

## PART III

### GOD

#### XI

#### THE FULFILMENT OF THE PLAN

THE GOSPEL STEMS FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT. ACCORDING to Heb. 1: 1-2 the same God speaks in both, and does so in continuance of a single objective. "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds." In the Gospel we have the full expression of God's Word: Old Testament history is therein evangelically fulfilled, Old Testament prophecy historically realized. True, we style the book containing the message "The New Testament," or, to give the full title, "The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," and this presupposes that the Old has been superseded by the New. This supersession, however, is not (like that of the Levitical system with its outward ordinances) one of complete abandonment but of fulfilment. We do not, for instance, now offer animal sacrifices in Divine service, but we *do* still read our Old Testament, which remains a living contemporary witness to the truth of the Gospel.

Hope is basic to the Old Testament. Before Christ, faith rested in promised mercy. Though man had fallen, he was not abandoned to despair. Promise, therefore, is the keynote to the whole book, whether psalm or chronicle, vision or lamentation, statute or prophecy. The ultimate end is salvation. The Old Testament has therefore been called a *Heilsgeschichte*, or history of salvation. Because the subjugation of evil is a necessary condition to this end, the Old Testament has much to say about the Divine judgments, and these have perhaps as a consequence been too exclusively regarded as the grand *raison d'être* of prophecy. Yet the prophets themselves, speaking in the name of the Lord, reveal that judgment is God's "strange work" (Isa. 28: 21), that He delights in mercy, and willeth not the death of any. Again and again, above the thunder of threatened doom rise pleading words of earnest solicitude, "Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die?": "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55: 7).

The characteristic attitude of the Old Testament is a stretching out of the hands toward a day to come when the curse of sin would be removed, God's kingdom be established on earth, and God Himself dwell in grace among men. Promise upon promise is given, and these renewed and confirmed time after time, until a great and comforting Messianic hope, extending over centuries and upholding the expectation of succeeding generations, was born in the hearts of God's people. There is in this a magnificence of scale, worthy of Him who inspired it, and matching the universal blessing that it pledges. Though in human reckoning long-delayed, His mercy endureth for ever. God had not left His world. The slow processional march of time, as God develops His dealings with mankind, is made to subserve this ultimate purpose of salvation for the whole world. In the fulness of time Christ came, and the long night, lit only by hope's bright candle, gave way to the shining radiance of the day of salvation. The Dayspring from on high had visited us. The darkness was past, and the true light now shining. Men could say one to another, "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

In this sense, therefore, more than in any other, the Old Testament has been fulfilled in the New. Prophecies do not exist in isolation or obscure the grand purpose behind each of them, God's desire to save and bless mankind. Even the prophet Jonah, commissioned to threaten in unrelieved terms God's judgment upon Nineveh, knew something of this when he said, upon God's reversal of doom, "I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? . . . for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and full of compassion, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy, and repentest thee of the evil." The whole Old Testament is but the grand prolegomena to John 3: 16—"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." So viewed, the Old Testament exhibits a unity of hope and promise, and in a complex diversity of ways, conditioned to the spiritual needs of mankind over an extended range of time, illustrates the largeness and enduring strength of God's mercy.

Salvation is man's ultimate need; not only salvation from the frustrations and disabilities of life, but in an altogether deeper sense, salvation from sin, with all that sin connotes and involves. This being so, only that which reveals such salvation can give satisfaction and meaning to life. Lesser satisfactions may indeed tempt us, and we may rest in them without realizing that we are missing something of first importance, but sooner or later these

lesser lights will flicker out, and if we are left without the true light, we shall find ourselves in utter darkness. The whole discipline of life is meant to force us back upon this fact. The one thing needful is to have our relationship with God restored and to come into the personal experience of His saving grace in Christ. Other things then, without losing their relative values, fall into harmony and proportion, and contribute in their degree to the glory of God.

Salvation comes out of justice, and God's delight in it springs from His own character. The Old Testament bears constant witness to the LORD's hatred of tyranny, and to the fact that He hears the cry of the downtrodden. The great judgments of the Old Testament are connected with the fall of tyrants like Pharaoh and Sennacherib, and of oppressor nations like Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia. These outward deliverances of history are so wrought as to reveal God in His saving character, and are taken as symbols of salvation on a higher and spiritual level. For man is under the oppression of sin, and is helpless to save himself. The parallel may be extended to include the attitude of the oppressed, who see in their affliction a Divine judgment upon their own guilt. Groaning after relief from distress, they know it can only come through sin being forgiven. The actual deliverance is the outward token of this. Thus when deliverance comes the people look on it from this angle, and exclaim that "the Lord had passed by the transgression of His people." Yet this forgiveness is not simply an act of amnesty. It takes the total situation into account, exposes the righteous necessities of the case, and by meeting these, achieves salvation. This then is enjoyed as much as an act of justice as of lenience. Mercy and truth unite: righteousness and peace are reconciled.

