Romans - Commentaries by James Lampden Harris

Present Testimony Papers, Intercession of the Spirit, The (8:18-34)

It has pleased God to reveal that standing in grace into which faith in Christ gives us introduction; and He shows us, to our comfort, how that standing is always maintained for us in righteousness by the intercession of Christ. It is not the way of the Spirit of God to present truth to us theoretically, but rather in a way to meet the exercises of conscience, both with respect to our sinfulness and God's holiness. An abstract doctrine, however true, will not meet the need of an exercised soul. Such a soul is sensitive both as to the holiness of God and the evil of sin, and needs to know the present living active ministry of Christ as engaged on its behalf. It is with the intercession of Christ that the apostle closes the wonderful climax (Rom. 8:31-34). None can lay anything to the charge of God's elect, for God Himself has justified them -none can condemn them without impugning the value of Christ's death. But Christ is risen again, and is even at the right hand of God; and there He is actively engaged on our behalf; "He also maketh intercession for us." It is thus that God has provided for the maintenance of His holiness, and prevented even our failings from displacing us from that nearness to Him, whereunto we are brought by the blood of Christ.

What the value of the intercession of Jesus was to Peter, the same is it to every believer. Had Peter's faith in Jesus failed, on the discovery of the turpitude of his conduct to his Master, how exquisite would have been his misery. But when he was turned from fleshly confidence to look only to Jesus, he not only knew that he was "kept by the power of God," but he was also "strengthened." It is thus that we are kept in that grace wherein we stand; and our standing before God through Jesus is "holy, and unblameable, and unrebukeable."

But God is pleased to consider our actual circumstances, and to provide for us accordingly. This is infinite condescension, and the way in which we especially learn divine sympathy. "He knoweth our frame, He remembereth that we are but as dust." The apostle in Rom. 8 speaks of "sufferings," "groanings," and "infirmities," as making part of the actual condition of the saints; and it is well to notice, that if we do not recognize the gracious way in which God considers our actual condition, we are liable to fall into mysticism or reckless fatalism. Over against "the sufferings of the present time" the apostle sets "the glory to be revealed in us" -over against "the groanings" "the redemption of the body" (see also 2 Cor. 5). But in meeting "the infirmities" the apostle introduces "the intercession of the Spirit." But what are the infirmities of which the apostle speaks? These are sufficiently defined; for while they result from our being still in the flesh. and in the world, they are infirmities which are not common to man as man, but characteristic of "the saints." "We know," says the apostle, "that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now"; and not only it, but ourselves also, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, "the redemption of the body." Here "ourselves stands in contrast with "the whole creation." It groans, and we groan. True it is that we groan with it, as having sympathy with it, because we are connected with "the first man, who is of the earth, earthy." But we groan "within ourselves," because of our possession of the Spirit; by that Spirit we are linked to another creation, of which Jesus, not Adam, is the Head. In and of one creation for a time, but belonging to another creation essentially and forever, we groan by reason of the strangeness of our actual condition.

