

THE OLIVE TREE OF ROMANS XI

An Inquiry into the Divine Purposes Affecting Jew and Gentile

THE PLACE of the Jew in the purposes of God is a subject not only of increasing importance and significance in our world to-day, but also one which calls for a diligent searching of the Scriptures and a reverent application of the principles of interpretation as set forth in the New Testament. In the following pages I shall endeavour to indicate the chief lines of the Biblical teaching on this subject, using St. Paul's well-known parable of the olive tree in Romans xi as a framework upon which to stretch the canvas depicting God's purposes for the Jew.

I. THE ROOT OF THE TREE

The root of the Apostle's olive tree is grounded in the sub-soil of the protevangelium of Genesis iii. 15. Here we have the earliest Gospel promise proclaimed to the fallen parents of the human race. In them we find human nature brought into a state of sin and condemnation, and in desperate need of super-human help. And in this promise the grace and mercy of Almighty God are manifested from the very first moment of man's dire need; for, so far from descending upon His guilty creatures in the mere office of a wrathful and implacable Judge, God committed to them a prophecy in which was enshrined the hope that the Divine-human communion might be restored. Although His creatures, miserable in the knowledge of their guilt, and driven by a futile desperation, attempted to conceal their shame from the Creator's all-seeing eye—for they realised full well that they had not the slightest cause for expecting clemency from the Benefactor whom they had so wantonly dishonoured—yet God, even before pronouncing sentence upon their sin, entrusted to them the merciful promise of a great Deliverer and the certain hope of ultimate victory over the fearsome enemy of their souls. The serpent was to bruise the Saviour's heel: this, as we now know, was fulfilled when Christ suffered and died upon the cross of Calvary. But it was a wound from which the Saviour was to recover; Satan could only touch His heel, the lowest part of our Lord, that is, His

humanity: His Deity is inviolable. The Saviour, however, was to crush the serpent's head; whereby it was foreshadowed that Satan would receive a wound unto death. The resurrection of our Lord from the dead has set the seal upon His supremacy and established Him as the mighty Overcomer in the great struggle against the forces of evil.

This promise, however, was necessarily of a general and shadowy nature: it was a mysterious adumbration of the outcome of the conflict with Satan, and at the same time a gracious assurance to man that God had not entirely cast him away nor dissociated Himself from the welfare of His erring creatures. It was a message of hope to the whole human race. But the particularities of its fulfilment remained to be unfolded in later ages.

We now pass on to God's covenant with Abraham, for this is the very tap-root of the Pauline olive tree. The obedience and faith of the patriarch were acceptable to God and called forth the remarkable promise to the effect that he, although at the time aged and childless, would become "exceeding fruitful", the father of nations and kings; that his seed would be multiplied until it became a "great nation", in number "as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore"; that the land of Canaan, wherein he was a stranger, would be given to him and to his posterity for an everlasting possession; and that he would both be blessed and also become a blessing—indeed, that in him and in his seed should "all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. xii. 2, 3; xiii. 16; xv. 5, 18; xvii. 2, 6-8; xviii. 18; xxii. 17, 18).

Now, in attempting to interpret these notable predictions, it is important for us to bear in mind that they carry a double connotation—that, on the one hand, they are to be understood in a material or outward sense, and, on the other, in a spiritual or inner sense. The study of Scripture itself teaches us to distinguish between what we may call their proximate and their ultimate signification.

In the first place, then, let us consider in what manner these prophecies given by God to Abraham have been outwardly fulfilled. The prediction that from him would spring a great nation, and that his posterity would be multiplied as the stars of the heaven and as the sand of the sea shore, was literally brought to pass, not merely in the vast numbers of those peoples

which in later times could justly trace back their lineage to Abraham as their forebear, but more particularly in the Israelitish nation whose amazing prolificity was one of the outstanding characteristics of their sojourn in Egypt:

The children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them (Exod. i. 7).

This was doubly remarkable, inasmuch as the little family band of seventy persons who originally formed a settlement in the district of Goshen were not, as might have been expected (especially as their kinsman, Joseph, was, under Pharaoh, the first man of the land), assimilated into what was then the far greater body of the Egyptians. Throughout the whole length of their sojourn in this country they maintained their identity intact and their blood unmixed. In this manner God was preparing them to become the "great nation" whom He would choose for the setting forward of His purposes of blessing to one whole world.

The hand of God was in all this, and Moses reminded the Israelites of this patent truth when, at the conclusion of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, he addressed them in the following terms:

Thy fathers went down into Egypt with threescore and ten persons; and now the Lord thy God hath made thee as the stars of heaven for multitude (Deut. x. 22; cf. i. 10).

Moreover, that great leader and lawgiver, who was not permitted to pass over Jordan into Canaan with them, enjoined upon this people that, when once they were possessors of the promised land and in due course brought their offering of first-fruits to the priest, they were to acknowledge before the Lord their God, and say:

A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous (Deut. xxvi. 5).

The rhetorical question of Balaam, the Mesopotamian prophet, also bears testimony to the marvellous development of the children of Israel into a numerous people:

Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the fourth part of Israel? (Num. xxiii. 10).

Solomon, too, in a subsequent age, was impressed by this same phenomenon:

Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people which Thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude (1 Kings iii. 8).