Sin is borne and forgiven. If God's righteous Servant is able to justify many it is because "He shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53: 11). The deepest conviction of the Christian is that Christ "bore our sins in his body upon the tree" (I Pet. 2: 24). This bearing of sin carries a wealth of meaning, and includes full sympathy and identification with suffering man ("Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows"), strict regard to the requirements of Divine justice, self-sacrifice, ultimate victory over all the consequences of sin, including death, and, most of all, voluntary endurance of whatever penalties sin had brought upon us. Language must here necessarily use the form of symbol, for the reality transcends all speech, but this does not mean that the language so used is not valid, or that it does not convey something that is real to the human soul. Grasping at something glimpsed in its essence language is enriched by symbol, not impoverished.

So in seeking to proclaim the mystery of the atonement the Christian preacher rightly uses the language of the market-place, the vocabulary of ancient ceremonial, and metaphors drawn from the prison house, to express what in itself is transcendental truth, too high for human utterance.

Salvation, though in its initial experience individual, leads to a sense of communal blessing. This feeling of spiritual solidarity with God's people of all times and of all places, a strong consciousness of universality surmounting all that is merely local in time and place, is one of the deepest instincts of Christian experience, and is confirmed in the general implications of Biblical thought. The godly Israelite of olden time fulfilled his service toward God within the chosen community. The constant language of his heart was, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing within thy gates, O Jerusalem" (Psa. 122: 1-2), and again, "I will praise him among the multitude" (Psa. 109: 30). Though the Psalms strike a peculiarly personal and inward note in human experience, it is an experience shared in common with others, leading to joint praise and worship. To belong to the chosen people was salvation: to be excommunicate from them was to be cast out from God's presence. This instinctive hold upon community was retained by early believers in New Testament times, and found its satisfaction in the fellowship of the Church. Salvation to them was not only something individually experienced, but that which they shared in common with all who had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. In this broad sense the Cyprianic formula, "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*," has more than a measure of justification, and does no violence to truth—only, *ecclesia* must be taken in its original and Scriptural sense and not confined to any outward organization bearing the name Catholic in any of its forms, or, indeed, to any other system which does not implicitly include all who belong to Christ. It is only "with all saints" (Eph. 3: 18) that we shall come to grasp in all its dimensions God's dealings in grace. And is not the consummation of joy in the kingdom of God spoken of as "sitting down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob" in that kingdom? (Matt. 8: 11). We are not wandering stars isolated in the firmament of grace, but have our orbit in the ordered constellations of spiritual being, though by reason of our present limited vision we may not yet see this in full perspective.

Heaven's highest praise is communal. "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 1: 5-6). Ancient hymns maintain this tradition, notably the *Te Deum*

*Laudamus*, uniting as it does the common praise of the Church with that of "the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and the noble army of martyrs." Their use may decline into mere outward formalism, but is in itself wholesome and sound. In the event of such decline, reaction to individual experience may restore the balance. During periods of evangelical revival, when personal feeling becomes intense, song not unnaturally turns to fervent expression of individual faith: the hymnology of Charles Wesley and other Evangelicals illustrates this. Many of our favourite English hymns, as, for example, "Rock of ages, cleft for me," "Jesus, Lover of my soul," "Come, O Thou Traveller unknown," "Sun of my soul, Thou Saviour dear," and "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide," like many of the Psalms, touch those depths of personal experience in which the soul finds itself standing alone in the presence of God. We instinctively cling to their use: rightly so, for they enshrine that moment of crisis when the soul bursts out of the darkness of sin into the freedom and glory of eternal life. But in their exclusive use may there not rise a danger of self-centred preoccupation with our own personal blessing and happiness to the neglect of privileges and responsibilities entailed in our being fellow-members with others in the body of Christ? The noblest Christian hymns are those in which hearts and minds unite in communal praise, when individual adherence to Christ becomes merged in the fellowship of the Christian congregation. Such praise makes vocal our part in the great prophetic drama of the ages, and magnifies the glory of Him who has so wrought for the blessing and salvation of men.

There is something deeply satisfying in the thought that salvation not only brings us into a right personal relationship with our Creator and Redeemer, but that it relates us in a very vital way with the sum of things being worked out in time and space, and in particular with the Divine purpose expressed in human history. Such an outlook gives Christian faith proportion and balance, deflates pride, and promotes within us a due realization of our modest place in that great multitude which no man can number. Most of all, it magnifies Christ, who is thus recognized in His fulness as expressed in His members. He is seen, not only to *be* all, but to be *in* all, to be ALL in ALL. In the new creation "there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman: but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3: 11). This spiritual kingdom is in being now: its future manifestation will only make visible something veiled as yet to sight but real to faith.