

Hebrews - Commentaries by Alexander Hume Rule

Practical Grace, Practical Grace (12:18-29)

In Hebrews 12, two mountains are spoken of: one that speaks of law, and one that speaks of grace. It is important for our souls to discover which one of these mountains we are brought to. In connection with one, we have to do with God as making demands upon us, while in connection with the other, we have to do with God as acting in grace.

Ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (for they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: and so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) but ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. Heb. 12:18-24.

God had spoken the law to Israel at Mount Sinai, and their responsibility was according to the just requirements of that law. In this they failed and utterly broke down, and in the days of Eli, the ark —the only remaining link between Jehovah and His people —was taken by the Philistines. At the end of this career of failure, God came in grace and chose David the king, who with his son, Solomon, founded the temple on Mount Sion. This was the expression of God's grace to a failing people when all was over on the ground of responsibility under the law.

This is the grace according to which God had visited the Hebrew saints who accepted the Messiah. It is the same grace that has taken us up, and that goes on with us day by day. And on this principle only can we get on with God. God acts toward us in grace. This is an immense truth for our souls to grasp, for only as we lay hold of this can we realize the character of our relationships with God and with one another as Christians, and the principles that are to govern us in our ways with one another. Our sins have been purged through the blood of Christ. This is pure grace.

Is not holiness required? Without holiness no man can see the Lord, we are told in Hebrews 12:14. Is this grace also? The need of holiness surely is not grace, but if God's character and nature are such that none can be in His presence without holiness, He furnishes it to us in grace, blessed be His name! We have it not of or in ourselves, but He makes us "partakers of His holiness," even if He has to chasten us in order to break our wills and bring us into that exercise of soul in which we can receive all from Him. All blessing flows down from Him in perfect grace, and our place before Him is that of subject receivers.

If God acts toward us on the principle of grace, we are to be imitators of Him as dear children. Grace is the principle on which we are to act toward one another. Do we sufficiently realize this in our souls, so as practically to act according to divine principles?

We find in the beginning of Hebrews 12 that we are on the racecourse, and weights are to be laid aside, and sin which entangles the feet. Then God comes in and helps us by chastening and making us partakers of His holiness. Now we are not alone in this path. There is a company — the whole company of God's people —moving on together toward Him who has finished the course of faith, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God, but who will soon rise up to receive His own. It is with this company we have to do.

It is not a mere selfish running where only one receives the prize. We all journey on together, and as in a flock of sheep, there are the weak and the lame not to be left behind, but to be helped on. There are "hands that hang down," and there are "feeble knees." How are we to act toward such? The passage is plain: "Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed." vs. 12,13. This is not the terrible mount that burned with fire; it is the pure grace of God.

On the one hand, grace leads us to minister help to the weak and the faint. On the other hand, it will lead us to be watchful, taking heed to our own ways lest the lame be turned out of the way. There are lame ones in the flock, and they do not get on well, but the whip would be no remedy for such. We must not act toward them on the principle of Pharaoh's taskmasters with the bondslave children of Israel. This is not God's way. He acts toward us in grace and helps us in our infirmities, or if He chastens when needs be, it is "that we might be partakers of His holiness."

What would we think of a shepherd taking a whip to a poor, weak, lame sheep? Yet how often is this done among the flock of Christ! The whip instead of grace! Mount Sinai instead of Mount Sion! God's Word is, "But let it rather be healed." It is not that holiness can be dispensed with, and therefore it is written: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

Only let us remember that the whip and the burning mount will neither heal nor produce holiness. Grace only can do either, and so it is added, "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God." If I lose in my soul the sense of that grace in which God is ever acting toward me, I shall fail in manifesting grace toward my brethren. Who can tell the loss and damage to the saints? Some root of bitterness springs up, and trouble arises, and many are thereby defiled.