In like manner we may observe how the promise that the land of Canaan would be given to Abraham's seed was performed to the letter. At the termination of the forty years in the wilderness the Israelites crossed over the river Jordan under the leadership of Joshua, and proceeded to make conquest of the land of Canaan. Here they dwelt for more than seven hundred years (the southern tribes for more than eight hundred years) until their apostasy caused them to be carried off into ignominious captivity in heathen lands. Those that subsequently returned, and their descendants after them, established themselves once more in Palestine, and remained as the people of the land for a further period of six hundred years, until the overthrow of Jerusalem by the Romans. In dedicating the first-fruits of the earth to the Lord, the Israelite had been commanded to say,

I profess this day that I am come into the country which the Lord sware unto our fathers for to give us (Deut. xxvi. 3),

thus acknowledging the faithfulness of God in the keeping of the promise made to Abraham many generations previously. And this fulfilment of the Divine word is further confirmed by the writer of the book of Joshua with these clinching sentences:

So the Lord gave unto Israel all the land which He sware to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein. And the Lord gave them rest round about, according to all that He sware unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand. There failed not aught of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; *all came to pass* (Joshua xxi. 43-5).

Furthermore, in making His covenant with Abraham, God had indicated the bounds of the promised land as being from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates (Gen. xv. 18). These delimitations were repeated to Moses:

I will set thy border from the Red Sea even unto the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness unto the River

—that is, the River Euphrates; and they were confirmed in turn to his successor, Joshua (Exod. xxiii. 31; Joshua i. 4). But at the same time the Israelites were forewarned not to expect

to occupy all this territory in its entirety as soon as they entered into the land: the conquest of their enemies was to be a gradual one. God had said:

I will not drive them out from before thee in one year; lest the land become desolate, and the beast of the field multiply against thee. By little and little I will drive them out from before thee, until thou be increased, and inherit the land (Exod. xxiii. 29, 30).

It was not until the reign of Solomon, some five hundred years later, that these conditions were finally realised. In those days, we are told,

Judah and Israel were many, as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating, and drinking, and making merry. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdom from the River unto the land of the Philistines, and unto the border of Egypt . . . He had dominion over all the region on this side the River, from Tiphah even to Gaza, over all the kings on this side the River: and he had peace on all sides round about him. And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beer-Sheba, all the days of Solomon (1 Kings iv. 20, 21, 24, 25).

And so we see how the promises to Abraham of old were, in their externals at least, quite definitely fulfilled,—how his seed became a great nation and inherited the promised land in accordance with the limits which God had foretold. Nor is this a mere personal conclusion, but one that is attested in the plainest possible terms both by the Scriptures of that period (as I have shown), and also by those of a later time. Four hundred years after the reign of Solomon, the Levites who returned from the Babylonian captivity with Nehemiah publicly made a solemn confession and acknowledgment before God, from which I take the following significant statements:

Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham; and foundest his heart faithful before Thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, even to give it unto his seed, *and hast performed Thy words*; for Thou art righteous. And Thou sawest the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red Sea . . . Their children also multipliedst Thou as the stars of heaven, and broughtest them into the land, concerning which Thou didst say to their fathers, that they should go in to possess it. So the children went in and possessed the land, and Thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with their kings, and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they took fenced cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all good things, cisterns hewn out, vineyards, and olive-yards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in Thy great goodness (Neh. ix. 7-9, 23-5).

Thus Holy Scripture itself bears clear testimony to the fact that God did not fail to perform His promises to Abraham as regards their proximate signification.

II. THE FATNESS OF THE TREE

But, it will be objected, this land was promised not only to Abraham's posterity, but even to the patriarch himself, as an "everlasting possession", and it is certainly known that Abraham was a stranger in Canaan until the day of his death, and that his posterity have not enjoyed the possession of it uninterruptedly: how, then, can it be true that God's word has been performed? To this it must be replied, that it is just here, in connection with this very point, that we begin to be brought face to face with the ultimate or spiritual meaning of the Abrahamic covenant.

When God said to Abraham, "I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession", what exactly did He mean? Did God promise to the patriarch merely an earthly acquisition?—because, if so, subsequent events have clearly shown that the promise has not been kept. Yet we dare not charge Almighty God with unfaithfulness, or, alternatively, with inability to perform what He had promised. It cannot be disputed that the country of Canaan has not been an everlasting possession either of Abraham or of his seed: at best, they have only enjoyed a footing in this land at intermittent intervals; and for a period of approximately eighteen hundred years since the final anti-Roman revolt under Bar-Cochba this territory has been the possession of Gentile peoples, and in no sense of the seed of Abraham through Isaac.

There is no doubt much truth in the contention that, just as the covenant with Abraham was made in consequence of his faith and obedience, so, too, the continuance of that covenant presupposed the condition of faith and obedience in his posterity: an unfaithful and disobedient people could not expect to partake of the blessings and benefits of the covenant. Moses, in fact, warned the children of Israel to this very effect:

Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which He made with you . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto ye go over Jordan to possess it; ye shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall

utterly be destroyed. And the Lord shall scatter you among the peoples, and ye shall be left few in number among the nations (Deut. iv. 23-7).

Those who returned from the Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem, after experiencing the stern judgment of God upon their disobedience and apostasy, solemnly acknowledged the justice of this punishment:

Howbeit Thou art just in all that is come upon us; for Thou hast dealt truly, but we have done wickedly (Neh. ix. 33).

