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TENNYSON'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

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Alfred Tennyson is the most representative English poet of the nineteenth century. For this reason the religious beliefs held by him and expressed in his poetry are of peculiar interest to any student of religious thought. But let us endeavor to understand what his beliefs were before undertaking to measure the significance of his holding and teaching them.

We turn first to one of his earliest poems, *The Palace of Art*. Opening with the statement,

"I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,
Wherein at ease for aye to dwell,"

he proceeds to describe this lordly pleasure-house of his soul as furnished with all the treasures of literature and art from all the ages. Then the soul in "Godlike isolation," separating herself from God and from men, whom she despises as "droves of swine," says at last:

"I take possession of man's mind and deed,
I care not what the sects may brawl.
I sit as God holding no form of creed,
But contemplating all."

A SERMON SKETCH

BY REV. A. M. FRASER, D. D.

“He that spared not His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall He not with him also freely give us all things?”—Romans 8:32.

This is as convincing argument as can possibly be addressed to the reason of man. Strange to say, it is on a most perplexing subject, and one on which men need and desire convincing statement. It should therefore be as “a light that shineth in a dark place.”

The subject is the same that troubled David and Moses and Job, and that troubles men to-day. It is the question whether the Power which rules the world is friendly toward men or unfriendly. Granting that an intelligent Being governs the course of nature and providence, is it a benevolent or a malevolent one?

The argument is that God sacrificed His Son for men; or, as Christ expressed it, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And if God so loved the world that He sacrificed His Son for it, how is it possible to withhold any other thing by which that love may be expressed? What infinite repose this should bring to every distressed soul among the people of God! It is “as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” No wonder Paul, with such facts in his mind, could reason in this connection, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.” And no wonder that Christ, who knew the facts more fully, should, with so much confidence, with such yearning for man’s confidence, and with a heart bursting from solicitude because of the unbelief of men, stand in the midst of the suffering and sick and anxious and disappointed and desperate and dying and cry, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” and, “Ye shall

find rest unto your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The Psalmist in his ecstatic eulogy of Zion exclaimed: "Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof; mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces." Let us in the same spirit of reverent admiration go round about this massive argument of Scripture and consider the stones in the structure and the strength and security of the refuge it affords.

I. The first stone in the foundation of the argument is the fact that *God loved His Son*. If God did not love His Son, then the argument amounts to nothing. It was no sacrifice to give him up, and His giving him up proves nothing as to His love for us. God loved His Son—

1st. With a *love grounded in congenial and eternal fellowship*. When human beings are associated together for a long time in a family, as friends in business, as colleagues in the same cause, as co-workers in the same enterprise; and when they are congenial, when there is mutual admiration of each other's character, and similarity of tastes, and each is interested in all that interests the other, there comes to be a powerful affection between them. Their souls are knit together in love. In this respect man is in the image of God. God the Father and God the Son are knit together by congenial and eternal companionship. There is much connected with this whole subject that we cannot comprehend, and can only accept by faith. By faith we learn that, though God is one God, yet there are three persons in the Godhead—the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. These three persons are the same in substance and equal in power and glory; yet they are so distinguishable from each other that each may address the other and love the other. The congeniality then between the Father and the Son is absolute and their communion eternal. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever they had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting, this loving intimacy had existed and their fellowship was blissful. Whatever suggestions, therefore, come to us from our experience of human friendship, grounded in prolonged and affectionate intercourse,

serve to augment our appreciation of the Father's love for the Son of God.

2d. With *parental love*. Paul here speaks of him as God's "own Son." Jesus speaks of himself as the "only begotten Son." Twice the silence of the invisible world was broken, and there came a voice from heaven, the Father's own voice, saying, "This is My beloved Son."

How shall we adequately or satisfactorily portray parental love? Is there a mightier force in human nature than it is? We have stood at the cradle of a first-born and smiled in glad sympathy with the joy and pride and hopes that filled the room with a glow. We have wept by the new-made infant's grave. Our hearts have bled at the story of Abraham and Isaac on that dolorous way to Mt. Moriah; at the story of Hagar and Ishmael in the desert; at the story of Jacob's grief for Joseph; at the story of the ark of bulrushes fashioned by a desperate mother's love; at the story of David's grief for Bathsheba's babe and for Absalom. God loves His Son with parental love. Now, here again, we encounter something that we can not understand, but must accept on faith. We don't understand how there can be a parental love and a filial relation in the Godhead. We know this, however, that when God wished to tell us how He loved the Second Person of the Trinity, there was nothing to be found known to men, nothing in all human experience that comes as near to it as this mighty power, the love of a father or mother for a child. All, therefore, that we know of parental love increases our appreciation of the love of God for the Son of God.

3d. With *infinite love*. We do not know what infinite love means. We are finite and our minds can not hold the thought. But we know what is meant by differences in degrees of love. We say, "I love this friend twice as much as I do that one," or three times as much, or a thousand times as much. But in the case of God's love for His Son the multiplier is infinity and the multiplicand is the strongest love and the most perfect love we can conceive. Take all the love of fellowship and delight, and all the parental love we know, and fuse them into one, and

multiply it all by infinity and we get the love of God for His Son. This, of course, does not convey any definite impression to our minds. But it means this much to us, that when we consider *all we know of love*, the love of God for His Son exceeds it immeasurably, and overlaps and extends beyond it boundlessly in every direction.

