

The Silence of God

by Robert Anderson

The sermon explores the profound mystery of God's silence in the face of human suffering and the implications for faith and grace.

Scripture: John 4:48, Acts 28:28, Romans 16:25, Hebrews 1:1

Topics: "Divine Providence", "Christian Suffering"

Description

R.A. preaches about the silence of God, emphasizing the unique truth of Grace enthroned in Christianity, lost in the era between the New Testament Canon and the Patristic theologians. The sermon delves into the mystery of why God remains silent in the face of suffering and evil, challenging the common belief that miracles are the only way to authenticate a revelation. It explores the purpose of miracles in accrediting the Person of Christ rather than His teachings, and how the transition from a Jewish to a Gentile audience in the early Church led to a decrease in miraculous events.

Transcript

THE SILENCE OF GOD

PREFACE TO THE NINTH EDITION

IN response to appeals from various quarters this book is once again reissued. Its importance is enhanced by the vagaries of religious thought in our day, and notably by the growth of certain religious movements which claim to be accredited by "miraculous" spiritual manifestations. As the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches, certain great truths which are generally regarded as distinctively Christian were common to the Divine religion of Judaism upon which Christianity is based. And as the opening words of Romans remind us, "The gospel of God concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord" was "promised afore" in Hebrew prophecy.

The most distinctive truth of the Christian revelation is Grace enthroned. And that truth was lost in the interval that elapsed between the close of the New Testament Canon and the era of the Patristic theologians. That He to whom the prerogative of judgment has been committed is now sitting upon the throne of God in grace, and that, as a consequence, all judicial and punitive action against human sin is in abeyance - deferred until the day of grace is over and the day of judgment dawns - this is a truth that will be sought for in vain in the standard theology of Christendom.

"My gospel" the Apostle Paul calls it, for it was through him that this truth was revealed - not the gospel "promised afore," but "the preaching of Christ according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret since the world began." Even among men, the wise and strong keep silence when they have said all they wish to say. And as this gospel of grace is the supreme revelation of Divine mercy to the world, the silence of heaven will remain unbroken until the Lord Jesus passes from the throne of grace to the throne of judgment.

It is not that the Divine moral Government of the world is in abeyance. Still less is it that spiritual miracles have ceased. For in our day the gospel has achieved triumphs in heathendom which transcend anything recorded in the New Testament. Infidelity is thus confronted by miracles of a kind that give far surer proof of the presence and power of God than any miracle in the natural sphere could offer - hearts so entirely changed, and lives so thoroughly transformed, that fierce, brutal, and degraded savages have become humble, pure-living, and gracious.

But the argument of these pages is that what may be called evidential miracles have no place in this "Christian dispensation." In the ages before Christ came, men may well have craved tokens of the action of a personal God. But in the ministry and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, God has so plainly manifested not only His power, but His goodness and love toward man, that to grant evidential miracles now would be an acknowledgment that questions which have been for ever settled are still open.

No one may limit what God will do in response to individual faith. But we may confidently assert that, in view of His supreme revelation in Christ, God will yield nothing to the petulant demands of unbelief. And that revelation supplies the key to the dual mystery of a silent heaven and the trials of the life of faith on earth. This foreword is given for the benefit of persons who skim a book instead of reading it. R.A.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION IN his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne descants feelingly upon his incapacity for literary effort during the years in which he held an appointment in the Custom House. But there are spheres of work in the Public Service compared with which the Custom House might seem almost a sanctuary! And having regard to the circumstances in which the present volume was written, the demand for a new edition within a few weeks of its first appearance gives striking proof of deep and wide-spread interest in the subject of which it treats.

Conflicting criticisms have been passed upon the structure of the book. In the opinion of some the middle chapters embarrass the argument, and ought to be omitted or curtailed. Others, again, have strongly urged that these very chapters should be amplified, and definite additions made to them. These seemingly contradictory suggestions are both alike legitimate. To a very limited class such incidental dissertations seem unnecessary, and the mere critic turns from them with impatience; but in the estimation of the great majority of readers they are of exceptional interest.

The ninth and eleventh chapters, for example, which might perhaps have been excluded, seem to have attracted special notice. It must not be forgotten, moreover, that, unlike those doctrines which belong to the Christian dispensation in common with that which preceded it, the great characteristic truth of Christianity is ignored by the religion of Christendom, and receives but scant attention even in our best religious literature. It is of vital moment, therefore, to unfold here its character and scope, and to emphasise its transcendent importance.

Indeed it will probably be found that the reader's appreciation of the argument will be precisely in proportion to his apprehension of this truth. One of the leading daily papers, for instance, informs its

readers that the author "finds the sufficient cause of the silence in the doctrine of the Atonement." And another journal -a Review of the highest class indicates as the "main contention" of the book, "that the Christian facts supply an adequate explanation of the 'Silence of God.'" It might seem impossible that any one could so misread these pages; but the preceding paragraph may perhaps account for the phenomenon.

"The Atonement" is not a specially Christian doctrine at all: it holds as prominent a place in Judaism as in Christianity. And the author's "contention," most plainly expressed, is that "the Christian facts," so far from explaining the silence of Heaven, seem only to render it still more inexplicable. In the judgment of this last-cited critic the intensely Protestant and Christian position maintained throughout this volume is nothing more than a "peculiar view of Scripture as a supreme guide in matters of faith and speculation."

And writing from the standpoint this indicates, his strictures are, of course, unsympathetic and severe. Nor can the author complain of this; for one who deals hard blows should expect hard blows in return. But there should be no "hitting below the belt." The impartial reader can decide whether these pages afford even a colourable pretext for the charge of "occasional departures from reverence." And no less unwarrantable is the allegation that Mr. Balfour is here referred to in "a patronising tone."

