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THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS: A STUDY.

BY THE RIGHT REV. E. A. KNOX, D.D.

THE old saying ran "Speak that I may see thee." The modern demand is "Let me see thee, that I may hear thee." A photograph of the writer is almost indispensable for the success of an Article or Open Letter. But who shall procure us a photograph of St. Paul? Our nearest approach to it is in the Acts of Paul and Thekla—a document of the latter half of the second century: "A man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, bald-headed, bow-legged, strongly built, full of grace, for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel." This likeness St. Paul reduces, quoting his adversaries' words, to the brief comment, "his bodily presence is weak." Is it a matter of any importance?

Careful readers of 2 Corinthians, who wish to discover the kind of criticism to which that letter is a reply will not think it unimportant. For the great difficulty in understanding the Epistle is the want of any definite clue to the conditions which evoked it. True, it is an assertion of St. Paul's apostolic authority. But on what grounds were his opponents questioning that authority? There is no trace of the parties of Apollos and Cephas, which we find in the first Epistle. There is a Christ-party, apparently furnished with letters from eyewitnesses of our Lord's ministry: men who were preaching another Jesus, another Spirit, and another gospel. But on the contents of that gospel we have no light. They were making money out of it (ii. 17), even swindling over it (ii. 2), and attributing St. Paul's free preaching to a consciousness that his message was unauthorized, and worth no more than what he asked for it (xi. 7 and xii. 16). These charges, for what they were worth, had already been dealt with in the first Epistle. Now we are on the track, not so much of a school—though several were implicated as being false Apostles and emissaries of Satan (xi. 14)—but rather on the track of some special wrongdoer (vii. 12), whose offence has been outrageous and personal—St. Paul is undoubtedly "the wronged one" (vii. 12). This malicious opponent has drawn from the Apostle a letter so bitter, and so involving the whole Church in his offence, that there is grave reason to fear that a permanent breach has been made between the converts and their teacher. In his restlessness and distress (vii. 5) the Apostle has been unable even to take advantage of a favourable opening for preaching the gospel in Troas (ii. 12), and has, under feverish anxiety, been even at death's door (i. 9). The disturbing effect of this antagonism is not to be equalled in any other part of the Apostle's life. The care of all the Churches was a daily burden (xii. 28). The folly of the Galatians, the nearest parallel, was heartbreaking enough.

But there was no one who so nearly killed St. Paul by his work as this Corinthian offender. We cannot read the letter without trying to form some conception of the nature of his attack. But the letter throws no direct light upon it. We are left to conjecture.

Before proceeding to do so we must notice, however briefly, the suggestion that 2 Corinthians is a composite letter, a MS. combination, some say, of three letters, others of two. There is no authority for the suggestion in any MS. extant. It is losing favour in Germany, the home of its origin. It depends largely on the marked difference of tone and attitude of the portion before chapter ix. from the part that follows: the first part full of joy and confidence in the Corinthians, the second indignant, severe, menacing. The difference is not imaginary. If we were compelled to believe that the whole letter was dictated at a single session it would be inexplicable. But there is no such necessity. An interval, even of days, between the two parts is quite possible. Was the change of tone, then, due to fresh tidings from Corinth, or to some alteration in the Apostle's condition? As there is no evidence for the former hypothesis, we must fall back on the latter. But is such an explanation consistent with the idea of inspiration? Those who repudiate it, must reconcile 2 Corinthians ix.—end with 1 Corinthians xiii. Beyond a doubt St. Paul wrote both. He, who denounced false Apostles transforming themselves into angels of light, wrote also of the love that beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. We may dislike the idea of moods or mental states in an inspired writer. We may hold that the occasion justified the vehemence of the indictment. If so, we need not refuse to accept the idea of inspiration working even in a body shattered by illness, and in a mind suffering from severe prostration.

