

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ROMANS

ROMANS I. 3, 4.

Who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead.—R.V.

ST. PAUL summarily describes the contents of the Gospel, and says that it was wholly concerned with our Lord Jesus Christ and more especially with two facts about Him. The first fact was that *He was really man with a human body and a human soul*; this was due to His being a member of a particular and well-known Jewish family. 'According to the flesh,' that is, in respect of His human nature, He was 'born of the seed of David.' The second fact was that although man He was more than man, 'according to the spirit of holiness,' that is, in respect of His higher and superhuman nature, *He was declared to be the Son of God*. The phrase, 'according to the spirit of holiness,' in the second clause, corresponds to, and contrasts with, the phrase 'according to the flesh' in the first clause; and as the flesh in this passage certainly means human nature, and not, as often, the corrupt or animalized principle in human nature, so 'the spirit of holiness' means not the third person in the Godhead who sanctifies us, but the higher or divine nature of Christ, somewhat vaguely described and set over-against His human nature. For this less common use of the word 'spirit' we have a warrant in at least two other passages of the New Testament, and the resulting sense is that as our Lord was seen to be truly human by the fact of His birth in the family of David, so the true import and character of His higher nature became apparent when He rose from the dead.

I was much puzzled by this text years ago, when preparing notes for Indian divinity students, and commentaries available gave little help. A vague remark suggested proceedings in Law Courts. Here is a great case—the case of Jesus of Nazareth. He claimed to be Son of God. He was arrested and tried on this charge, and what would we not give for an official copy of the proceedings? The sentence was death, and He was executed. The appeal was to the High Court of Heaven. The human decision was reversed, the sentence of the earthly court was repealed, and He was 'determined Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.'¹

I.

The Resurrection was a Proof of Christ's Divine Sonship.

The Apostle says that Christ was 'declared' to be the Son of God by the resurrection of the dead.

1. Events are for God what language is for man. They are the manner, the means whereby God reveals His mind and will. Events are the language of God written on the pages of human history, whether it be the history of a man or of a family or of a nation or of the world. Just as God's eternal power and Godhead are, according to the Apostle, clearly understood by reverent study of the book of Nature—the 'things that are made' as he calls it—so the judgments which are formed in the Divine mind on men, on families, on nations, are discoverable in the book of human history, as they are written in the language of events. But whether the characters in which His mind is thus declared are always legible by man or by all men is quite another question. Sometimes, indeed, they are written in a familiar alphabet; their meaning is so clear that all men may read it. All who believed that the world is governed by a moral God understood what was meant by the fall of Babylon, by the capture of Rome by Alaric, by the close of the career of Napoleon. Sometimes they are written in characters as wholly unintelligible to all living men as were the Egyptian hieroglyphics half a century ago, though they may be read by the higher intelligences around the throne in heaven, or they may be read hereafter on earth, for all that we know, by highly endowed souls. And in the book of history there is much written of this kind which eludes the efforts of man's inquisitive and constant gaze. But sometimes also the meaning of God's writing in events is hidden from the mass of men at first sight, but becomes plain to them when the key of its interpretation has been given them by some competent instructor, like the 'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin,' traced on the wall of the banquetting chamber of the Eastern monarch, the sense of which was plain when a Daniel had been summoned to decipher it. Of such handwriting as this, too, history is full, but we must not

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linger on it, since we have to fix our attention on one great example of it in one particular event, the resurrection of our Lord.

Now, that a striking occurrence such as the resurrection would have a special meaning or several meanings, is an obvious supposition. The strange thing would be if such an event could occur without any purpose or meaning at all; and St. Paul tells us what, in his inspired judgment, one such meaning was: it was to declare that Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

2. What was it in our Lord's case that invested His Resurrection with this declaratory force which the Apostle ascribes to it? The answer is, first of all, that the resurrection of our Lord was a verification of the proof which He had voluntarily offered of His own claim. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. This He frankly confessed before the chief priest. For making this claim He was condemned and crucified, and His resurrection vindicates the justness of His claim. God declared Him to be the Son of God with power, by His resurrection from the dead. Peter said, 'This Jesus whom ye have crucified, God hath raised from the dead, exalted at his right hand, and hath made him both Lord and Christ.' Christ said that He had power to lay down His life and power to take it up again. This power was within Himself. Elijah raised the dead, but it was by a power without—a power that he had received from on High. Peter restored one to life, but it was through the power of Christ; but Jesus Christ had the power within Himself. He raised Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, and the son of the widow of Naim to life by His own power. It was because there was life within Himself, that He could say, 'Destroy this temple, and the third day I will build it up again'; 'I am the resurrection and the life.' What a comfort! What an assurance! Jesus Christ is declared to be the Son of God and the Saviour of man by His resurrection from the dead. Here is an absolute certainty of salvation. Here is assurance of remission of sins. Herein the children of God are justified, walk in newness of life with Him, and have their lives hid in God with Him.