But this consideration does not greatly assist us in the present difficulty, for it is not elsewhere God's custom to fix His creatures' attention upon earthly prospects, but rather to cause them to look away from this transitory world to the eternal values of the heavenly reality (cf. Col. iii. 2). Let us not forget either that the whole world labours and groans under the curse which followed upon man's sin (Rom. viii. 22); it is hard to believe that God would promise for eternity something upon which a curse already rested—something which, even under the happiest of circumstances, could only be enjoyed by each individual for the brief and fleeting term of his life's span upon this earth; and a territory, moreover, which, should there be, as some have fondly imagined, an assemblage on some future resurrection day of all the generations that have proceeded from Abraham's loins, would be altogether inadequate for the accommodation of so vast a multitude.

Surely, if they learnt anything, the patriarchs learnt to mistrust any object of this world for the satisfaction of their deepest cravings. Abraham's obedience to the call of God conducted him to a life of rigour and vicissitude and temporal uncertainty, and to the endurance of climatic extremes with no better shelter than the flimsy covering of a tent—an existence in sharp contrast to his secure mode of life in the great city of Ur. As Calvin reminds us in a fine passage (*Inst.* II. x. 11),

He is torn away from friends, parents, and country, objects in which the chief happiness of life is deemed to consist, as if it had been the fixed purpose of God to deprive him of all the sources of enjoyment. No sooner does he enter the land in which he was ordered to dwell, than he is driven from it by famine. In the country to which he retires to obtain relief, he is obliged, for his personal safety, to expose his wife to prostitution. This must have been more bitter than many deaths. After returning to the land of his habitation, he is again expelled by famine. What is the happiness of inhabiting a land where you must often suffer from hunger, nay, perish from famine, unless you flee from it? . . . He wanders up and down uncertain for many years. . . .

Wherever he goes, he meets with savage-hearted neighbours, who will not even allow him to drink of the wells which he has dug with great labour. . . . Thus, in fine, during the whole course of his life, he was harassed and tossed in such a way, that anyone desirous of giving a picture of a calamitous life could not find one more appropriate.

Although at a later time the descendants of Abraham inhabited the land of Canaan with more or less security for a period of some centuries, we must not forget that the territory was promised not only to the seed of Abraham, but to Abraham himself also, who was an unsettled stranger there, "for an everlasting possession" (Gen. xvii. 8). But this world, and all that is in it, is transitory, and such happiness as is to be found here is ephemeral, and the enjoyment of it but partial; and man's earthly course is brief and torn with yearnings after a better state (cf. 1 John ii. 15-17). Are we, then, to charge God with the use of contradictory terms when He promises an earthly territory as "an everlasting possession"? Was He indeed leading the patriarch to indulge in the vain hope of possessing for eternity that which must ultimately in the nature of things perish? By no means. We do not even think of accusing Christ of inconsistency or insincerity when the Scripture tells us that, His body and blood intact before them, He gave His disciples bread and wine with the words, "This is My body", and "This is My blood". The visible elements of bread and wine were not intended simply as a source of sustenance for the bodily frame, but rather as a tangible token of the invisible and spiritual power which sustains the life of the soul that is united to Christ and feeds upon Him by faith. We do not come to the Holy Communion for a physical meal, but that our hearts and thoughts may be transported to heaven, whither our Saviour is gone before us. No more did Abraham and the other patriarchs seek in the visible land of Canaan their everlasting possession. Had they done so, they would have been bitterly disillusioned men. But they looked beyond to the enjoyment of an eternal state which, though hidden from the physical gaze, was none the less apparent to the eye of faith.

The truth is that the promise to Abraham of an "everlasting" possession and the strong contrast opposed by the ills and hardships of his earthly existence were intended to direct the aspirations of Abraham away from the idea of gaining any corruptible inheritance, and up into the very presence of the eternal God, where there is "fullness of joy", and at whose

right hand there are "pleasures for evermore" (Ps. xvi. 11). This, in fact, was the significance of God's word to the patriarch: "Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (Gen. xv. 1). Thus he got the true perspective of the man of faith.

Had it been the case that Abraham's hopes were centred chiefly in the securing of an earthly possession, he would doubtless upon entering the promised land have attempted to exchange the fragile abode afforded by his tents for a more solid and permanent type of dwelling-place. But the very fact that he continued to dwell in tents is set before us as a clear indication that "he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. xi. 9, 10). The early patriarchs—Abel who was murdered by the hand of his own brother, Enoch whose earnest preaching of coming judgment fell upon the unreceptive ears of the ungodly people of his day (Jude 14, 15), Noah who by the providence of God survived what is probably the most terrifying ordeal ever experienced by man, and Abraham at whose precarious existence we have already glanced—all these, by their constant faith in the midst of the most harassing adversities, "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth", and declared "plainly that they were seeking a country". What sort of country?—an earthly one? No! For had this been their quest they might quite well have returned to "that country from whence they came out". But no: they desired "*a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God; for He hath prepared for them a city*" (Heb. xi. 13-16). Consequently, the inspired writer reminds us that, like these faithful men of old, "*here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come*" (*ibid.*, xiii. 14).