Now Sir W. M. Ramsay, in his *Church in the Roman Empire*, writes (p. 63): "A bad attack of malarial fever, such as we suppose to have befallen St. Paul in Pamphylia, could not be described better than in the words in which Lightfoot . . . sums up the physical infirmity implied in the Epistle" (to the Galatians): "'A return of his old malady, 'the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet him,' some sharp and violent attack it would appear which humiliated him and prostrated his physical strength'". "I appeal" (continues Ramsay) "to all who have experience, whether this is not a singular and apt description of that fever, which has such an annoying and tormenting habit of catching one by the heel in the midst of some great effort, and on the eve of some serious crisis, when all one's energies are specially needed." In the second half of the Epistle St. Paul seems almost pointedly to suggest the presence of this tormenting foe, paralysing him at the end of chapter viii., turning all his sunshine into cloud, and especially bitter because of the triumph which it gave to his adversary and his adversary's followers, because of its affording them the advantage of pressing home their accusations that a man who could not miraculously heal himself of this tormenting ailment could not be an Apostle of

God. The connexion of disease with Divine disfavour was still deeply rooted in popular imagination. Also, we must not forget the popular worship of Aesculapius and the miracles claimed for his power. Have we not extant a tablet of Imperial date in which a certain Apella, using the very same phrase as St. Paul, says, "I besought the Lord" (i.e. Aesculapius) "and he healed me"? Paul's fervent beseeching brought him indeed a message of peace, a message for all time, but it did not bring him healing. His adversary would not fail to drive home the contrast as proof of St. Paul's lack of Apostolic authority.

From this point of view an attack on St. Paul's bodily appearance accompanied by scathing criticisms on his ailment ceases to be a purely personal affair. It has been said very truly that the idea of his resenting any such personal attack shows a radical misunderstanding of his character. That is quite true: It would be true also to say that no such attack could have been a theme for inspiration. On the other hand place the Apostle, in a city of athletes, in a city of noble statues modelled on noble figures, a city of sharp and caustic wit, and we shall feel a new force in the words "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." Amid these statuesque Corinthians St. Paul moves as a bit of rough pottery destined for the rubbish heap. "What can there be more pitiful than an earthen potsherd?" The prophet in his emphatic irony could think of no image more apt to describe man's nothingness than that of "a potsherd among potsherds." "Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! a potsherd among the potsherds of the earth" (Isaiah xlv. 9). A perishable potsherd by the side of immortal marbles! Yes, and that potsherd scarred and defaced by scourging, stoning, fasting, shipwreck, by every form of peril and pain that could deface a man's body, tortured by malignant disease, and wasting day by day. If you follow the letter closely you will constantly come upon fresh indignities which the Apostle heaps on his poor worn-out and haggard frame. But for all that he claims that even now it is lit up by glory, greater than that which rested on the face of Moses, glory of the Lord, brilliant and increasing. "We with unveiled face reflecting the glory of the Lord are being changed from glory to glory." "At times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel."

The poor potsherd reflecting heavenly glory! But there was more to be said. This earthly body was awaiting a moment in which it would be swallowed up in an eternal and renovated heavenly body, a moment when the mortal should put on immortality. The phrases recall, of course, the fifteenth chapter of the first Epistle. But they do more. They suggest that the disbelievers in the resurrection of the body had pointed to the poor "potsherd," and made mock of the resurrection of such a poor body as that. So the personal attack, the caricature, it may be, had become an attack on doctrine, on a dearly prized hope, on the very foundation of faith. For "if in this life only we have hope, we are of all men most miserable." The Greek hope of immortality was almost

anathema to the Apostle—the idea, that is, of a disembodied soul wandering for ever in regions of gloom, and cut off from all that share of personality which attaches to the body. Nor is he content with a period of unconscious waiting for the coming of the Lord, which the Corinthians may have inferred, as some even now infer it, from his first Epistle. “Asleep to the world we are,” yet “at home with the Lord.” Parted from the body we are utterly, not disembodied but clothed upon with the heavenly body. For the believer death is a defeated foe. His falling asleep to earth is a waking to glory.