What sorrow is sometimes caused in the assembly of God, just because someone — a leader, it may be —has failed of the grace of God, and acted in the spirit of the law rather than the Spirit of Christ! Or someone, through greed of gain, has driven a hard bargain, or defrauded his brother! Or some word has been unadvisedly spoken and an evil seed has been sown in some heart. When it springs up it is as a root of

bitterness producing trouble which passes from tongue to tongue, thereby defiling many. Surely such conduct is most sad, utterly contrary to the Spirit of Christ. If not unsparingly judged by those who so act, it will bring down the hand of the Lord in discipline.

Oh, to realize in our innermost soul that we are saved by grace, and we stand in grace, and that it is grace every step of the way to the end! And to realize that we are called to live, and act toward one another, in the power of the same grace in which God has acted and always acts toward us.

Selected Ministry of A. H. Rule Volume 1, Propitiation, A Letter on (2:17)

Dear Brother:

In thinking of your last letter, it occurred to me last night that I omitted to notice the point about propitiation. In my letter to you I gave "to make propitiation for the sins of the people" as the translation of Hebrews 2:17. I find it so both in Mr. Darby's translation of the New Testament, and in the Revised Version. And I have looked at the meaning of the word both in Classical and New Testament Greek, and cannot find the use you make of it; that is, "to propitiate the sins." Used in connection with a person this might do, because you may propitiate a person, but not a thing, as sins. It is the word the publican uses in Luke 18:13, "God be merciful to me a sinner" — literally "be propitiated to me the sinner." In my New Testament Lexicon the meaning is given, "to render propitious in respect to anything." This is the primary meaning; then by implication, "to expiate, make an atonement or expiation for." In the Classical Greek Lexicon the meaning is given, "to appease, to soothe; in Homer, always used of gods," "to make him that is the god propitious to one," and so on. Used with the word sin it is given, "to expiate." Webster gives the meaning of the word "expiate," "To extinguish the guilt of a crime by sufferance of penalty, or some equivalent; to make satisfaction or reparation for; as, to expiate a crime."

The propitiation of Scripture was simply a propitiatory sacrifice offered to God with reference to sins, in order to render God propitious, or favorable, to the one who had committed the sins. This is the general force of the word, and is the meaning in Hebrews 2:17. Christ offering Himself as a sacrifice was the propitiation. It was thus He made propitiation for the sins of the people. You object to the words "to make," but "to make propitiation for," is what the word means in connection with "sins." It was to God that propitiation had to be made with reference to our sins. 1 All the light I can get confirms me in the thought that this is the right translation.

But perhaps you will ask, Was not God favorable to the sinner already, before Christ made propitiation? In one sense, yes. That is, God loved the world, and proved His love in sending His Son; but He could not receive the sinner into favor except through this propitiation. The wrath of God abides on the unbeliever (John 3:36), and this is the opposite of being under favor. Again, "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Psa. 7:11). Yet God is love, and His love has gone out after a lost world. He commendeth His love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. But why did Christ die? Was it merely to show God's love? Was it not to make propitiation? And was not this a necessity? Much as God loved us, He could not have us in His presence and favor with our sins on us. His love might have forgiven, but that would not have been righteousness, and would not have removed our guilt. But in order not only to forgive, but to justify, God dealt with our sins at the cross, when they were laid on Christ, and borne by Him; that is, Christ paid the full penalty of our guilt, and thus all was cleared, and God could justify us, the sins being gone in the blood shedding of Him who bore them. So being justified by faith, we have peace with God; nor is this all: through our Lord Jesus Christ, we have access into present favor, or grace, and in this favor we stand, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God, while we glory in tribulations, not ashamed of the hope, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us. God's love indeed acted toward us when we were in our sins — when we were enemies — but we were not in His favor then, and could only be brought into that favor according to divine righteousness. God loved, and gave, when we were guilty rebels. But there were two things that hindered our being in His presence and favor: we were in a state of moral death, and we were guilty. This double need God has met, because He desired to have us in His presence to enjoy His face and His favor, and as the companions and co-heirs of His son; yea, and as His own dear children, and not as guilty rebels in a state of alienation and moral death, without a single affection answering to His love. How then did He get us there? Not by any movement on our part, for we did not want to be there; and if we had desired it, our guilt would have shut us out. 1 John 4:9,10 answers the question. God Himself meets the difficulty in sovereign, infinite love, yet consistently with righteousness and holiness. "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Here then was life for the dead, and propitiation for the guilty; life in the incarnate Son of God, but made good to us through His death by which expiation of sins was also made. Wondrous love! It is the revelation of what God is. The love has been manifested — love acting out its own nature without anything in us to call it forth, save our guilty need; nay, there was everything to drive it back, had it been possible. "God is love." And we have seen and known the love as those who have been brought to Him; but life had to be possessed, and sins expiated, before we could either enjoy what God is, or be in His holy presence. And this could be only through the Mediator, God's only begotten Son, our Redeemer. God's love has been manifested in giving Him. He came to do God's will, and doing this will involved making propitiation for our sins. He was sent to do this. He could do it, and He only. He did His Father's will, and drank the cup. He paid the full penalty of our guilt. But oh, what a price! Who can estimate its value? Who can fathom the sorrows of Golgotha? Who can tell what passed through the holy soul of our Redeemer as He drank the cup — derided by enemies; forsaken by disciples; lover and friend far from Him; "made sin," though sinless; iniquities, the sins of His people, laid on Him; the sword of Jehovah awaking and smiting; Jehovah bruising; the light gone; forsaken of God — oh! who can tell?