Considerable freedom, indeed, is used in criticising the arguments of a still more distinguished man. But the author's misgivings upon that score have been relieved by receiving a letter from Mr. Gladstone himself. "I am very glad," he writes, "that those arguments should be thoroughly canvassed by persons so well disposed and competent as yourself." TABLE OF CONTENTS CHAPTER I. The problem stated, and exemplified by the Armenian atrocities and the massacre of Christian missionaries, by "the Christian persecutions" and the common experience of Christians generally CHAPTER II.

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CHAPTER ONE

A SILENT Heaven is the greatest mystery of our existence. Some there are, indeed, for whom the problem has no perplexities. In a philosophy of silly optimism, or a life of selfish isolation, they have "attained Nirvana." For such the sad and hideous realities of life around us have no existence. Upon their path these cast no shadow. The serene atmosphere of their fools' paradise is undisturbed by the cry of the suffering and the oppressed. But earnest and thoughtful men face these realities, and have ears to hear that cry; and their indignant wonder finds utterance at times in some such words as those of the old Hebrew prophet and bard, "Doth God know?"

And is there knowledge in the Most High? Society, even in the great centres of our modern civilisation, is all too like a slave-ship, where, with the sounds of music and laughter and revelry on the upper deck, there mingle the groans of untold misery batten down below. Who can estimate the sorrow and suffering and wrong endured during a single round of the clock even in the favoured metropolis of highly favoured England? And if it be thus in the green tree, what shall be said of the dry!

What mind is competent to grasp the sum of all this great world's misery, heaped up day after day, year after year, century after century? Human hearts may plan, and human hands achieve, some little to alleviate it, and the strong and ready arm of human law may accomplish much in the protection of the weak and the punishment of the wicked. But as for God - the light of moon and stars is not more cold and pitiless than He appears to be! Every new chapter in the story of Turkish misrule raises a fresh storm of indignation throughout Europe.

The conscience of Christendom is outraged by tales of oppression and cruelty and wrong inflicted on the Christian subjects of the Porte. Here is a testimony to the Armenian massacres of 1895 "Over 60,000 Armenians have been butchered. In Trebizond, Erzeroum, Erzinghian, Hassankaleh, and numberless other places the Christians were crushed like grapes during the vintage. The frantic mob, seething and surging in the streets of the cities, swept down upon the defenceless Armenians, plundered their shops, gutted their houses, then joked and jested with the terrified victims, as cats play with mice.

The rivulets were choked up with corpses; the streams ran red with human blood; the forest glades and rocky caves were peopled with the dead and dying; among the black ruins of once prosperous villages lay roasted infants by their mangled mothers' corpses; pits were dug at night by the wretches destined to fill them, many of whom, flung in when but lightly wounded, awoke underneath a mountain of clammy corpses, and vainly wrestled with death and with the dead, who shut them out from light and life for ever.

"A man In Erzeroum, hearing a tumult, and fearing for his children, who were playing in the street, went out to seek and save them. He was borne down upon by the mob. He pleaded for his life, protesting that he had always lived in peace with his Moslem neighbours, and sincerely loved them. The statement may have represented a fact, or it may have been but a plea for pity. The ringleader, however, told him that that was the proper spirit, and would be condignly rewarded. The man was then stripped, and a chunk of his flesh cut out of his body, and jestingly offered for sale: 'Good fresh meat, and dirt cheap,' exclaimed some of the crowd.

'Who'll buy fine dog's meat?' echoed the amused bystanders. The writhing wretch uttered piercing screams as some of the mob, who had just come from rifling the shops, opened a bottle and poured vinegar or some acid into the gaping wound. He called on God and man to end his agonies. But they had only begun. Soon afterwards two little boys came up, the elder crying, 'Hairik, Hairih (Father, father), save me! See what they've done to me!' and pointed to his head, from which the blood was streaming over his handsome face, and down his neck.

The younger brother - a child of about three - was playing with a wooden toy. The agonising man was silent for a second and then, glancing at these his children, made a frantic but vain effort to snatch a dagger from a Turk by his side. This was the signal for the renewal of his torments. The bleeding boy was finally dashed with violence against the dying father, who began to lose strength and consciousness, and the two were then pounded to death where they lay. The younger child sat near, dabbling his wooden toy in the blood of his father and brother, and looking up, now through smiles at the prettily dressed Kurds and now through tears at the dust-begrimed thing that had lately been his father.

A slash of a sabre, wound up his short experience of God's world, and the crowd turned its attention to others. "These are but isolated scenes revealed for a brief second by the light, as it were, of a momentary lightning-flash. The worst cannot be described."-Contemporary Review, January, 1896. The following refers to still more recent horrors :- "In no place in this region has the attack upon the Christians been

more savage than in Egin. Every male above twelve years of age who could be found was slain.

Only one Armenian was found who had been seen and spared. Many children and boys were laid on their backs and their necks cut like sheep. The women and children were gathered together in the yard of the Government building and in various places throughout the town. Turks, Kurds, and soldiers went among these women, selected the fairest, and led them aside to outrage them. In the village of Pinguan fifteen women threw themselves into the river to escape dishonour."-The Times, December 10, 1896.

And what is the element in all this that most exasperates the public sentiment? It is that the Sultan has the power to prevent all this, but will not. That, while possessing ample means to restrain and punish, he remains unmoved, and in the safe seclusion of his palace gives himself up to a life of luxury and ease. But has Almighty God no power to check such crimes? Even Abdul Hamid has been shamed into laying aside the dignity of kingship, and making heard his personal voice in Europe to repel the charge his seeming inaction has raised to his discredit.

But in vain do we strain our ears to hear some voice from the throne of the Divine Majesty. The far-off heaven where, in perfect peace and unutterable glory, God dwells and reigns, is SILENT! "So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter." And this in a world ruled and governed by a God who is Almighty!