A brief résumé of the allusions to the body, the flesh, and bodily appearance in this Epistle cannot fail to enforce the suggestion that *the adversary*, as distinct from parties and factions, the adversary whose attack had called forth the severe letter, had envenomed his attack on the resurrection of the dead by contemptuous reference to St. Paul’s bodily appearance and disfigurements, and illnesses. From the allusion in the very first chapter to “God Who raises the dead,” we pass on to “the veil on the face of Moses,” to the “unveiled reflection of Christ in the believer’s countenance,” to “the earthen potsherds,” the “bearing about in the *body* the dying of Jesus,” the “manifestation in our *bodies* of the life of Jesus,” its “manifestation again in our mortal flesh,” the “wasting of the outer man,” the “earthly dwelling of this tabernacle,” “we that are in this tabernacle,” while “we are at home in this tabernacle,” the “receiving of the awards for things done in the body,” “knowing Christ after the flesh,” the “allusions to stripes and imprisonments,” the “putting away pollution of the flesh,” the “lowly bodily appearance of the Apostle,” who though “he walks in the flesh does not war according to the flesh”; once more “the weakness of his bodily appearance,” his determination “to boast, as others do, according to the flesh,” the return to the “exceeding sufferings of beatings, scourgings, stonings,” to the “visions received whether out of the body or in the body,” and finally “to the thorn in the flesh.” It is undeniable that this theme of the body, not in a generalized way as in other Epistles, but with close and constant reference to St. Paul’s own body, runs as a connecting thread through the whole letter. There are fifteen references in the first half to seven in the second. Indeed, this thread is only absent in the chapters about the collection, and in the conclusion. Apart from these it is interwoven with every part of the Apostle’s argument. It is hardly ever absent from his mind. In this respect the second Epistle to the Corinthians is quite unique. Can we account for these references to his own body, evidently most distasteful to St. Paul otherwise than by connecting them with the attack made on him? Or is there any better method of explaining first, the violent reaction against the offender that followed the receipt of the sharp epistle, and the complete and prompt forgiveness—to whom ye forgive, I forgive also—and the fear that punishment had been overdone. It is not easy to agree with commentators who hold that it was some grave moral sin,

in respect of which St. Paul pleaded for a lighter punishment, passed over so quickly upon repentance.

While, however, the foreground of the Epistle is occupied by this arch-agitator and his misdeeds, now happily past, forgiven and forgotten, there stand behind him the Judaizing opponents who dog the Apostle's footsteps from Church to Church. They are distinct from the Jewish colony, which St. Paul had exasperated by shaking out his garment and crying, "Your blood be on you and on your children." Over these had been won a conspicuous victory when Gallio drove them from his judgment seat and thereby gave a charter of toleration to Christianity at Corinth. These were the men who plotted to kill him, and forced him to alter the course of his journey. Quite distinct from these were the Judaizers who came with letters of commendation, probably from Jerusalem, preaching another Jesus and another gospel. Haughtily and not without violence they thrust themselves into another man's mission-field. They boasted their Apostolic commission, their personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. They transformed themselves into Apostles of Christ, and plundered the congregation as a sign of their Apostolic authority. To exhaust the story of their wrong-doing is unnecessary and unprofitable. It is enough. Our attention must be fastened on the reason of St. Paul's strenuous opposition to them. No specific doctrinal error is alleged against them, such as insistence on circumcision, or observance of the law of Moses, though a passage in the third chapter points in that direction. Still that passage is probably directed rather against the Jews than against the Judaizers. There is none of the combative Rabbinic argument which we find in the Epistles to the Galatians and Romans. We hear more of the men, of their doings, and of their character than of their doctrine. The Apostle silences them by enunciation of a profound, positive truth, which occupies the centre of his Epistle, the very heart and core of his message to Corinth. Let us hear it first in the Apostle's own words.

"Whether we be mad, it is to God, or are sane, it is for you. For the love which Christ displayed constrains us, deeming, as we do, that one died for all. Then all died. And He died for all that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him Who died and rose again. So that henceforth we know no one after the flesh (i.e., by any personal distinction or rank). Yea, even though we have known Christ after the flesh (as the Master and Teacher of His disciples on earth), yet now we know Him in that capacity no more. So that, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is past. Behold it has become new. And the whole is from God Who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation, to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not reckoning to them their transgressions, and putting in our mouths the message of reconciliation. On Christ's behalf, therefore, are we deputies, as though God were entreating you through us, we pray you, be reconciled to God. Him that knew not sin, for our sakes He

made sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

We are told sometimes that St. Paul did scanty justice to his Judaizing opponents—that his teaching must have appeared to them an encouragement of lawlessness—almost of sin. We are reminded of the grave disorders in this very Church of Corinth, the daring licentiousness, the drunkenness at their Eucharists, the party strife, the disorderly public worship. To Jewish Christians (so it is said), brought up under the discipline of the Law, and regarding it as their fence and protection against the criminal self-indulgence of surrounding Hellenism, St. Paul's attitude to the law must have come perilously near to blasphemy. Could He, Who insisted on a righteousness exceeding the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, be satisfied with a standard that hardly rose above the Gentile level? Ought it to be said of Christians, as the writer of the Epistle to Diognetus said, not long after St. Paul's time: "Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor by language, nor by customs. For nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, nor do they make use of any exceptional dialect, nor do they practise a conspicuous mode of life." They had not even a Ghetto to preserve them from the contamination of the world.