The sorrow, the agony, the horror of darkness, we shall never fathom, never know. Blessed be God, we shall know the results for us in eternal blessedness and glory, with and like Him who suffered thus for us, to make propitiation for our sins! And He shall have His eternal delight and joy in us too — "shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isa 53:11). "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 1:5-6).

I would add that where it is said He was "made sin" for us (2 Cor. 5:21), or sent "for sin" (Rom. 8:3), it is a different thought from propitiation. Propitiation, though not limited to "sins," is "for the whole world." "Propitiation" and "substitution" both have reference to "sins." The former

expresses the God-ward aspect of Christ's atoning work, and the latter expresses the man-ward aspect.

"Propitiation" is seen in the goat on which Jehovah's lot fell, and whose blood was carried into the sanctuary, and put on and before the mercy seat to meet the requirements of the throne and majesty of Jehovah, and by which the sanctuary was cleansed.

"Substitution" is seen in the goat on whose head the high priest, as the representative of the people, laid his hands, confessing "over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel," thus transferring them to the goat, as it is said, "putting them upon the head of the goat," which, as a scapegoat, bore them away.

On the one hand Christ glorified God about our sins in the shedding of His blood. This is a propitiation. On the other hand He confessed the sins of His people as His own and bore them away in death. This is substitution. His resurrection is the witness that the sins are gone, and that God has been glorified. He "was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father." (Rom. 6:4.) Propitiation is for "sins," but in the passages just referred to it is not "sins," but "sin." In Romans 8:3, it is distinctly stated, "Condemned sin in the flesh," not "sins." On the ground of propitiation we are pardoned. The sins are forgiven in virtue of the atonement, or satisfaction that Christ has rendered to God. But "sin in the flesh" is not forgiven, but "condemned" in the death of Christ. "Sin in the flesh," is not what we have done. It is our state, but a state out of which springs incorrigible "enmity against God," and insubjection to His law (Rom. 8:7), and therefore it cannot be bettered, but only "condemned." God has condemned it in the sacrifice of Christ, and thus we personally escape condemnation. (Rom. 8:1.) Christ's death, in which "sin in the flesh" was condemned, was for us, so that we can say we have died with Him. We account ourselves to have died unto sin, and to live unto God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 6:11.) This is our deliverance from sin in His death — sin put away according to what God is as Light, and love having its own way in saving the guilty, and bringing many sons to glory — this will form the key note to our praise and worship in the scene where He will rest in His love, and we with Him, the objects of His eternal love and delight in Christ.

Even now we raise the song of praise.

Affectionately your brother in Christ,

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