And when we withdraw our thoughts from the great world around us, and fix them upon the narrow circle of His faithful people, the facts are no less stern, and the mystery grows more inscrutable. Devoted men leave our shores, forsaking the security, the comforts, the charms, the countless benefits of life in the midst of our Christian civilisation, to carry the knowledge of the true God to heathen lands. But by and by we hear of their massacre by the hands of those whom thus they sought to elevate and bless.

And where is "the true God" they served? The little band of Christian men who were in a special sense His accredited ambassadors, noble women too, who shared in their exile and their labours, and little children whose tender helplessness might excite the pity of a very devil, in their terror and agony cried to Heaven for the succour which never came. The God they trusted might surely have turned the hearts, or restrained the hands, of their brutal murderers. Is it possible to imagine circumstances that would more fitly claim the help of Him whom they worshipped as all-powerful both in heaven and on earth?

But the earth has drunk in their blood, and a silent Heaven has seemed to mock their cry! And these horrors are but mere ripples on the surface of the deep, wide sea of the Church's sufferings throughout the ages of her history. From the old days of Pagan Rome right down through the centuries of so-called "Christian" persecutions, the untold millions of the martyrs, the best and purest and noblest of our race, have been given up to violence and outrage and death in hideous forms.

The heart grows sick at the appalling story, and we turn away with a dull but baseless hope that it may be in part at least untrue. But the facts are too terrible to make exaggeration in the record of them possible. Torn by wild beasts in the arena, torn by men as merciless as wild beasts, and, far more hateful, in the torture chambers of the Inquisition, His people have died, with faces turned to heaven, and hearts upraised in prayer to God; but the heaven has seemed as hard as brass, and the God of their prayers as powerless as themselves or as callous as their persecutors!

But most men are selfish in their sympathies. Some private grief at times looms greater than all the sum of the world's miseries and the Church's sufferings. If ever there was a saint on earth, it is the mother to whose deathbed sons and daughters have been summoned from various pursuits of business or of pleasure. In all their wanderings that mother's piety and faith have been a guiding and restraining influence. And now, thus gathered once more in the old home, they are keen to watch how, in the solemn crisis of her last days on earth, God will deal with one of the loveliest and truest of His children.

And what do they behold? The poor body racked with pain that never ceases till all capacity for suffering is quenched by the hand of Death! If human skill could give relief the attending physician would be dismissed as heartless or incompetent. Is God, then, incompetent or heartless? To Him they look to relieve the death agonies of the dying saint, but they look to Him in vain! Or it may be some grief more selfish still. The crash of some great sorrow that turns a bright home into a waste, and leaves the heart so be-numbed and hard that even the so-called "consolations of religion" appear but hollow platitudes.

Why should God be so cruel? Why is Heaven so terribly silent? The most prolific fancy, the most facile pen, would fail to picture or portray, in their endless variety, the experiences which have thus stamped out the last embers of faith in many a crushed and desolated heart. "There are times," as a Christian writer puts it, "when the heaven that is over our heads seems to be brass, and the earth that is under us to be iron, and we feel our hearts sink within us under the calm pressure of unyielding and unsympathising law."

How true the statement, but how inadequate! If it were merely on behalf of this or that individual that God failed to interfere, or on one occasion or another, belief in His infinite wisdom and goodness ought to check our murmurs and soothe our fears. And, further, if, as in the days of the patriarchs, even a whole generation passed away without His once declaring Himself, faith might glance back, and hope look forward, amidst heart searchings for the cause of His silence. But what confronts us is the fact, explain it as we may, that for eighteen centuries the world has never witnessed a public manifestation of His presence or His power.

"Doth God know?" At first the thought comes up as an impatient yet not irreverent appeal. But presently the words are formed upon the lip to imply a challenge and suggest a doubt; and at last they are boldly uttered as the avowal of a settled unbelief. And then the sacred records which awed and charmed the mind in childhood, telling of "mighty acts" of Divine intervention "in the old time," begin to lose their vividness and force, till at last they sink to the level of Hebrew legends and old-world myths. In presence of the stern and dismal facts of life, the faith of earlier days gives way, for surely a God who is entirely passive and always unavailable is for all practical purposes non-existent.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN we turn to Holy Writ this mystery of a silent Heaven, which is driving so many to infidelity, if not to atheism, seems to become more utterly insoluble. The life and teaching of the great Prophet of Nazareth have claimed the admiration of multitudes, even of those who have denied to Him the deeper homage of their faith. All generous minds acclaim Him as the noblest figure that has ever passed across the stage of human life. But Christianity claims for Him infinitely more than this.

The great and unknown God had dwelt in impenetrable darkness and unapproachable light - seeming contradictories which harmonise in fact in a perfect representation of His attitude toward men. But now He at last declared Himself. The Nazarene was not merely the pattern man of all the ages, He was Himself Divine, "God manifest in the flesh." The inspired prophets had foreshadowed this: now it was

accomplished. The dream of heathen mythology was realised in the great foundation fact of Christianity - God assumed the form of a man and dwelt as a man among men, speaking words such as mere man never spoke, and scattering on every hand the proofs of His Divine character and mission.

But the sphere of the display was confined to the narrowest limits - the towns and villages of a district Scarcely larger than an English county. If this was to be the end of it, a theory so sublime must be exploded by its inherent incredibility. But throughout His ministry He spoke of a mysterious death He had to suffer, and of His rising from the dead and returning to the heaven from which He had come down, and of triumphs of His power to follow upon that ascension - triumphs such as they to whom He spoke were then incapable of understanding.

And, in keeping with the hopes He thus inspired, among His latest utterances, spoken after His resurrection and in view of His ascension, we find these sublime and pregnant words-"All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth." The position of avowed unbelief here is perfectly intelligible; but what can be said for the covert scepticism of modern Christianity which explains this to mean nothing more than the assertion of a mystical authority to send out preachers of the gospel!