Now St. Paul's answer to all such accusations as this is plain enough. "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers, for what share hath righteousness with lawlessness, or what fellowship hath light with darkness? What agreement hath Christ with Belial, or what portion hath a believer with an unbeliever? And what covenant hath God with idols? For we are a shrine of the living God."

St. Paul's quarrel with the Judaizers was not because of their demand for a high moral standard, but because they set and were satisfied with an attainable standard, and an attainable standard must always become a conventional standard, and again a conventional standard means an otiose or dead God. St. Paul was on fire with the living God. "In Him we live, and move, and have our being." It was in reality, and St. Paul knew that it was, a battle between life and death. Hence the violence of his opposition to the Judaizers. Whatever letters of commendation they may have brought, they were not true emissaries of the Apostles at Jerusalem. With Peter and John and the rest of the Apostolic College, St. Paul was in full agreement. But these emissaries of Satan under cover of the dead Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, were restoring a racial Judaism. They boasted of their being Hebrews, Israelites, the seed of Abraham. They would have made their proselytes tenfold children of Gehenna, under pretence of making them Jews.

Against these impostors St. Paul raised the standard of a living, loving God in a living, loving Christ: not loving in the sense of making light of sin, for in that case He would have been no God at all. He preached a God Who is Love, and Who carried Love to its furthest act of self-sacrifice, that is of self-identification with sinners through the Incarnate Christ. Not that St. Paul used these long abstract nouns in which we reason out our theology. He was

not a professor of theology, but the *Legatus* of God. Slave of Christ, Apostle of Christ, he rises to a higher title now. He is the *deputy* of the living God, charged with an embassy from Him, an embassy of love, an urgent embassy—"to-day." "Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation." Listen then to this ministry of reconciliation. God was in Christ, and made Him to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The righteousness of God. The Law and the Prophets had confronted the world with a living God of infinite holiness—a God Who stood out in sublime contrast with the impure Gods of the Graeco-Roman world. The tidings of that God found their way through men like Seneca (the brother of Gallio at Corinth) into the Imperial Palace, and the homes of the aristocracy, and through the synagogue and its proselytizing activity into the *forum* and the *agora*. Side by side with the lofty, unapproachable majesty of Jehovah acting upon the heathen conscience, there came also the message of the mystery religions insisting on the necessity of purification from sin. But there was wanting the message of reconciliation between the All Holy Jehovah, and the sin-burdened conscience of a world sick to death of its own profligacy, and swift to discern the imposture of the relief held out by the mysteries. Into that world came the Legatus of God, the persecuted, ugly little Jew, with the face "now of a man and now of an angel." He came proclaiming Christ crucified, in Whom all died, for the Cross was the death sentence of a world of sinners: proclaiming also Christ risen and living, that they who rise with Him from the death of sin should henceforth live not unto themselves, but unto Him that died and rose again. But the gospel was more, far more, than a call or motive to unselfishness. Motives have no power over a nature that cannot respond to them. They even irritate and exasperate as suggestions from without. How often has the world witnessed the tragedy of an unselfish mother mourning over selfish children! The gospel was a gospel of power, the gospel of a Redeemer, and that, a gospel which made its appeal specially to the poorest. A. Deissman points out how the titles of Christ were all such as "could domicile in the souls of the poor and the simple." But even he, in a very stirring passage on this theme, falls short of the sublimity of the message of "the righteousness of God." For this is a message which transforms a world of failure into a world of triumphs. Against the tragic ruin of ancient civilization, and equally against the facile optimism of a God Who, as Bernard Shaw tells us, is blundering out on the road of evolution to a far distant success, this message of the righteousness of God gives us the All Holy God, saying to our poor sinful souls to-day: "All that is Mine is thine," thine by right of union with Me in Him Who was made sin for thee, thine by the indwelling power of His Spirit. For the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