3. The demonstration of Christ's Divine Sonship came '*with power*.' The resurrection did not hesitatingly suggest that our Lord might possibly be the Son of God; it amounted, when taken together with His life and character and teaching, to a demonstration irresistible and overwhelming,

at least to the Apostle himself, that He was the Son of God. To the Apostle himself, because, looking at the connexion of the passage, it is scarcely open to doubt that the expression 'with power' points first of all to a personal experience. Saul of Tarsus, at that time an active young Rabbi in Jerusalem, strongly attached to the cause of the Pharisee party, was not one of the privileged company to whom our risen Redeemer showed Himself during the great forty days. As an unconverted Jew he would have looked at the person and work of Jesus through an atmosphere discoloured by false reports and by implacable controversial passions. But the vision on the way to Damascus changed all that. He who could bend into utter submission the mind and the will of His stoutest adversary, must be indeed of more than human stature, must be indeed Divine. To St. Paul the resurrection was a revelation of the divinity of the Son of God made with power. And so it has been ever since. The resurrection has been felt to be the fact which, beyond all others proclaims Christ to man as the Son of God. When Judas had gone his way, the important requisite in his successor was that he was to be a witness to the resurrection. The resurrection was the burden of all the recorded preaching of the earliest Church; the gospel it preached was the gospel of the resurrection; whether in the mouth of Peter or Stephen or Paul, it was all the same. And at this moment all who think seriously on the matter know that the resurrection is the point at which the creed which carries us to the faith of heaven is most clearly embedded in the soil of earth; most really capable of asserting a place for its Divine and living subject in the history of our race. Disprove the resurrection, and Christianity fades away into thin air as a graceful, but discredited illusion. But as a certain fact, it does its work as at the first in every honest conscience and intellect. More than any other event, it proclaims Christ to be the Son of God with power in millions of Christian souls.

He is the Son of God; but how is that to be demonstrated? You point me to the carpenter as He walks along with His bag of tools, and you say, 'That is the Son of God.' I may say, 'I believe it,' but my heart sighs, 'Oh, that it were demonstrated!' You point me to a man sitting tired out upon the well of Samaria, and you say, 'That is the Son of God.' I believe it, but my heart is still saying, 'Oh, I wish that He could be determined to be such!' I want a more powerful argument that will at once set the

matter beyond doubt. The Holy Ghost says that you have it in His resurrection from the dead. I see Him there on the cross, and, in His uttermost weakness, He bows His head and dies. It is really blood that gathers in a pool at the foot of that cross. Son of David, Thou hast died! But stand by that open grave on the third morning. Now, guards, arrest Him! What, Romans, will you allow the stone to be rolled back? Why do you not put your hand, in the name of the imperial Cæsar, upon the arm of that lone man as He comes forth from that sepulchre? Lay hold upon Him! No, those guards are as dead men upon the ground. Christ staked everything upon this—'I have power to lay down my life, and I have power to take it again;' and He has taken it again. He has come up and out from among the dead, and the resurrection thunders forth, 'According to the flesh He is of the seed of David, but according to the spirit of holiness He is the Son of God.'¹

II.

The Resurrection was the Triumph of Moral Character.

1. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ we see the victory of holiness. As we looked upon the cross and tried to read its lesson, the one thing that we saw there was the perfect holiness of the Sufferer. Everything else, all that goes to make up what the world calls success, was gone; worldly position, comfort, wide influence with others—all were gone. The Sufferer had none of these. What He had was a character with which His enemies could find no fault; a character of considerate forgiveness, of thoughtfulness for others, of earnest longing to do God's will, of absolute self-surrender and trust in God. These we saw, and then all ended in gloom. What a sad thing it would have been for human nature if that had been the real end, if this perfect human character had ended with failure in the grave. But, thank God, it was not the end. The Easter message means this, that whatever man may do, God will not neglect holiness. God will not suffer His Holy One to see corruption. In virtue of the spirit of holiness, Christ is risen from the dead; and God has set to His seal that it is not prosperity, not worldly success, not riches, but character and holiness that shall survive the grave.

The resurrection of Jesus was the triumph of character, and it is interesting to notice how this thought seems to have been the one which first laid hold of the disciples. As they talk of their risen Lord, it is by a title which was not common before, and which soon gave way to more majestic titles. He is for them 'the Just One'—'the Holy One.'

¹ A. G. Brown.