II. The second stone in the argument is that God sacrificed this Son for men. He "delivered him up for us all." Paul does not say to what He delivered him. Nor does Christ say in that parallel passage, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." He says, God "gave" His Son, but does not say to what He gave him. Does He mean then that he was "delivered" to death, and "given" to death? Yes, but not to that alone. He was given to whatever was necessary for our salvation. He was given to weariness and watchings, to loneliness and neglect, to grief and sorrow, and pain and privation, to "strong crying and tears," to the achievement of a righteousness and to Gethsemane and Calvary and the tomb. He "*spared* not His own Son." He did not "spare" him. He spares us. He spared even Job. He would not at first allow Satan to touch his person. But when Satan returned so boastful, declaring that Job was even worse than he supposed, that he did not care what happened even to his own children provided you did not interfere with his personal comfort, God allowed him to go further and afflict his person all he wanted. But even then He spared his life. He spares men, He did not spare His Son. Even on the cross, at the supreme crisis of his anguish, He averted His face and closed His ears while His own child was crying from the jaws of hell, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Whatever was necessary for salvation must be done and endured. He "delivered him up," He "gave" him for our salvation. All that you feel when your child is under the surgeon's knife, or is suffering in sickness or from the neglect of the world, or from failure in life or from death, God the Father felt when Christ was undergoing the sacrifice.

We don't understand how God can suffer pain or loss. But one thing is perfectly plain, if language has any meaning. It is that God intends in His word to represent Himself as making a true sacrifice in this matter. Let us accept the fact without trying to comprehend it. And inasmuch as it was God who was making the sacrifice, and the sacrifice was His Son, the magnitude of that sacrifice is infinitely beyond any other instance of sacrifice we ever knew.

III. The third course in the masonry of the argument is that God loves men. Christ so states. Said he, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." Then He is not malevolent, but infinitely benevolent. The Providence which rules the world is not unfriendly, but loving beyond all our power to conceive. He does not despise our infirmities, nor rejoice in our misfortunes, nor willingly afflict, nor take pleasure in our death. He never forgets us. He did not forget Jacob at Bethel, nor Joseph in prison, nor Moses in the wilderness, nor Israel in bondage, nor David in exile, nor Daniel in the lions' den, nor the Hebrew captives in the fiery furnace, nor Paul in the shipwreck, nor John on the Isle of Patmos. Nor will He ever forget any of His people in any of their troubles. His attention to the individual surpasses what it is possible for the individual to bestow upon himself. "The hairs of your head are all numbered." Now, Christ tells us that it was on account of this marvellous love for us that He gave His Son for us. We may not infer, of course, that He loved men more than He loved His Son. It was for the joy that was set before him that Christ endured the cross, despising the shame. Doubtless it was the contemplation of the same joy that made the Father willing that the Son should undergo what he did. He saw Jesus would overcome the temptation, survive the suffering and death, and establish the salvation, that he would see the travail of his soul and be satisfied, that he would be highly exalted and given a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

But all that does not diminish our estimate of the sacrifice—the infinite sacrifice. God loved us enough to be willing that the Saviour should suffer all he did in our behalf.

IV. The next fact to be laid upon the foregoing is that God is unchangeable. He is not “the son of man that He should repent.” “I am the Lord, I change not,” He cries. He is not a being to love to-day and hate or be indifferent to-morrow. “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable.” It may be said of Him as of Jesus Christ, He is “the same, yesterday and to-day and forever.” Therefore, whatever love God had for men when His Spirit inspired the sentiment of the text, He feels to-day, and He is willing to express that love in the same ways.

V. The capstone of the argument is the inference. If God loved His Son, yet so loved men that He gave His Son for them and did not at all spare him, and if God is unchangeable, how is it possible for Him not to give anything else by which His love may be expressed? That which was the most difficult thing has already been done. That was really the only hard thing for God to do. The Scriptures do not speak of anything as *costing* God an effort except the gift of His Son. On all the other works of God there rests the evidence of ease. It did not cost Him an effort to create. “He spake and it was done.” He said, “Let there be light; and there was light.” It costs him no effort to control the world. He wills it, and the earth is clothed with verdure. He thinks a thought, and in obedience to it the day comes out of the darkness. He wills, and all the worlds of the universe continue in their places and describe their orbits and there is no effort, no noise, but all is silent and easy. There not even a “music of the spheres” except in the exalted fancy of the poet. But it cost God to give His Son for men. Now, if God so loved men that He gave what cost Him so severely, how can He withhold what costs Him nothing, if that, too, can convey His love? It costs Him nothing to make you rich, so that if riches are a real good for you and will show real love for you, He will give them to you. It would cost Him nothing to give you good health, or to save your soul, or to sanctify your life,

or purify your heart, or comfort you in distress, or convert your child. His love stood the only strain upon it when He gave His Son for you; how can that love fail to respond to a less demand? The argument is almost like a demonstration from mathematics. All that is lacking is faith on our part to grasp the reality and proportion of the great truth.

The question may now be asked, If all this is true, then how do you explain all the ills we really suffer? Why do we have disease, and discord, and heartburning, and disappointment, and casualties, and death and all manner of affliction? I answer that that which seems to be evil with the Christian is not really so. It is chastening. It is loving discipline. Divine grace has changed the character of trouble for us and converted it into an agency of blessing.

One word in conclusion. The whole passage from which my text is taken is addressed to Christians; those who have come to God through the sacrifice of His Son, and not to any who reject that sacrifice. Why is it that there are any who will still reject God's love when expressed in that way, and then expect a mercy which He has not promised and which has no such pledge attached to it?