The observations just made demonstrate with great clarity that Abraham's expectation was by no means focused upon that which is immediately perceptible to the physical senses, but rather that the country he sought was one not of this earth. Calvin remarks that, if the "holy patriarchs expected a happy life from the hand of God (and it is indubitable that they did), they viewed and contemplated a different happiness from that of a terrestrial life" (*Inst.* II. x. 13). Together with the patriarchs and St. Paul and all thoroughgoing Christians of every age, we have to learn the great and vital lesson, that "our citizenship

is in heaven"—not on this earth (Phil. iii. 20). The conclusions of the great Apostle, who endured so much in the cause of Christ, are entirely applicable to the lives of the patriarchs of old:

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. . . . Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tent be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (Rom. viii. 18; 2 Cor. iv. 16-18; v. 1).

III. THE STEM OF THE TREE

As the Apostle's olive tree grows upwards so, too, like any tree of the natural realm, its stem becomes progressively narrower. The first presage of this principle was given to Abraham after the birth of Ishmael and while Isaac, though promised, was as yet unborn. In response to the patriarch's petition, "O that Ishmael might live before Thee!" God affirmed, "My covenant will I establish with Isaac" (Gen. xvii. 18, 21). When in due course Isaac was born, the Almighty again asserted this purpose with great particularity: "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen. xxi. 12). The trunk of the tree was narrowed yet further in connection with the offspring of Isaac: Jacob not only purchased his brother's birthright for a dish of broth, but also, though the younger son, obtained the paternal blessing which should normally have gone to Esau the firstborn (Gen. xxv. 29 ff.; xxvii). In turn Jacob's prophetic benediction from his death-bed demarcated Judah from among all his sons as the one through whom in a special manner the line of the promise was to be continued (Gen. xlix. 8 ff.). Subsequently the blessing pronounced upon the descendants of Judah was confined more narrowly still in its outworkings to the family of David, in connection with whom it was promised that the Messianic King would be of his stock, and the glories of His kingdom eternal: "Thine house and thy kingdom shall be made sure for ever before thee; thy throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam. vii. 16). This promise of an eternal kingdom in its essence necessarily looked forward to the unending reign of an Eternal King.

The establishment of the kingdom and throne of David *for ever*, points incontrovertibly beyond the time of Solomon, and to the eternal continuance of the seed of David. . . . We must not reduce the idea of eternity to the popular notion of a long incalculable period, but must take it in an absolute sense, as the promise is evidently understood in Ps. lxxxix. 30: "I set his seed for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven." No earthly kingdom, and no posterity of any single man, has eternal duration. . . . The posterity of David, therefore, could only last for ever by running out in a person who lives for ever, *i.e.* by culminating in the Messiah, who lives for ever, and of whose kingdom there is no end (Keil and Delitzsch, *comm. in loc.*).

That these remarkable promises of God to the saints of old actually had in view a single messianic Personage is further corroborated by St. Paul's interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant. It has already been shown how the New Testament leads us to understand that the gaze of Abraham was directed away from the perishable fabric of this world and fixed upon a city of God's making which is "eternal in the heavens". But the inspired Apostle conducts us still deeper into the mysterious meaning of the Divine covenant with Abraham, when he instructs us that the "seed" of the patriarch to which the promise referred is to be interpreted specifically as pointing to none other than Christ Himself. That is, the stem of the olive tree reaches its narrowest, its consummating, point in the person of the Messiah. It was exactly this same truth which the devout Zacharias was enabled to grasp shortly before the birth of Mary's Son. He blessed Almighty God because of the crowning knowledge that, by the impending advent of the person of Jesus, He was about "to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant—the oath which He swore to our father Abraham" (Luke i. 72, 73). St. Paul expounds this matter further:

Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, *And to thy seed, which is Christ* (Gal. iii. 16).

Not that St. Paul is dependent for the validity of his interpretation upon a mere point of grammar: he appeals to the use of the singular simply as a confirmation of the truth of his exegesis. But, it may be objected, the singular noun "seed" may be employed just as well in a collective as in an individualistic sense. To this one must interpose the rejoinder that St. Paul was not only well aware of this fact, but also in this very same passage adds an interpretation which is based upon the collective

sense of the term. "Ye are all one in Christ Jesus," he assures his readers. "And if ye are Christ's, *then are ye Abraham's seed*, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. iii. 28, 29). Nor does this collective interpretation in any way contradict the individualistic interpretation, for, as is clearly indicated by the Apostle's argument here, Christian believers are only accounted as Abraham's seed on the grounds of their being actually identified with Christ through faith; they are seen and accepted *in Him*. And thus the term "seed" is to be understood both collectively and individualistically: the one is the complement, not the contradiction of the other. But the collectiveness may be understood ever and only in the all-enfolding unity of the Person of the Messiah: *all* are truly *one* "in Christ Jesus".

IV. THE BRANCHES OF THE TREE

Though the narrowest point in the stem of this tree of Divine promise is reached in the person of Christ, yet in no respect does this represent a narrowing in the beneficent purposes of God. In Christ, indeed, we find the true fulfilment of all God's promises: "All the promises of God have their Yea in Him" (2 Cor. i. 20: Corr. Eng. N.T.). And it is at this consummating or nuclear point, namely Christ, that the branches also have their union with the trunk of the tree.