Accept the scheme of revelation as to man's apostasy and fall, and his consequent alienation from God, and the history of the world down to the time of Christ can be explained. But type and promise and prophecy testified with united voice that the advent of Messiah should be the dawn of a brighter day, when "the heavens should rule," when all wrong should be redressed, and sorrow and discord should give place to gladness and peace. The angelic host who heralded His birth confirmed the testimony, and seemed to point to its near fulfilment.

And these words of Christ Himself ring out like a proclamation that earth's great jubilee at last was come. Nor did the events of the early days which followed belie the hope. If because of a great public miracle wrought by them in His name the apostles were threatened with penalties, they appealed from men to God, and then and there God gave public proof that He heard their prayer, for "the place was shaken where they were. Sudden judgment fell upon Ananias and Sapphira when they sinned, and as a consequence "great fear came upon all." a "By the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people."

From the surrounding villages "the multitude "-that is the inhabitants en masse -gathered to Jerusalem carrying their sick, and they were healed every one." And when their exasperated enemies seized the apostles and thrust them into the common prison, "the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors and brought them forth." At this very period it was, no doubt, that the martyr Stephen fell. Yes, but ere he sank beneath the blows showered upon him by his fierce murderers, the heavens were opened, and revealed to him a vision of his Lord in glory.

If martyrdom brought such visions now, who would shrink from being a martyr! By a like vision the most prominent witness to his death became changed into an apostle of the faith he had resisted and blasphemed. And when he in his turn, found himself in the grasp of cruel enemies at Philippi, his midnight prayer was answered by an earthquake which shook the foundations of his prison. Unseen hands struck off the chains which bound him, freed his feet from the stocks in which they had been made fast, and threw the gaol doors open.

The Apostle Peter, too, had experienced a like deliverance when held a prisoner by Herod at Jerusalem, and this on the very eve of the day appointed for his death. The record is definite and thrilling. "Peter was

sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and the keepers before the door kept the prison, and behold the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison; and he smote Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands."

"The iron gate" of the prison "opened to them of its own accord," and together they passed into the Street. These are but gleanings from the narrative of the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Divine intervention was no mystic theory with these men. "All power in heaven and on earth" was no mere shibboleth. The story of the infant Church, like the early history of the Hebrew nation, was an unbroken record of miracles. But there the parallel ends. Under the old economy the cessation of Divine intervention in human affairs was regarded as abnormal, and the fact was explained by national apostasy and sin.

And the times of national apostasy were precisely the period of the prophetic dispensation. Then it was that the Divine voice was heard with increasing clearness. But in contrast with this, Heaven has now been dumb for eighteen long centuries. This fact, moreover, might seem less strange if prophecy had ceased with Malachi, and miracles had not been renewed in Messianic times. But though miraculous powers and prophetic gifts abounded in the Pentecostal Church, yet when the testimony passed out from the narrow sphere of Judaism, and was confronted by the philosophy and civilisation of the heathen world - at the very time in fact when, according to accepted theories, their voice was specially required - that voice died away for ever.

Is there nothing here to excite our wonder? Some of course will dispose of the matter by rejecting every record of miracles, whether in Old Testament times or New, as mere legend or fable. Others again will protest that miracles are actually wrought today at certain favoured shrines. But here in Britain, at least, most men are neither superstitious nor infidel. They believe the Biblical record of miracles in the past, and they assent to the fact that ever since the days of the apostles the silence of Heaven has been unbroken.

Yet when challenged to account for this, they are either wholly dumb or else they offer explanations which are utterly inadequate, if not absolutely untrue. To plead that the idea of Divine intervention in human affairs is unreasonable or absurd is only to afford a proof how easily the mind becomes enslaved by the ordinary facts of experience. The believer recognises that such intervention was common in ancient times, and the unbeliever most fairly argues that if there really existed a God, all-good and almighty, such intervention would be common at all times.

The taunt would be easily met if the Christian could make answer that this world is a scene of probation where God in His infinite wisdom has thought fit to leave men absolutely to themselves. But in presence of an open Bible such an answer is impossible. The mystery remains that "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers," never speaks to His people now! The Divine history of the favoured race for thousands of years teems with miracles by which God gave proof of His power with men, and yet we are confronted by the astounding fact that from the days of the apostles to the present hour the history of Christendom will be searched in vain for the record of a single public event to compel belief that there is a God at all!

CHAPTER THREE

IN the old time men worshipped false gods, as they do still in heathendom today. Atheism is the recoil from Christianity rejected. But the unbelief of earnest men who are willing to believe, but cannot, is not to be confounded with the blind and bitter atheism of apostates. Nor will it avail to plead that the miracles by which Christianity was accredited at first still live as evidence of its truth. That will not satisfy the question

here at issue, which is not the truth of Christianity but the fact of a silent Heaven.

That in presence of the measureless ocean of human suffering in the great world around us, and in spite of the articulate cry so constantly wrung from the hearts of His faithful people, God should preserve a silence which is absolute and crushing - this is a mystery which Christianity seems only to render more inscrutable. Here, however, we are assuming that miracles are possible, and thus we shall incur the contempt of all persons of superior enlightenment. But we can brook their sneers.

Nor will they betray us into the folly of turning aside to enter upon the great miracle controversy, save in so far as the subject in hand requires it. Open infidelity has made no advance upon the arguments of Hume. Indeed the phenomenal triumphs of modern science have only served to weaken the infidel's position, for they have discredited the theory that new discoveries in nature might yet account for the miracles of Scripture. The only thing distinctive about the infidelity of our own times is that it has assumed the dress and language of religion.

Among its teachers are "Doctors of Divinity" and Professors in Christian universities and colleges. And as the disciples and admirers of these men claim for them superior intelligence and special vigour of mental perception, an examination of these pretensions may not be inopportune. But vivisection is to be deprecated, and mere abstract statements carry little weight. How, then, are we to proceed? An Oxford Professor of the past generation will do as the corpus vile for the inquiry.