'Ye denied,' says St. Peter to the Jews, 'Ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you.' Jesus is spoken of in prayer to God as 'Thy Holy Child,' 'Thy Holy Servant' (R.V.). When St. Paul is converted he is told that God hath chosen him to see 'the Just One,' 'the Righteous One' (R.V.).²

2. The Resurrection was a triumph of character in the effect it had on the disciples.

Some of you may perhaps remember the striking scene in *Faust*, where Faust is about to commit suicide. The cup of poison is in his hand; he is moving it to his lips, when on his ears falls the sound of the Easter hymns singing the risen Christ. The sound and the recollections that it stirs recall him, and he is saved. But in that song which is put into the mouth of the disciples, the poet seems to me to have made one great mistake. He makes the disciples praise the victory of Christ, but bewail their own fortune, as left behind to suffer on earth:

Lo—He whom we buried,
Now out of his prison,
Living, exalted,
Royally risen!
He with the Creator,
God's joyance may share:
We on earth's bosom
Still suffer, still bear!
He has left us behind Him
To languish and pine:
Ah, Master, we sorrow
For the joy that is Thine.

How different is this from the language of the Gospel: 'And it came to pass that while He blessed them, He was parted from them and carried up into heaven, and they worshipped Him; and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the Temple, praising and blessing God.'³

All Christian peoples have had some conception of the importance of the resurrection. In one of the great cathedrals of Europe, the resurrection of Christ is celebrated by a beautiful and symbolic ceremony. Doves which have been confined in cages are brought out in front of the great towers of the cathedral, and the doors of the cages opened that the doves may emerge from them and mount up toward heaven. It is a symbol of the soul released from the cage of its confinement, and mounting up in resurrection glory to bask in the sunshine of God, and attain the very heaven where He dwells.⁴

III.

The Resurrection of Christ was the type of other Resurrections.

1. The phrase is not 'Resurrection from the dead,' but 'Resurrection of the dead' (plu.), be-

² W. Lock, in *Keble College Sermons*, 1877-1888, p. 89.

³ *Ibid.* p. 90.

⁴ A. T. Pierson, *The Hopes of the Gospel*, 170.

cause in Him the general hope of mankind received a first fulfilment. Others had been raised by prophets of old, and by Christ Himself, but only to die again. 'Christ being raised from the dead, dieth no more.'

The resurrection of Jesus carried all other resurrections with it. It is not simply the resurrection of Jesus Christ by Himself; for, when Jesus Christ rose, He rose as the first-fruits of an innumerable company. Not only did Christ rise, but *Christ is the resurrection*; and in His resurrection His redeemed ones shall rise. Paul here takes a view right into the far distance; and when he says, 'declared to be the Son of God in power,' he does not simply say, 'by his own resurrection'; but 'declared to be so by the resurrection'; that is, by His own resurrection, first, and by the opening up of every grave hereafter. So we bow to Jesus and we worship Him as very God.

There is a great picture you will find in many galleries, of the Crucifixion of Christ. It was first a fine painting, then reduced by the art of engraving to a first-class steel plate. It represents the three crosses, the dark heavens, the rent rocks, and, in the foreground, saints moving out of their graves and walking towards the Holy City. The unfortunate thing is that the artist overlooked the statement of Matthew, who says, 'The rocks were rent, the graves were opened, and many of the bodies of the saints which slept, arose and came out of their graves after his resurrection.' What becomes of that picture? It is the embodiment of an error. The evangelist Matthew thinks of the rending of the rocks in connexion with the earthquake, and the exposure of the graves that were in those rocks, and then he adds in a kind of parenthesis, 'Many of the bodies of the saints which slept'—in these sepulchres that were rent asunder,—'arose and came out of their graves, after His resurrection'; we are not to think that they rose before Christ. He was the first-fruits of them that slept, and saints who rose after Him were like the first sheaf laid on the altar, 'on the morrow after the Sabbath,' as an offering unto the Lord. So Christ's resurrection is the first-fruits of ours, for it antedates and antecedes all other resurrections.¹

2. No one can read the Epistles of St. Paul without observing that he constantly speaks of the crucifixion and the resurrection not only as events in the life of Jesus upon earth, but as spiritual transactions which take place within the Christian soul or character. He bids Christians to 'crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts thereof.' He says of himself, 'I am crucified with Christ'; and addressing his readers at Ephesus, he quotes a Christian hymn of the earliest age, 'Awake, thou that sleepest, arise from the dead, and Christ shall

¹ A. T. Pierson, *The Hopes of the Gospel*, 169.

give thee light.' He exclaims in his Epistle to his Colossian friends, 'If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.' It is true that this language of St. Paul is more particularly connected with the entrance of new converts into the Church of Christ by baptism. Conversion involved a crucifixion of the old corrupt nature, and then, as the new convert was dipped beneath the baptismal waters and raised again by the minister of the sacraments, he was, in St. Paul's words, 'Buried with Christ in baptism, and raised again to newness of life.'