The continuing fruitfulness and well-being of the several branches depends upon a vital union with the trunk whereby they are enabled to partake of the "root and fatness of the tree" (Rom. xi. 17). Should this organic participation be interrupted in the case of any branch, with the inevitable result that it becomes a fruitless and moribund encumbrance, the Divine Husbandman breaks it off, and in its stead grafts in a branch from a wild olive tree. It is plain from the context of this apostolic allegory that the "natural" branches represent the Jews and the branches of the "wild" olive tree represent the Gentiles, and that the vital principle of union between branch and stem, whether the branch be natural or engrafted, is that of *faith*. The natural branches were broken off "*because of unbelief*", and the engrafted branches maintain their position of privilege "*by faith*". Yet, if they do not continue in faith, the latter will also be cut off; and those natural branches that

have been broken off, "if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again" (Rom. xi. 20-23; cf. Jer. xi. 16, 17).

The first thing that we learn from this Scripture is the fact of the unassailable sovereignty and supremacy of Almighty God—a matter which St. Paul emphasises with great insistence in dealing with this subject. The frailty and fickleness of man cannot in any way frustrate the progress and fulfilment of God's purposes: He both breaks off and grafts in, to the end that His husbandry is unimpaired in vigour and in fruitfulness. Whether by Jew or by Gentile, His perfect work is set forward. And we also learn that all the branches, both Jewish and Gentile, are supported by the same root and nourished by the same fatness or sap, and that for all alike the requirement for continuance in the organic communion of this state of blessing is simply and solely that of faith.

This is the kernel of the Apostle's argument in Romans ix-xi, which is the most important passage in the New Testament on the subject of the relationship between Jew and Gentile.

I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart; for I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites; to whom belong the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the living of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and from whom, as regards the flesh, is the Christ, who is over all, God blessed for ever (Rom. ix. 2-5).

We are not, however, to suppose (he continues) that through their lamentable defection the word of God has been frustrated and rendered ineffectual. This is never the case with any word of God, and such a supposition betrays a woeful misunderstanding of the inflexible nature of the Divine purposes. It is not by any means being of the seed of Abraham according to the flesh that ensures acceptability with God, otherwise the lines of Ishmael and of Esau would also have been lines of blessing in the purpose of God. God had said to Abraham, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called"—that is, in the son of promise, who was the fruit and crown of Abraham's great faith. This demonstrates in itself that "it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned as the seed". Now, the promise of God was coupled with the faith of Abraham, and it is ever faith that links human hearts to the blessings of the Divine covenant

and identifies them, whether Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female, with the true seed of Abraham.

Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus [affirms the Apostle]; and if ye are Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. iii. 26-9).

In another place St. Paul insists upon this same fundamental truth with, if possible, even greater earnestness—it is, indeed, the *leit-motif* of all his doctrinal writings:

The promise [he asserts] that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

It was given to the patriarch, under the circumstances already described, by God, "who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things that are not as though they were". The notable faith of Abraham is shown in that he,

against all hope, yet in hope, believed to this end, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, "So shall thy seed be"; and not being weak in faith, he considered his own body—to all intents dead, for he was about a hundred years old—and the deadness of Sarah's womb, yet staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, and being fully persuaded that, what God had promised, He was able also to perform. And therefore his faith was reckoned to him for righteousness. Nor was it written for Abraham's sake alone, that righteousness was reckoned to him; but for our sake also, to whom it shall be reckoned, if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead (Rom. iv. 13-24).

But let us clearly see that God does not demand from us merely faith in connection with a mysterious promise of an ancient day, but a very definite faith in connection with the fulfilment and consummation of that very promise in the person of Jesus Christ. Abraham peered forward towards the distant fulfilment of the promise: we look back in the fuller light of the New Testament upon its consummation, and are without excuse if our understanding of its content is not in proportion more complete than that of the patriarch. Yet, even so, the faith and spiritual perception of Abraham were so remarkable that he actually anticipated and, by the appropriation of a clear hope, rejoiced in the day of Christ: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad", our Lord assured the Jews who were seeking to controvert His teaching (John viii. 56).

Now, the apprehension of this important truth directs us

to a correct understanding of the inner meaning of God's promise to Abraham that he would become the father of many nations. Externally, of course, we have seen that this is referable to the vast numbers of his fleshly posterity. But the deeper interpretation of this promise leads us to perceive that in their spiritual and ultimate significance the purposes of God were of a far different kind. The patriarch, says Calvin, "was not called the father of many nations, because his seed was to be divided into many nations; but rather, because many nations were to be gathered together unto him" (*Comm. in Gen.*, xvii. 6). God had in view not only the spreading out of the natural branches of the tree, but also, and even particularly, the grafting in of other branches from the wild olive tree, on the grounds of their faith. That this is so is explicitly borne out by St. Paul when he plainly states that

the Scripture, *foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith*, preached the Gospel beforehand unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all the nations be blessed (*Gal. iii. 8*).

Thus the engrafting of the Gentiles was by no means a new purpose of God, but an age-old one implied even in the terms of His covenant with Abraham.

God's design for universal blessing is apparent in every section of the Old Testament, and the Jew with his wide knowledge of the Scriptures should have been on his guard against the spirit of pharisaic exclusivism which was so prevalent in the apostolic times. St. Paul reminds his Roman readers of the word of God spoken through Moses, whereby God's total independence is asserted:

I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

He reminds them of the words spoken through the prophet Hosea:

I will call them My people, who were not My people; and her beloved who was not beloved. And, in the place where it was said to them, Ye are not My people, there shall they be called the children of the living God.