Let us turn to the treatise upon "The Evidences of Christianity" in the notorious "Essays and Reviews." Its thesis may be stated in a single sentence - That the reign of law is absolute and universal. From this it follows of course (1) that a miracle is an impossibility, and (2) that Holy Scripture is altogether unreliable. Inspiration, therefore, is out of the question, save as all goodness and genius are inspired. It may seem feeble to turn back now to the "Essays and Reviews," but the last forty years have made no change in the German Rationalism which that epoch-making book first brought to the notice of the average Englishman.

These views are being taught today in many of our schools of theology. The future occupants of so-called Christian pulpits are being taught that the miraculous in Scripture must be rejected, and that the Bible must be read like any other book. Now what concerns us here is not whether this teaching is true: let us assume its truth. Nor yet whether the teachers be honest: we assume their integrity. But what can be said for their intelligence? Any dullard can trade upon the labours of others.

The most commonplace of men can understand and adopt the tenets of the rationalists. Where mental power will declare itself is in the capacity to review preconceived ideas in the light of the new tenets. Let us apply this test to the Christian rationalists. The incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension of Christ - these are incomparably the greatest of all miracles. If we accept them the credibility of other miracles resolves itself entirely into a question of evidence. If we reject them the whole Christian system falls to pieces like a house of cards.

To change the figure, when Christianity is exposed to the clear light and air of "modern thought," what seemed to be a living body crumbles into dust. Yet these men profess unfaltering faith in Christianity. But while their faith does credit to their hearts, it proves the weakness of their heads. Those who believe in the Divinity of Christ while rejecting inspiration and miracles, may pose as persons of superior enlightenment - in fact, they are credulous creatures who would believe anything.

Such faith as theirs is the merest superstition. Appeal might here be made to unnumbered witnesses among the scholars and thinkers of our time, who in face of this dilemma have found themselves compelled to choose "between a deeper faith and a bolder unbelief." If Christ was indeed Divine, no person of ordinary intelligence will question that He had power to open the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, the lips of the dumb. If He had power to forgive sins, it is a small matter to believe that He had power to heal diseases.

If He could give Eternal Life there is nothing to wonder at in the record that He could restore natural life. And if He is now upon the throne of God, and all power in heaven and earth is His, every man of common sense will brush aside all sophistries and quibbles about causation and natural laws, and will recognise that our Divine Lord could do for men to-day all He did for them in the days of His ministry on earth. - But how is it that He does not? I know that if in the days of His humiliation this poor crippled child had been brought into His presence He would have healed it.

And I am assured that His power is greater now than when He sojourned upon earth, and that He is still as near to us as He then was. But when I bring this to a practical test, it fails. Whatever the reason, it does not seem true. This poor afflicted child must remain a cripple. I dare not say He cannot heal my child, but it is clear He will not. And why will He not? How is this mystery to be explained? The plain fact is that with all who believe the Bible the great difficulty respecting miracles is not their occurrence but their absence.

In his "Foundations of Belief," Mr. Balfour reproduces the suggestion that if the special circumstances in which a miracle was wrought were again to recur, the miracle would recur also. But even if the truth of this could be ascertained, it would have no bearing on the present problem. Miracles, Mr. Balfour avers, are "wonders due to the special action of Divine power." As then we have to do neither with a mere machine nor with a monster, but with a personal God who is infinite in wisdom and power and love, how is it that in a world which, pace the philosopher, cries aloud for that "special action," we look for it in vain?

In his "Studies Subsidiary to the Works of Bishop Butler," Mr. Gladstone speaks in the same sense, but still more definitely. In his discussion of Hume's dictum, that miracles are impossible because they imply the violation of natural laws, he says: "Now, unless we know all the laws of nature, Hume's contention is of no avail; for the alleged miracle may come under some law not yet known to us." But surely this admission is fatal. The evidential value of miracles, against which Hume is arguing, depends on the assumption that they are due, as Mr.

Balfour says, to "the special action of Divine power," and that but for such action they would not have occurred. That is to say, it is essential that the act or event represented as miraculous should be supernatural. If, therefore, the "alleged" miracle can be brought within the sphere of the natural, it is thereby shown not to be a real miracle. In other words, it is not a miracle at all. If a miracle were indeed a violation of the laws of nature, not a few of us who believe in miracles would renounce our faith.

For then the word "impossible" would be transferred to the sphere in which it is rightly predicated of acts attributable to the Almighty. "It is," we declare, "impossible for God to lie": it is equally impossible for Him to violate His own laws; He "cannot deny Himself" But this vaunted dictum owes its seeming force solely to confounding what is above nature with what is against nature. Beyond this it is nothing but a cloak for ignorance. Here is a stone upon the road. In obedience to unchanging law it lies there inert and tends to sink into the ground.

Were it to rise from the earth and fly upward toward the sky, it would, you say, be indeed a miracle. But this you know is absolutely impossible. Impossible! A rude boy who comes along snatches it from us and flings it into the air. This mischievous urchin has thus achieved what you declared to be impossible! "But," you exclaim, "this is mere trifling, we saw the boy throw it up!" Is it by our senses, then, that the limits of possibility are to be fixed? This is materialism with a vengeance!

Suppose the boy himself should fall over a precipice, and you grasped him and drew him up again to safety, would this be a violation of the law of gravitation? Why, then, should it be such if his rescue were achieved by some unseen hand? A miracle it would be, no doubt, but not "a violation of the laws of nature." As Dean Mansel expresses it, a miracle is merely "the introduction of a new agent, possessing new powers, and therefore not included under the rules generalised from a previous experience."