The spiritual man, knowing that he is presented before God as in the spirit {Spirit}, and not in the flesh, is at the same time made very sensible of what it is to "groan in this tabernacle, being burdened." But even were he exempt from personal trials, he sees all around him contrary to Christ; he sees the great mass, although outwardly acknowledging Christ, yet strangers to His grace, and either setting aside or resisting "the truth." Jesus himself, for there is none perfect but the Lord, was necessarily, in this world, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," exhibiting divine sympathy in full intelligence of the extent of human misery. He was "grieved at the hardness of the heart" of those around Him (Mark 3:5). When a case of human misery was presented before Him, in one deaf, and who had an impediment in his speech, "He sighed, and saith unto him `Ephphatha,' that is, Be opened." So again, at witnessing the deeper misery of those who sought a sign from heaven; "He sighed deeply in His spirit." He wept over Jerusalem, when He saw her reckless of impending visitation. He wept at the grave of Lazarus, when He witnessed the inevitable disruption of the fondest human affections. In our measure the reality of human misery, moral and physical, must often produce the secret sigh, alloyed, indeed, in us, by selfishness, which had no place in Jesus. Even where there is allowed human joy, as in the outflowing of family affection, the sigh will escape, or the tear roll down, in the certain knowledge of its transitiveness. But while our actual condition necessitates as it were this inward groaning, there are exercises of the soul, which (although not sinful in themselves, yet resulting from our actual condition) become most perplexing. Such exercises the apostle here calls "infirmities," and it is in reference to these infirmities that the apostle presents to us the doctrine of "the intercession of the Spirit." "Likewise, also, the Spirit helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered, and He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to God." "But we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." One special "infirmity" arising from our actual condition, is, that because of that condition we are unable intelligently to ask God to meet our need. We are perplexed and drawn different ways. The soul may labor to pour itself out before God, and yet know not how to utter its complaint, or what to ask for. Here the Spirit comes in to our help, and by means of a groan, or a sigh, unintelligent to us, maketh intercession for us. But, although unintelligent to us, it is not unintelligent in heaven, for "He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit." He knows what the real need is, and what the right remedy is; for the intercession of the Spirit is according to God's perfect understanding of our case, and not according to our ignorance. This is a doctrine of solid comfort to the soul. The Lord had made known of old how that he put all the tears of His saints in His bottle," as well as that "in all their afflictions He was afflicted." But till redemption was actually accomplished by the work of Christ on the cross, the doctrine of the intercession of the Spirit could not be announced. Till Jesus was glorified, the Holy Ghost could not come down from heaven to dwell in the church as the other comforter, and to take this place of intercession. It is only when the irreconcilable variance between the flesh and the spirit is truly acknowledged, and we have learned to judge the flesh according to the extent of its meaning, as set forth in the word of God, that we discover that there may be intelligence with God in a sigh or a groan. The doctrine may be exemplified by Jesus himself, the perfect one.

The scene at the grave of Lazarus brought out from Jesus what seemed only an unintelligent groan; but that groan was intelligible to the Father, and it was answered. "When Jesus, therefore, saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping, which came with her, He groaned in the spirit, and was troubled... Jesus therefore again groaning in Himself, cometh to the grave... Then they took away the stone where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me" (John 11:33, 38, 41)." This illustrates the doctrine. Prayer was not uttered, but the groan in the spirit was heard and answered.

The Apostle Paul, in the statement of his experience (Phil. 1:21-24), furnishes us with an instance of an "infirmity" to which we are subject by reason of our present condition. His perplexity was speedily resolved, but the perplexity itself sprang from an infirmity, because his personal spiritual feelings drew him one way, and his spiritual judgment another. There was nothing sinful in the conflict; it was infirmity. However holy and pure his personal feeling -a feeling only possible for one born of God -even this feeling needed to be lost in the good, perfect, and acceptable will of God. One only could perfectly say, "Lo, I come to do thy will, O God." We must, indeed, take perfection as our example; but in our case, personal feelings have often to be crossed, and always to be exercised, in order to bring us into approval of and delight in the will of God. "To me," says the apostle, "to live, is Christ, and to die, is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor: yet what I shall choose I wot not, for I am in a strait between two." The sum of human life is, in the case of many, nothing more than a choice between two evils; and unfaithfulness often brings Christians themselves into a like perplexity. But in the case of the apostle, it was a choice between two blessed things: his own personal joy, in being with the Lord, and his service to the Lord in serving the saints. To be thrown into "a strait betwixt two," is a token of infirmity arising from the condition in which we are. The unfallen angels cannot be supposed to be in such a state. Their glory is, that however "they excel in strength, they do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word." The glory of the redeemed also is obedience to the will of God; but they not being dependent on direct mandate, as angels; but, led of the Spirit into exercise of conscience in order to obedience, discover their infirmity, and are often in such a strait as not to know what to choose, or what to ask for, as they ought. Hence they sigh and groan; but in this exercise, the Spirit maketh intercession for them according to God. When we look at "the Son" Himself, we see the difference between Him and "men having infirmity" -between the Master and His servant. In the servant there was "infirmity," hence his strait, his not knowing what to choose.