He reminds them of the boldness of Isaiah in saying:

I was found by them that sought Me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after Me;

whereas in this same place it is said concerning Israel:

All day long I stretched forth My hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people.

Even Moses had prophesied:

I will move you to jealousy by those who are no people, and by a nation void of understanding I will provoke you.

Moreover, through Isaiah it was proclaimed:

Whosoever believeth on Him shall not be put to shame;

and Joel had announced:

Whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord shall be saved.

Therefore, the Apostle concludes,

there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, seeing that the same Lord is Lord over all, and is rich unto all that call upon Him (*Rom. ix. 15, 25, 26; x. 20, 21, 19, 11, 13, 12*).

Part and parcel with all this is St. Paul's reminder of the Old Testament doctrine that only a *remnant* of Israel would be saved—not the whole people without discrimination. This, too, was a blow at the national pride of the Jews. The Apostle quotes the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that shall be saved, [and] Except the Lord of Hosts had left us as remnant a seed, we had become as Sodom, and had been made like unto Gomorrah.

Again, he points out that by no means all who of old heard the good news in Israel paid heed to it; even as the same prophet complains:

Lord, who hath believed our report?

In the days of the prophet Elijah, when godlessness and apostasy flourished on all sides, God had preserved a remnant who had not bowed the knee to Baal; and the Apostle declares that the same was true of his own day:

Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace (*Rom. ix. 27-9; x. 16; xi. 3-5*).

St. Paul himself and the other Apostles were members of this remnant according to the election of grace in the midst of an unresponsive people. We see this principle of the unbelieving majority as opposed to the faithful remnant, and of

the Divine purpose of blessing to the Gentiles, at work in Pisidian Antioch, where the Jews met the message of the Gospel with cold hostility and refused to heed the solemn warnings of Holy Scripture. After proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, Paul and Barnabas uttered this earnest admonition:

Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken in the prophets, Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish, for I work a work in your days, a work which ye will in no wise believe, though a man declare it to you.

The Jews, however, were filled with jealousy, and contradicted the things which were spoken by Paul, and blasphemed. Then the Apostles spoke out boldly, and declared their intention of obeying the scriptural commission by taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, whom these Jews, blinded by pride, considered to be beyond the scope of God's grace.

It was necessary [said Paul and Barnabas], that the word of God should first be spoken to you; but, seeing that ye thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou shouldst be for salvation unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts xiii. 38-48).

And so through their fall salvation came to the Gentiles, and the whole world was enriched; branches from the wild olive tree were grafted in in place of the natural branches which were broken off because of unbelief (Rom. xi. 11, 12, 17 ff.).

We are now in a position to understand clearly St. Paul's dictum:

They are not all Israel, which are of Israel (Rom. ix. 6).

Those who are of the stock of Israel according to the flesh, although thereby placed in a position of privilege, are not in virtue of this standing automatically constituted members of the true or spiritual Israel:

it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God (Rom. ix. 8).

It is faith that justifies, and grace that elects; and God's blessing is designed for all the nations of the earth. The company of the redeemed is "a great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues", their robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. vii. 9, 14).

The truth against which the Jew hardened his heart, and

which he persistently refused to learn, was that "with God there is no respect of persons" (Rom. ii. 11), and that the universal grace of God is founded upon the universal sinfulness and need of mankind—a point which the Apostle, supported by the unequivocal statements of Scripture, hammers home in the third chapter of his epistle to the Romans. All, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin—there is none righteous, no, not one—there is no distinction, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God—God is the God, not only of the Jews, but of the Gentiles also—He justifies both the circumcision and also the uncircumcision through faith.

Circumcision, indeed, the distinctive mark of the Israelite, was not instituted by God as a sign of superiority, but as a seal and token of the acceptance with God which comes through faith in His word, and was intended as a constant reminder to the human heart of the need for the renunciation of all fleshly vanity and for the exercise of true humility and dependence towards God. Abraham himself, the honoured patriarch of the Israelites, was accounted righteous through his faith, without regard to the fact that at the time he was uncircumcised:

He receiveth the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was still in uncircumcision; that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision, that righteousness might be reckoned unto them also; and that he might be the father of circumcision to them who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham which he had in uncircumcision (Rom. iv. 11, 12).

That this is the true significance of the rite of circumcision is made perfectly plain in the pages of the Old Testament itself, so that there was no reason for the devout Jew to be in error concerning its real import, or to imagine that it was a mere fleshly formality intended to foster his national pride. (In any case, there were other peoples in the ancient world besides the Israelites who practised the custom of circumcision.) Thus the Levitical writing alludes to their "uncircumcised hearts" (Lev. xxvi. 41); and Moses enjoined his wayward people in these terms:

Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked (Deut. x. 16).

This great leader of old also told the Israelites:

The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live (Deut. xxx. 6).

And in a subsequent day of national crisis the prophet Jeremiah offered this warning to the people of Judah:

Thus saith the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem . . . Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings (Jer. iv. 3, 4).

St. Paul, in speaking to the Jew, insists upon this same inner emphasis:

He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in spirit, not in letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God (Rom. ii. 28, 29).