But some thoughtless person may still object that matter can be put in motion only by matter, and that to talk of a stone being raised by an unseen hand is therefore absurd. Indeed! Will the objector tell us how it is he puts his own body in motion? The power of something that is not matter over matter is one of the commonest facts of life. The Apostle Peter walked upon the sea. "Nonsense," the infidel exclaims, with a toss of his head, "that would be a violation of natural laws!"

And yet the phenomenon may have been as simple as that produced when he himself shakes his head! It is possible, moreover, that the laws may yet be explained under which the miracles were performed. Nor would they cease to be miracles if those laws were known; for the test of a miracle is not that it should be inexplicable, but that it should be beyond human power to accomplish it. Whether or not the power in exercise be Divine is matter of evidence or inference; but once the presence of Divine power is ascertained, a miracle, regarded as a fact, is accounted for. (Footnote - This possibly may be what Mr.

Gladstone means in the statement criticised at p. 25 ante. But if so, I am at a loss to understand either his language or his argument. He seems to suggest that the "alleged" miracles may yet be explained to us, just as the predicted eclipse of the moon which terrified the South Sea Islanders might afterwards have been explained to the savages. My own meaning an illustration may make plain. That fire should come down from the sky and kindle a pile of wood is a commonplace phenomenon.

It might occur during any thunderstorm. But if I heap wood together upon a certain spot, and at my word lightning falls upon it and consumes it, this is a miracle; and the element of the miraculous is in the fact that I have set in motion some power that is above nature and competent to control it.) If a surgeon restores sight to a blind man, or a physician rescues a fever patient from death, the fact excites no other emotion than our gratitude. But when we are told that such cures have been achieved by Divine power without the use of medicine or the knife, we are called upon to refuse even to examine the evidence.

The plain fact is that men do not believe in "Divine power," or the "unseen hand." Disguise it as we will this is the real point of the controversy. In the case of every human being, "special action" is a duty if thereby he can relieve suffering or avert disaster; but in the case of the Divine Being it is not to be expected or indeed tolerated! It is accepted as an axiom that Almighty God must be a cipher in His own world! The doctrinaire infidel rejects Christianity on the ground that the only evidence of its truth is the miracles by which it was accredited at the first, and that miracles are impossible - propositions, both of which are untenable.

The ordinary infidel, on the other hand, bringing practical intelligence and common sense to bear upon the question, rejects Christianity because, he argues, if the Christian's God were not a myth He would not

remain passive in presence of all the suffering and wrong which prevail in the world. That is to say, discarding the contention of the doctrinaire philosopher that miracles are impossible, he maintains that if there really existed a Supreme Being of infinite goodness and power, miracles would abound.

And the vast majority of infidels belong to this second category. But though the philosophers are few, and their sophistries have failed to take hold of the minds of common men, they have well-nigh monopolised the attention of Christian apologists. Common men, moreover, unlike the philosophers, are apt to be both fair and earnest, and ready to consider any reasonable explanation of their difficulties. But the answer offered them is for the most part either futile or inadequate.

Mr. Gladstone, for instance, falls back upon the plea that "if the experience of miracles were universal, they would cease to be miracles." But what possible ground is there for this? They would cease to excite wonder, no doubt; but that is no test of the miraculous. In the beginning of our Lord's ministry, and before the antipathy of the religious leaders of the Jews took shape in plots for His destruction, His miracles of healing were so numerous and so free to all, that they must have come to be regarded as matters of course.

He "went about," we read, "in all Galilee, healing all manner of disease and all manner of sickness among the people. And the report of Him went forth into all Syria, and they brought unto Him ALL that were sick, holden with divers diseases and torments, possessed with devils, and epileptic, and palsied; and He healed them." In presence of such an unlimited display of miraculous power all sense of wonder must have soon died out. But yet every fresh cure was a fresh miracle, and would have been recognised as such.

And so would it be in our own day, if, for example, whenever a wicked man committed an outrage upon his neighbour, Divine power inter-vened to strike down the offender and protect his victim. The event would cease to excite the least surprise; but all would none the less recognise the hand of God, and own His justice and goodness. And there would be no infidels left- except, of course, the philosophers! The difficulty therefore remains unsolved. The true explanation of it will be considered in the sequel; but at this stage the discussion of it is a mere digression.

So far as the present argument is concerned the matter may be summed up in borrowed words: "The Scripture miracles stand on a solid basis which no reasoning can overthrow. Their possibility cannot be denied without denying the very nature of God as an all-powerful Being; their probability cannot be questioned without questioning His moral perfections; and their certainty as matters of fact can only be invalidated by destroying the very foundations of all human testimony."! (Bishop Van Mildert's "Boyle Lectures," sermon xxi.)

Of the truth of these last words Hume's celebrated treatise supplies most striking proof. He takes exception to the evidence for the Christian miracles; but when he goes on to speak of certain miracles alleged to have occurred in France upon the tomb of Abbé Paris, the famous Jansenist, he admits that the evidence in support of them was clear, complete, and without a flaw. But yet he rejects them, and that solely because of "the absolute impossibility, or miraculous nature of the events"! It behoves us to regard such evidence with suspicion; but to accept the evidence and yet to reject the facts thus established, is indeed "to destroy the very foundations of all human testimony."

Chapter Four

THAT Paley and those who follow him have mistaken and misstated the evidential value of the miracles of Christ may seem to some a startling proposition; but it is by no means a novel one. To this error, moreover, it is that the argument against miracles in John Stuart Mill's "Essays on Religion" owes its seeming cogency. The unbelief of the Christianised sceptic compares unfavourably with the agnosticism of the honest infidel. The one in rejecting miracles destroys the authenticity of the Gospels, and thus recklessly undermines the foundations of Christianity.

The object of the other is a defence of human reason against supposed encroachments upon its authority. The one trades in sophistries which have been again and again refuted and exposed. The other propounds arguments which have never yet been adequately answered. The pseudo-Christian practically joins hands with the atheist; for no amount of special pleading will avail to silence Paley's challenge, "Once believe there is a God, and miracles are not incredible." The avowed agnostic seizes upon Paley's gratuitous assertion that a revelation can only be made by miracles, and he sets himself to prove that miracles are wholly invalid for such a purpose.