It is impossible, within the limits of such a paper as this, to do justice to the wonderful conception of the Atonement contained in this passage. In a few words, volumes of criticism and objection

are met and set aside. Is it argued that the idea of Atonement is the placating of an angry God? St. Paul answers God was in Christ. The God of Love not only gave His only begotten Son, but was in Him in the act of redemption. Or is it objected that the substitution of the innocent for the guilty is immoral? Again St. Paul answers that what is called substitution should rather be called identification. Christ died for all, because He died with all making their sins His own. He made the sin of the world His own, not by becoming sinful, for He knew no sin, but by sharing with us all that sin entailed, and draining to the dregs the cup of separation from God. Yet was God in Christ even when He made Christ to be sin for us. Do men scoff at a doctrine of imputed righteousness? St. Paul answers that we become the righteousness of God in Christ: not apart from Him as outsiders watching an unreal transaction, but we become the righteousness of God by a vivid experience of the unreality of any righteousness that we can offer, and by acceptance of the righteousness of Christ, a gift which entails the putting on of Christ. The garment of Christian righteousness is ours not that we may boast of it, or store it away for use in Heaven, but that we may wear it here and now. The whole gospel is in these few lines and we can never regret the heart agony out of which this Epistle was won.

We may well pause and ask ourselves what we know of this experience, of which John Bunyan wrote as follows:

“One day as I was passing in the field, and that too with some dashes of Conscience, fearing lest yet all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, Thy righteousness is in Heaven; and methought withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God’s right hand. There I saw was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, He wants my righteousness, for that was just before Him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, the same yesterday and to-day and forever. Now did my chains fall from my legs indeed; I was loosed from my affliction and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures left off to trouble me; now went I home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.”

Space does not permit us to follow out the working of this theme in reference to the collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem. It is enough to notice that the contribution is treated from first to last as a question of grace. The grace that was in Christ Jesus, Who, though He was rich, for our sakes became poor, wrought in the Churches of Achaia, so that they gave themselves to God first, and consequently out of the depths of their poverty were rich in liberality. That same grace God was able to make to abound to the Corinthians, that they having all sufficiency for all things might abound to every good work. We have a hint here that the collection for the Jerusalem saints was only one of many charitable activi-

ties in the primitive Church—and, possibly, in a Gentile Church the least popular. Undoubtedly the season of St. Paul's unpopularity had affected it adversely, and he is conscious that nothing short of a miracle of grace will revive it.

Here we must part from the Church at Corinth. The attempt to bring from the obscurity in which St. Paul deliberately buried them those adversaries, who forced from him this Apologia, has left on our minds an unduly unfavourable impression of the Church as a whole. We must not forget that the Corinthian Christians were living Epistles read and known of all men, letters from God in the midst of an impure, avaricious and dishonest city. On their hearts, tables of flesh, were inscribed the message of God, as legibly and plainly as were Imperial rescripts engraved on stone. For them were penned our earliest tradition of the Eucharist, the Hymn of Love, the Ode of the Resurrection, and the marvellous gospel in miniature on which we have been dwelling. The Church for which these were written can never fail to stand high in the annals of Christendom. "Annihilated for ever, the magnificence of Nero's Corinth lies buried to-day beneath silent rubbish mounds and green vineyards on the terraces between the mass of the Acro-Corinthus and the shore of the shining Gulf: nothing but ruin, ghastly remnants, destruction. The words of paeans (i.e., 1 Cor. xiii.), however, have outlived the marble and the bronze of the Empire, because they had an unassailable refuge in the secret depths of the soul of the people" (A. Deissman, *Light from the East*, p. 391). The weary, wayworn, storm-tossed world is hunting for those inscriptions on our hearts and lives to-day.

The Rev. G. R. Balleine's books of Sunday School Lessons, issued by "Home Words" Printing & Publishing Co., are so well known to all interested in Sunday School work that they need no commendation. His exceptional gifts in the compilation of helpful guidance for teachers have contributed greatly to improve the standard of teaching in our Sunday Schools. The series of lessons for this year is on "God and Ourselves," and presents the many excellent features which have already made its predecessors the favourite handbooks in so many schools. The lessons are divided into four series—the Unveiling of God, the Proof of our Love, Some Gifts of God, Adventuring with God.

At the request of the Church Book Room his series of lessons on the Acts of the Apostles has been reprinted. It is one of the most popular of these books. Although there are fewer illustrations drawn from outside sources, the narrative of the Acts provides all the incidents that are required to give the lessons the vividness and interest necessary to retain the attention of the young people. Practical advice, the outcome of long experience, is given which will be specially helpful to teachers who are new to the work. The course is arranged for a year.