And, in speaking to the Christian, the Apostle says that in Christ he is

circumcised with the circumcision not made with hands, in putting off the body of the flesh, in the circumcision which is of Christ (Col. ii. 11).

Again, he reminds us that, as those who are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,

we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh (Phil. iii. 3).

All outward ceremonial, though it be divinely instituted, is nothing and valueless, unless it be accompanied with a sincere corresponding attitude of heart in repentance and trust; thus alone may it become the vehicle of a vital religion: that is the great lesson which the Apostle has to teach; and that is the lesson which the Jews were so slow to learn. The Jews enjoyed a unique and special advantage, chiefly in that the oracles of God had been committed to them (Rom. iii. 2; cf. ix. 4); and yet through the wanton hardness of their hearts they misinterpreted their trust in a carnal and arrogant manner, and destroyed their privilege, bartering it, like profane Esau, for one morsel of meat—that of confidence in the flesh. They did not relish being reminded that God is not by any means limited in manifestation or in blessing to one “promised land” or to one “chosen people”, or that the river of His grace which flows from the sanctuary was never intended to be dammed up, but rather, growing ever deeper and broader, was designed from

the very beginning to bring life and refreshment even into the thirsty desert of the heathen world (Ezek. xlvi). They did not wish to see branches from the wild olive tree grafted into the trunk of the natural tree and sharing in the rich blessings of its root and fatness. Least of all in their blind pride did they imagine that it could ever be possible for them to be cut off from their position of privilege because of unbelief.

To such, who boasted,

We be Abraham's seed, and have never yet been in bondage to any man, our Lord replied:

If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. . . . Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye desire to do (John viii. 33, 39, 44).

To such the first Christian martyr, in an oration of pointed brilliance, demonstrated by unmistakable implication that the presence of Almighty God, even in the case of their venerable forebears, was not confined to the land of Canaan—indeed, that the lives of the patriarchs were more intimately connected with the countries of the heathen than with the land of promise.

Brethren and fathers, hearken [he said]. The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was *in Mesopotamia*. . . . Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt *in Haran*; and from thence God removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell: and He gave him *none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to put his foot on*. . . . And God spake in this wise, that his seed should sojourn *in a strange land*; and that they should bring them into *bondage*, and entreat them evil four hundred years. . . . And the patriarchs, moved with jealousy against Joseph, sold him *into Egypt*. . . . Now there came a famine over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction; and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob heard that there was corn *in Egypt*, he sent forth our fathers first. . . . And Joseph sent and called to him Jacob his father and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls. And Jacob went down *into Egypt*, and he and our fathers died, and were carried over *into Shechem*, and laid in the sepulchre which Abraham bought for a sum of money. . . . And the people grew and multiplied *in Egypt*. . . . Moses was born. . . . and when he was cast out, *Pharaoh's daughter* took him up, and nourished him for her own son. . . . And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the *Egyptians*. . . . And Moses fled, and became a *sojourner in the land of Midian*. . . . And when forty years were fulfilled, there appeared to him *in the wilderness of Mount Sinai* an angel in a flame of fire in a bush. . . . Then said the Lord to him, Loose thy shoes from thy feet; for *the place whereon thou standest is holy ground*. . . . This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send to be a deliverer and a ruler by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush. This man led them forth, having wrought wonders and signs *in Egypt*, and *in the Red Sea*, and *in the wilderness* forty years. . . . This is he that was in the church *in the wilderness* with the angel which spake to him *in the Mount Sinai*, and with our

fathers: who received the living oracles to give unto us: to whom our fathers would not be obedient, but thrust him from them, and turned back in their hearts unto Egypt. . . . Our fathers had the tabernacle of the testimony *in the wilderness* . . . which also our fathers, in their turn, brought in with Joshua when they entered upon *the possession of the Gentiles*, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David, who found favour before God, and desired to provide a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. Howbeit *the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands*. . . . Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: *as your fathers did, so do ye*. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? and they killed them who showed before of the coming of the Righteous One; of whom ye became but now the betrayers and murderers—ye who received the law by the ministrations of angels, and kept it not! (Acts vii.)

The implications of this inspired address before the Sanhedrin were too plain to be missed, and cut the hearers to the heart. Your great forefather Abraham (said Stephen to them in effect), of whose stock you boast yourselves to be, was actually a foreigner—a Chaldean by birth. God manifested Himself to him in Mesopotamia, *not* in Judaea. Indeed, in the latter land the patriarch had not even a foot's breadth of soil to call his own, with the exception of a place of *burial* which he had had to purchase from the inhabitants for a sum of money. Even this sepulchre which he bought was in a spot despised by you—Shechem, a city of the Samaritans, with whom you have no dealings. He entered the land as an uncircumcised man; nor was there any temple there in his day. Your honoured ancestors wickedly sold Joseph into Egypt; but God was with him and exalted him in that foreign country. It was to Egypt, *not* Judaea—in fact, *from* Judaea—that the insignificant handful of your forefathers had to flee as suppliants, in order that their family might survive and not be wiped off the face of the earth by famine. Again, it was in Egypt that they became a great and numerous people. Your great lawgiver Moses was born in Egypt; he was nurtured and educated in the palace of Pharaoh, and became learned in Egyptian wisdom. Remember, too, that your forebears rejected Moses as their leader and deliverer, when he wished to help them, and caused him to flee and become a sojourner in the strange land of Midian for a third part of his lifetime. Yet God appeared to him in the wilderness, and proclaimed the locality of His manifestation, though foreign soil, to be holy ground. The holy law and oracles of God were entrusted to Moses at Mount Sinai in Arabia, *not* in the promised land; and for forty years he led the Israelites through the wilderness, but he himself never set foot on the soil of Judaea.