Among English men of letters Mill's position is almost unique. From the account of his childhood in that saddest of books, his "Autobiography," it would appear that he approached the study of Christianity from the standpoint of a cultured pagan. He was wholly unconscious, therefore, that his argument against the theologian's position was entirely in accord with the teaching of Scripture. "A revelation cannot be proved Divine unless by external evidence": such is his mode of restating Paley's thesis.

And the problem this involves may be explained by the following illustration. A stranger appears, say in London, the metropolis of the world, claiming to be the bearer of a Divine revelation to mankind, and in order to accredit his message he proceeds to display miraculous power. Let us assume for the moment that after the strictest inquiry the reality of the miracles is established, and that all are agreed as to their genuineness. Here, then, we are face to face with the question in the most practical way.

If the "Christian argument" be sound we are bound to accept whatever gospel this prophet proclaims. And no one who knows anything of human nature will doubt that it would be generally received. The Christian, however, would be kept back by the words of the inspired apostle: "But though we or an angel from heaven should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema." In a word, the Christian would at once give up his "Paley" and fall back upon the position of the sceptic in the "Essays on Religion"!

He would insist, moreover, on bringing the new miracle-accredited gospel to the test of Holy Writ, and finding it inconsistent with the gospel he had already received, he would reject it. That is to say, he would test the message, not by the miracles, but by a preceding revelation known to be Divine. That Christ came to found a new religion, and that Christianity was received in the world on the authority of miracles -these are theses which command almost universal acceptance in Christendom.

It may seem startling to maintain that both are alike erroneous, and that the Christian position has been seriously prejudiced by the error. And yet this is the conclusion which the preceding argument suggests, and to which full and careful inquiry will lead us. Is it not a fact that those in whose midst the miracles of Christ were wrought were the very people who crucified Him as a profane impostor? Is it not a fact that when challenged to work miracles in support of His Messianic claims He peremptorily refused?

"However," says Bishop Butler, in summing up his argument on this subject, "the fact is allowed that Christianity was professed to be received into the world upon the belief of miracles," and "that is what the

first converts would have alleged as their reason for embracing it." Language cannot be plainer. The "first converts," having witnessed the miracles, reasoned out the matter, and concluded that he who wrought them must be sent of God; and thus became converts. But where is the authority for such a statement?

As a matter of fact not one of the disciples is reported to have attributed his faith to that ground.' The narrative of the first Passover of the ministry, which may seem at first sight to refute this, is in fact the clearest proof of it. Here are the words: "Many believed on His name, beholding His signs which He did. But Jesus did not trust Himself unto them, for that He knew all men." That is to say, He refused to recognise any such discipleship. Then follows the story of Nicodemus, who was one of the number of these miracle-made converts.

He had reasoned himself into discipleship, precisely as Butler supposes; but, as Dean Alford expresses it, he had to be taught that "it is not learning that is needed for the kingdom, but life, and life must begin by birth." Such is throughout the testimony of St. John. Entirely in harmony with it is the testimony of St. Peter, who shared with him the special privilege of witnessing that greatest of the miracles, the Transfiguration on the Holy Mount. "Being born again (he writes), not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God." (Footnote - i Pet. i. 23.

Still more definite are the Lord's words addressed to Peter in response to the confession of His Messiahship, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar.Jonah; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven" (Matt. xvi.) Still more striking and significant is the case of St. Paul. As great a reasoner as Butler, and moreover a man of unswerving devotion to what he deemed to be the truth, the completed testimony of the ministry and miracles of Christ left him a bitter opponent and persecutor of Christianity.

"I obtained mercy" is his own explanation of the change which took place in him. And again, "It pleased God, who . . . called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me." Some may call such language mystical. To others, who are themselves what St. Paul till then had been, it may even seem offensive. But whatever its meaning, and however regarded, certain it is that it implies something wholly different from what Bishop Butler's words would indicate.' But if the miracles were not intended to be a ground of faith in Christ, why, it will be asked, were they given at all?

They had a twofold character and purpose. Just as a good man who is possessed of the means and the opportunity to relieve suffering is impelled to action by his very nature, so was it with our blessed Lord. When "the Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us," it was, if we may so speak with reverence, a matter of course that sickness and pain and even death should give way before Him. He "went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil because God was with Him."

The sceptics talk as though our Lord were represented as stopping in His teaching at intervals in order to work some miracle to silence unbelief. The idea is absolutely grotesque in its falseness. On the contrary we read such statements as this, that "He did not many mighty works because of their unbelief." As a matter of fact, while there is not recorded a single instance in the whole course of His ministry where faith appealed to Him in vain - and this it is which makes the inexorable reign of law to-day so strange and overwhelming-neither is there recorded a solitary instance where the challenge of unbelief was rewarded by a miracle.

Every challenge of the kind was met by referring the caviller to the Scriptures. And this suggests the second great purpose for which the miracles were given. With the Jew politics and religion were

inseparable. Every hope of spiritual blessing rested on the coming of Messiah. With that advent was connected every promise of national independence and prosperity. The pious few who constituted the little band of His true disciples thought first and most of the spiritual aspect of His mission.

The multitude thought only of deliverance from the Roman yoke, and the restoration of the bygone glories of their kingdom. In the case of all alike His chief credentials were to be sought in the Scriptures which foretold His coming, and to these it was that His ultimate appeal was always made. "Ye are searching the Scriptures," He said to the Jews, "and these are they which bear witness of Me, and ye will not come to Me." "If they hear not Moses and the prophets neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

In this respect the evidence of the miracles was purely incidental. It is nowhere suggested that they were given to accredit the teaching; their evidential purpose was solely and altogether to accredit the Teacher. It was not merely that they were miracles, but that they were such miracles as the Jews were led by their Scriptures to expect. Their significance depended on their special character, and their relation to a preceding revelation accepted as Divine by those for whose benefit they were accomplished.

