruits, because it alone, of all the methods by which men have sought to obtain peace with God, is adapted to satisfy the conscience and to supply a sufficient ground of conviction of acceptance with God. How many ways there are in which men vainly seek peace, need not be enumerated here: by works, by repentance, by offerings to God of precious possessions or of dedicated lives. They give no peace, because men can find in them no sufficient ground for confidence that they are accepted by God. When they have performed all of which they are capable, they recognise that they are but unprofitable servants. The soul's fierce condemnation of itself in its awakened sense of sin cannot instil peace into the soul. They know that the judgment of God is true and righteous altogether. It is only on the ground of an adequate expiation of sin and a perfect righteousness, wrought out by a person capable of bearing to the uttermost the penalty and fulfilling to the uttermost the requirement of the law, and justly made ours, that conscience may be appeased and peace once more visit the guilty soul. This is what Paul offers in his doctrine of justification by faith. And observe how the whole Epistle on to this fifth chapter operates like a bent bow to give force to the appeal to personal experience which is there shot like an arrow into the soul, and to evoke an immediate and deep response. For what is that proof with which the Epistle opens, that all men are sinners and under the

wrath of God, but a faithful probing of conscience, awakening it to a sense of guilt and to a consciousness of helplessness? And what is that explanation of God's method of justification by means of a righteousness provided in Christ, laid hold of by faith, with which the third chapter closes, but a loving presentation of the work of Christ to the apprehension of faith? And what is that exposition of the Old Testament narrative of the acceptance of Abraham, the father of the faithful, with which the fourth chapter is occupied, but a gracious assurance that it is thus that God deals with His children? And what now is this appeal to his readers' own experience as they have humbly sought God's forgiveness and acceptance out of faith in Christ, but an assault upon their hearts that they may be forced to realize all the satisfaction they have found in believing in Christ? It is to this satisfaction that the Apostle now appeals in evidence of the reality of the justification of which it is the fruit. The argument is from the internal peace to the external peace. You have sought justification out of faith, he says in effect; you have appropriated the work of Jesus Christ; you rest upon Him; and your conscience at last says, It is enough. Your guilty pangs and fears subside, and the serenity of peace and the exultation of hope take their place. Is not this new-found satisfaction of conscience a proof of the reality of your justification? This is the Apostle's argument.

There is yet a deeper implication in the argument which we would do well explicitly to recognise, in order that we may feel its full force. External peace with God is inferred from internal peace of conscience. This involves the assumption that the deliverances of the human conscience are but shadows of the divine judgment, that its imperatives repeat the demands of God's righteousness and its satisfaction argues the satisfaction of His justice. Such an assump-

tion can scarcely be called in question ; for were this correspondence not actual, no valid peace could ever visit the human heart, no grounded hope could ever brighten its outlook upon the future. If our moral sense were so entirely out of analogy with the moral sense of God that what fully meets and satisfies that indignation which rises in us upon the realization of sin as sin should stand so wholly out of relation with God's moral sense as to leave it unmoved, we should be utterly incapacitated to know God, and the foundation of morality and religion alike for us would be destroyed. If there be a God at all, the Author of our moral nature, it is just as certain as His existence that the moral judgment which He has implanted in us is true to its pole in the depths of His own moral being ; that its deliverances are but the transcripts of His own moral judgments ; and that we may hearken to its voice with the assurance that it is but the echo of His decision. The sense of guilt by which the awakened conscience accuses us, speeding on into the remorse that bites back so fiercely on the sinking soul, is but the reflection of God's judgment against sin. But this could not be if an appeased conscience were not the reflection of God's judgment of acquittal. For if conscience could cease to accuse, while God continued to condemn, it would no longer be true that God's condemnation is repeated in our accusing conscience, and our sense of guilt is but the shadow of his overhanging wrath. Conscience must be conceived, therefore, as a mirror hung in the human breast, upon which man may read the reflection of the Divine judgment upon himself. When frowns of a just anger conceal His face, the clouds gather upon its polished surface : and surely when those shades pass away and the unclouded sun gleams once more from its surface, it cannot be other than the reflection of God's smile. Certainly a peace which is so firmly grounded as the reality of this correspondence is rooted so deeply in the nature of

man that humanity itself must perish before that peace can be taken away.

We seem now to have Paul's argument fully before us. Man's conscience reflects God's judgment upon the soul. What satisfies man's conscience satisfies God's justice. Paul's presentation to faith of an expiating and obedient God-man, paying the penalty of our sin and keeping probation before God's law in our stead, satisfies the demands of conscience. The peace that steals into the heart of him who rests upon this Saviour in faith, and the joy that exults upon his lips as he contemplates standing in Him before the judgment-seat of God, are but the proper emotions of the satisfied conscience, and as such are the proof to us that God's wrath is really appeased, His condemnation reversed, and His face turned upon us in loving acceptance in His beloved Son. Lastly, then, His experience of peace and joy is an irrefutable proof that this and no other is the just God's method of justifying the sinner.

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