God showed His wonders and signs to them in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness—heathen territory, all of it; yet your ancestors, whose memory you so proudly cherish, were disobedient, rebellious, idolatrous, and unmindful of all God's goodness to them. Even the divinely ordained tabernacle was a wilderness institution; and some hundreds of years later, in the days of king David, there was still no temple in the city of David, though he found favour with God, and earnestly desired to build Him a house. This privilege was granted to Solomon, the king who, none the less, was guilty of setting the nation off on the disastrous decline towards the apostasy and false worship which ended in the shame of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.

Just as their forefathers, moved with envy, had sold Joseph into bondage, had rejected Moses as their deliverer, and had persecuted and put to death God's messengers the prophets, who had foretold the coming of the Just One, so, too, these religious leaders before whom Stephen was arraigned had blindly resisted the Holy Ghost, misinterpreted the Holy Scriptures, and spurned the Holy Son of God. And in doing so they were not only destroying their own souls, but those too of the people who looked to them for spiritual guidance. This is the great tragedy of the Jewish people. It is this attitude of unbelief that has caused the natural branches to be cut off and left to endure centuries of languishing grief and suffering. But God is still merciful and gracious: He whom they rejected still offers Himself as their mighty Deliverer and Messiah.

They also, *if they abide not still in unbelief*, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again.

That is a day to be prayed for: the day of the restoration of the natural branches of the olive tree; which would mean a day of perhaps unprecedented blessing to the world through them.

If their fall is the enriching of the world, and their loss the enriching of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness? (Rom. xi. 12.)

Meanwhile there is no room for pride or smugness on the part of the Gentiles; indeed, in the appalling spiritual condition of our world to-day there is a grave danger lest the severity of God should descend upon those nations which are failing

to continue in His goodness, and lest the engrafted branches should be cut off also (Rom. xi: 19-22).

The fulness of Israel, however, will be preceded by the fulness of the Gentiles. By the former the Apostle wishes to signify the completion of the number of the elect from among the nation of Israel through the acknowledgment of Jesus as their Messiah and Deliverer, who will remove ungodliness from Jacob and take away their sins (Rom. xi. 25-7). "The fulness of the Gentiles" implies the fulfilment of our Lord's final commission to His followers to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, and to be His witnesses to the uttermost part of the earth (Mark xvi. 15; Acts i. 8). Then truly people from every quarter of the globe will be able to confess before their Lord:

Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation (Rev. v. 9).

Up till now the conversion of Jews has only been, as it were, occasional and incidental. St. Paul refers to this fact when he says that "a partial hardening hath befallen Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles shall have come in". If, then, we wish to see the fulness of Israel, which will mean an influx into our world of revitalising spiritual power (Rom. xi. 16), we must do our utmost to hasten the fulness of the Gentiles—that is to say, we must promote with the greatest possible vigour and zeal the missionary task of evangelising the heathen in every corner of the earth: the Gospel must first be preached in all the world for a testimony to all the Gentiles (Matt. xxiv. 14).

Until this is done, the family circle will not be completed, the elder brother, who because of his anger has remained outside, will not be brought in to share in the festal joys of the redeemed. And so the challenge comes to us in these last days to evangelise tirelessly and with thoroughness, so that the fulness of both Jews and Gentiles may be achieved. "Thus all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. xi. 26), both Jew and Gentile, the true and eternal seed of Abraham by faith in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, "the Israel of God" (Gal. vi. 16); and the number of the elect shall have been filled up according to the perfect purposes of Almighty God.

Finally, let us acknowledge the immutability of the Divine purposes: the promise of unspeakable blessing to all the nations

of the earth through Abraham and his seed, pre-eminently and perfectly fulfilled in and through the glorious Person of Jesus Christ, by identification with whom all His saints are made one; and the defection of the Jews, although constituting them enemies to the Gospel, yet by no means cancelling the election of the Jews, who are beloved for the fathers' sake. "For the gifts and calling of God are never regretted by God." For as the Gentiles in time past were disobedient to God, but now have obtained mercy by the disobedience of the Jews, even so have the Jews also now been disobedient, that by the mercy shown to the Gentiles they also may now obtain mercy. "For God hath shut up all men under disobedience, that He might have mercy upon all"—both Gentile and Jew (Rom. xi. 28-32).

Let us acknowledge, too, the inscrutability of the Divine purposes; for here we find the Jew, who was at the first favoured with such unique promises and privileges, being the last to enter upon the enjoyment of the universal blessing of the Gospel, and that, too, by the instrumentality of the Gentiles—an Ishmael, cast out and blindly perishing in the wilderness, until his eyes are opened by God to see, even at his side and within his reach, the well of the life-giving water of the Gospel. So we observe the truth of the Scripture which informs us that "the last shall be first, and the first last" (Matt. xx. 16).

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor? or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and unto Him, are all things. To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen (Rom. xi. 33-6).

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