And this suggests, it may be remarked in passing, another flaw in the Christian argument from miracles, as usually stated. What is supernatural is not of necessity Divine. "Every one who works miracles is sent of God: this man works miracles, therefore He is sent of God." The logic of the syllogism is perfect. But the Jew would rightly repudiate the major premise, and of course reject the conclusion. As a matter of fact he attributed the miracles of Christ to Satan, and our Lord met the taunt, not by denying Satanic power, but by appealing to the nature and purpose of His acts.

As they were manifestly aimed against the arch-enemy, they could not, He urged, be assigned to his agency. The subordination of the testimony of miracles to that of Scripture appears more plainly still in the teaching after the resurrection. "Beginning (we read) at Moses and all the prophets He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." And again, "These are the words which I spake unto you while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the Psalms concerning Me." Nor was it otherwise when the apostles took up the testimony.

St. Peter's appeal, addressed to the Jews of Jerusalem, was to "all the prophets, from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have 2 Such also was St. Paul's defence when arraigned before Agrippa: "I continue unto this day (he declared) witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come." And when we turn to the dogmatic teaching of the Epistles we have the same truth still more explicitly enforced, that Christ "was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written."

Page after page might thus be filled to prove the falseness of the dictum here under discussion. "A new religion!" It would be nearer the truth to declare that one great purpose of Messiah's advent was to put an end to the reign of religion altogether. Such a statement would be entirely in keeping with the spirit of the only passage in the New Testament where the word occurs in relation to the Christian life.' Christ was Himself the reality of every type, the substance of every shadow, the fulfilment of every promise of the old religion.

Whether we speak of the altar or the sacrifice, the priest or the temple in which He ministered, Christ was the antitype of all. His purpose was not to set these aside that He might set up others in their place - He came, not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them. The very details of that elaborate ritual, the very furniture of that gorgeous shrine which was the scene and centre of the national worship, all pointed to Him. The ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat which covered it, the most holy place itself, and the veil which shut it in - all were but types of Him.

The several altars and the many sacrifices bore witness to His infinite perfections and the varied aspects of His death as bringing glory to God and full redemption to mankind. In plain truth, the attempt to set up a religion now, in the sense in which Judaism was a religion, is to deny Christianity and to apostatise from Christ. In the light of this truth the force of the sceptic's argument is wholly dissipated. When the Nazarene appeared, the question with the Jew was not whether, like another John the Baptist, He was "a man sent of God," but whether He was the Sent One, the Messiah to whom all their religion pointed and all their Scriptures bore testimony.

"We have found the Messiah:" "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write." Such were the words in which His disciples gave expression to their faith, and by which they sought to draw others to Him. The question, then, is not whether a revelation can be accredited by external evidence, but whether such evidence can avail to accredit a person whose coming has been foretold. And this no accurate thinker would for a moment dispute. In Dean Swift's fierce invective against the Irish bishops of his day he suggested that they were highwaymen who, having waylaid and robbed the prelates appointed by the Crown, had entered on their Sees in virtue of the stolen credentials.

The whole point of this satire lay in the theoretical possibility of the suggestion. Nothing is more difficult in certain circumstances than to accredit an envoy. But, if he be expected, the merest trifle may suffice. An agent is sent upon some mission of secrecy and danger. A messenger will follow later with new and full instructions for his guidance. The messenger is described to him, but his sense of the peril of his position makes him plead that he shall have adequate credentials.

In response to his appeal I pick up a scrap of paper, tear it in two, and handing him the half I tell him that the other moiety will be presented by the envoy. No document, however elaborate, would give surer proof of his identity than would that torn piece of paper. Thus we see in what sense, and how certainly and simply, "external evidence" may avail "to accredit a revelation." And the sceptic's objection being set aside, he is again confronted with the irrefutable force of Paley's argument upon the main issue.

But another question claims notice here, ignored alike by exponent and objector. They have discussed the problem from the purely human standpoint, whereas the revelation offered for our acceptance claims to be Divine. Man is but a creature; can God not speak to him in such wise that His word shall carry with it its own sanction and authority? To assert that God cannot speak thus to man is practically to deny that He is God. To assert that He has never in fact spoken thus involves a transparent *petitio principii*.

It might be urged that the authenticity of prophecy and promise has been established by their fulfilment. But certain it is that the prophets declare that God did thus speak to them, the Scriptures assume it, and the faith of the Christian endorses.

CHAPTER FIVE

I N the preceding chapter it has been shown that on this question of the evidential value of miracles the infidel is right and the Christian is wrong. It is not true that a revelation can only be made by miracles. The error of Paley's thesis can be demonstrated by argument. It can be exemplified moreover by reference to the case of the Baptist, who, though the bearer of a Divine revelation of supreme importance, had no miracles to appeal to in support of it. It has been further argued that, so far as their evidential force was concerned, the "Christian miracles" were for that favoured people "of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came." And if this be well founded we shall be prepared to find that so long as the kingdom was being preached to Jews, miracles abounded, but that when the gospel appealed to the heathen world, miracles lost their prominence, and soon entirely ceased.

The question remains whether the sacred record will confirm this supposition. Who can fail to mark the contrast between the earlier and the later chapters of the Acts of the Apostles? Measured by years the period they embrace is comparatively brief; but morally the latter portion of the narrative seems to belong to a different age. And such is in fact the case. A new dispensation has begun, and the Book of the Acts covers historically the period of the transition. "the Jew first" is stamped on every page of it. The Saviour's prayer upon the Cross had secured for the favoured nation a respite from judgment And the forgiveness asked for carried with it a right to priority in the proclamation

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