The Master also was "straitened" but not "between two." There was no place in Him for such infirmity. He had one single object before Him. "My meat," says He, "is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish His work." "That work was before Him," and "when the time was come that He should be received up, He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem." But He knew the reality of that which awaited Him there, and said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished." Deep were the exercises of His soul in approaching this marvelous work. His perfect knowledge of the evil of sin, as well as of the wrath of God about to light on Him, before He was "received up," "straitened" His spirit. But in the deepest exercise of His soul in anticipation of the cross (for when the moment came He was led as a lamb to the slaughter) He was never "in a strait betwixt two." His one object, "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God," was always conspicuous. "How is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour; but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy name." In His agony in the garden of Gethsemane, His one object is made more prominent by the depth of the soul-exercise through which He was passing. "Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done." We have the fullest assurance that in Jesus, "we have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities." He can throw Himself into our case in all the power of divine sympathy, but He "needed not," as we do, to be led by a process of discipline into acquiescence with the will of God, because to do that will was His single paramount object. We are often in a "strait between two," not knowing what to choose, or what to pray for as we ought. But the Spirit helpeth our infirmities, and maketh intercession for us according to God, by a sigh or a groan. The perplexity is cleared away, and acquiescence in the good, perfect, and acceptable will of God is brought about. For the statement of the apostle, that "we do know that all things work together for good to them that love God, the called according to His purpose," is closely connected with the doctrine of the intercession of the Spirit. The apostle states what "we do not know," and what "we do know." "We know not what to pray for as we ought," "but we do know that all things work together for good to them that love God." This statement comes in to meet the need of an exercised soul, and not as an abstract doctrine. It is through perplexities and difficulties, in proving what is the good, and perfect, and acceptable will of God, that the soul is led to leave all things in His hand, rather than choose for itself; and to rest in holy confidence, that under His wise master-hand all things are working together for good, although it may not know what to pray for.

In illustration of what these infirmities are, which the Spirit helps by what is to us an intelligent sigh or groan; let us take the case of a Christian father of a family laid on a bed of sickness. His own gain would be to depart and be with Christ, but he sees those around him whom he is bringing up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and his anxiety is for them. Shall he plead to be raised up for their sakes? He is in a strait, conflicting thoughts rise within; he is deeply exercised, he knows not what to pray for; he feels almost as though he could not pray; he groans inwardly. Here is the intercession of the Spirit. The conflict ends. His times are in the hands of the Lord. If God takes him, He can "turn His hand on the little ones." God can take better care of them than the father, and He will not take away the father without supplying the father's place Himself. Such an exercise of soul therefore, under God's hand, is working together with other things for good; it brings out into prominence God's covenant promises as blessed realities, and leading the soul to look unto Jesus, as the perfect pattern, to say humbly, yet sincerely, "Not my will, but Thine be done."

Presbutes

The Present Testimony 7:143-149 (1855)

Notes from Christian Annotator, Romans 7:4 (7:4)

In Rom. 7 the Apostle enters largely into the question of the nature of law; taking up and proving his previous passing notice of law, such as "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20); "We establish the law" (Rom. 3:21); "Sin shall not have dominion over you, because ye are not under law" (Rom. 6:14).

I apprehend that "law" (Rom. 7:4) must be taken in the same comprehensive sense as in these passages, and therefore necessarily includes the moral law. The doctrine of the sixth chapter is that nothing short of death justifies from sin, and that we must have died unto sin in order to live to God; and that we have died to sin judicially in Christ (Rom. 6:2), cp. with Rom. 6:10.

In Rom. 7 the doctrine is, that we must have died unto "law" in order to union with Christ and fruitfulness unto God, and the Apostle twice asserts that we have died unto law by the body of Christ (vv. 4, 6), so that law has no longer dominion over us, because we have died; and he proves that sin would have dominion over one even quickened by the Spirit, if he were put under law, instead of being delivered by Christ. Deliverance from sin and deliverance from law by the cross of Christ are the introduction into a new life, and the basis of "righteousness and holiness of truth."

Presbutes The Christian Annotator 3:367, 368 (1856).

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