But although that is the first and more usual application of the Apostle's language, his language applies also to the circumstances of the altered life of baptized Christians who have fallen from God and from grace, and need to return to God by a fresh conversion. If the body of Christ could rise only once from the grave, the Christian soul may certainly need to rise a second time; may, after a fall from grace, need such a resurrection unless all is to be lost. And when such an event in the moral or spiritual world takes place, it is strange if they who look on do not learn from it something that they had not known before about the Son of God. When a man hears the voice of the Son of God, when his eyes are open to behold His justice and His love, when he opens his ears to His warnings and His promises, when he opens his mouth to pray and to praise Him as the Author, the Redeemer, the Sanctifier of his life, when such an one exchanges his corruption for purity, his coldness for the glow of warm affections, bursts the bondages of habit and passes forth through the barriers that would fain detain him, into light and freedom; when men around behold this, and note further how in such a soul, risen and beautified, love has taken the place of hatred, joy of sullen discontent, peace of restlessness, and long-suffering of an impatience with others and with God that knew no bounds, and faith of a distrust alike of man and of God, and temperance of a perfect chaos of insurgent passions—when they see the man who dwelt yesterday among the graves, sitting to-day among the pure, clothed and in his right mind, and ask, 'Who has done it? Who has thus changed that which offers to his will a much more stubborn resistance than the dust of a buried corpse, or the stone which closes the mouth of the sepulchre?' it is clear what must be the answer—Who but He who, at the grave of

Bethany, announced Himself as the Resurrection and the Life, and bade Lazarus come forth from his tomb, and whose own resurrection is not merely an outward power to mould our thoughts, but an inward power to transform our very souls and characters? When the old Christians whom Saul of Tarsus had so cruelly wronged beheld his converted life, his clear intelligence, his warm affections, his true and strong will all placed at the service of the Saviour whom he but now had persecuted, what did they do? He himself shall answer: 'They glorified God in me.' And when in the Church of our day a soul rises from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, there goes forth—oh! be sure of it—into hundreds and

thousands of consciences around the proclamation of the Divine power of the Son of God.¹

In one corner of my garden there is a rubbish-heap; it is away out of sight, because it is not pleasant to look at. Yet more than once in that rubbish-heap I have seen a beautiful flower spring up and bloom; some hyacinth bulb or rose-tree root which has been thrown there by mistake will rise out of the midst of the decay into fresh and beautiful life. The true nature of bulb or root is proved by this resurrection. There could be no flower if there were no capacity for the flower. So it is with the children of the All-Father in this strange, bewildering world of ours. Despair of none: God indwells all; at the worst and darkest it is still possible for the Divine Sonship to arise in power.²

¹ H. P. Liddon.

² R. J. Campbell, *New Theology Sermons*, 42.

The Doctrine of the Incarnation in the Creeds.

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III.

(1) When we approach the creeds from the standpoint of historical fact, we discover that they include what for some Christian scholars is doubtful, and what for the Christian scholar to-day is most certain in the historical reality of Jesus. (i.) While I myself have not found adequate reason for rejecting the tradition of the Christian Church regarding the virgin-birth, I must admit that literary and historical criticism does not allow the same degree of certainty as regards the healing and teaching ministry, the death and rising again of Christ. It is certain that a creed drawn up to-day would not demand acceptance of the fact as a necessary part of a Christian's confession of Christ as Saviour and Lord. (ii.) As regards the descent into Hades and the Second Advent, the Christian scholar could not insist on their acceptance literally as essential articles of the Christian faith, although in each the Christian thinker, even of to-day, may find a suggestion of Christian truth. (iii.) About the death of Christ by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate there is to-day no doubt or question deserving any attention from the historical student. The Resurrection is a fact which unbelief challenges to-day as in every age; but this fact is one which, on the one hand, the

Christian Church must assert, and may assert on the ground of personal experience of Christ's presence and power, and of the general history of Christendom as inexplicable without the guidance and guardianship of its Living Head; and which, on the other, historical and literary criticism cannot disprove. The literature of the New Testament and the history of the Christian Church are both unintelligible if this fundamental reality is an illusion. The fact of the Resurrection of Christ has a legitimate and unavoidable claim to be included in any Christian Confession.

(2) The question may, however, be raised, whether faith should be burdened with the demand to assert historical fact at all. Is not faith concerned solely with ideas and ideals? Can faith in eternal reality rest on historical fact? The answer to the question is that the Christian religion is an historical religion with a personal founder. It is not a conception of God, man, and their mutual relation reached by speculative thought or mystical intuition; but it is a personal relation between God and man constituted in the historical reality of Jesus Christ; it is a revelation in time of the eternal God; it is a redemption in time of man unto eternal life. Idea and ideal are