

The Atonement

In Its Relations To

The Covenant,

The Priesthood,

The Intercession

Of Our Lord

(Volume 4)

by

Hugh Martin

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CHAPTER IV.

CHRIST'S PRIESTLY ACTION IN HIS DEATH.

IN the preceding Chapter we have vindicated the position, That the defenders of the orthodox evangelical doctrine of the Atonement ought never to consent to discuss that doctrine outside of the larger category of the priesthood of Christ. Our closing train of thought in illustrating that position we feel inclined to resume and consider at somewhat greater length. We lay it down:—

That the Doctrine of the Atonement ought not to be discussed apart from the idea of Christ's Priestly ACTION in His death.

For we are deeply persuaded, that the refusal to discuss or contemplate the doctrine of Christ's death, except as that priestly *action* which Holy Scripture abundantly reveals it to have been,—while it is obviously the most effective method of establishing and defending the doctrine itself,—is at the same time the true way to take legitimate and conclusive preliminary objection to the vast majority of false representations of Christ's death, to the effect of

their not being entitled even to a hearing. Let it simply be shown of any particular aberration from the catholic doctrine of the death of Christ, that there is no room in it for anything more than suffering, mere passive endurance; that it has no explanation to afford of the idea, and indeed no room in it for the idea, that Christ in His death, besides being acted on, was in that very transaction an agent, an offerer, a priest—an official agent, triumphantly discharging positive, official, active duty,—and we are immediately exempted at the outset from any necessity of further discussion, and entitled preliminarily to dismiss out of court all such perversions of the doctrine of the catholic Church of Christ. For they are flagrant perversions. Holy Scripture is so clear, so abundant,—so express, varied, and emphatic,—in its assertions of Christ's death being a transaction in which His own agency was concerned, that those who deny this, or make no account of it, cannot be considered as merely erring in scriptural interpretation, but must be regarded as rejecting Scripture as the rule of faith. With such, of course, we are entitled and bound to refuse to discuss the doctrine of the Atonement. The question of the "Rule of Faith" is that to which all discussion with such opponents must be relegated.

of persons definitely, numerically, individually known:—"I know my sheep." And the representative priestly action *in itself* was simply what Jesus adds:—"And I lay down my life for the sheep." That is not *result*; result never can in the nature of things express the intrinsic causal action. That is not result: it is Christ's immediate dying action itself. And it is *Redemption*—not removal of bars. The very and immediate action of Christ in dying for His people is intrinsically their *redemption*. He offers Himself to God for them a sacrifice for their sins; and herein He offers them to God with Himself. And it cannot be too emphatically affirmed, or too gratefully believed, or too resolutely contended, that this *is* their redemption—their redemption, efficacious, complete and infallible. While mere "removal of bars" is a mockery, and the theory thereof leaves utterly unanswered the question, What did Christ *do* in dying? It recognises no action, and consequently no priestly action, in the Cross. It overthrows the Priesthood of our Lord.

Others—to make the Atonement indefinite and universal, save as special grace may subsequently apply it to the elect—tell us that Christ's death, or Christ by His death, *removed legal bars*. The argument with such as speak thus might be long: but it may be short. I ask them, Was "removing of bars" the immediate and intrinsic action of Christ's person in dying on the Cross? Was this the action in and by which Emmanuel died? Did He die in and by removing bars? No, they will say: for they must reverse the terms: "He removed legal bars by dying." Precisely: they are speaking of *result*—the result of His death. But I demand a scriptural, doctrinal description of the very and immediate act of Christ in His dying, and in His *doing* the will of God in and by His death. And, with the Scripture in our hands, the demand which a searching theology will never fail thus to make, is met,—the question answered. There was immediate action of Christ in His death; and it was official and public action. Private, or personal, or individual it could not be; for in that case His holiness was at once a legal bar to divine justice smiting Him in death, and a moral bar to His unauthorised parting with His life Himself. It was public and official action. He was not merely charged with a cause, but with an *office*, and with a people in that office to per-sonate; not merely with a cause to maintain, but with the interests of a people whom He should represent, and redeem by representing them. His action was priestly and representative action; representative of persons—

Part First.

Reasons why this truth has been much overlooked.

At the same time, while it is undoubtedly true that Scripture is most clear and abundant in its revelation of the truth that Christ's death was priestly *action*, we have a strong conviction that there are, or may be, not a few who acquiesce in the sound and scriptural doctrine of the Atonement, but have not given to the simple proposition which affirms the action of Christ in His own death that attention to which it is gloriously entitled. We are so familiar with the plain statement that Christ was at once the Sacrifice and the Priest,—“He offered up Himself,”—that we think we have fully mastered its contents, while we may have done little more than skim the surface.

That it must contain great depths of truth should be obvious from the fact that it presents a consideration absolutely unparalleled, and singular, and unique. That the man Christ Jesus should both suffer death,—and such a death, under the curse of the divine law, and with all conceivable aggravations of woe, and agony, and shame; and *also* that He should sinlessly, yea, obediently and officially, have an active hand in His death,—and such a death; ought at once to strike us as passing all comprehension; and as entitled to that thoughtful, prolonged, and reverent contemplation which might enable us, under the teaching of the Spirit of truth, to place the

fact before our understandings with the most exact accuracy of thought we can attain, and with the fullest completeness that we can grasp. There is, indeed, good reason to think that the severe mental exercise for which there is in this simple familiar truth such manifest scope, is precisely what has led many minds to pass it by without any attempt to fathom it. That "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," they are content to believe. But that in this transaction of the death at Calvary He combined the two apparently antagonistic attitudes of suffering and offering;—*suffering* unto such extent and such intensity as would have quelled all the active powers, not to say the patience, of any but a Divine person; and *offering* also in such activity, and such unquelled and excelling triumphant action, as if no suffering were making drain upon His active powers at all;—this is the apparent paradox in the death of Christ which many, we fear, have far too lightly considered. And yet, how, without profound consideration and appreciating admiration of it, they can intelligently "glory in the Cross," it is impossible to see.

That the simple but profound truth on which we are desirous of insisting should have been, at least to some extent, overlooked by many whose views of the Atonement are not incorrect, may in some measure be easily accounted for. Apart from the demand for severely accurate mental action, which the nature of the subject makes on all who would attain to exact theological knowledge of its various elements, several phrases have

BUSHNELL makes the death of Christ a Governmental Display. Be it granted, for argument's sake. But governmental display is not action, though it may be the result of action. Of what action, in this case, is it the result? Will Bushnell find any? Will he re-examine his own book, and his own mind, and see what room he has left in his theory for the truth, that, in dying, Christ not merely suffered but *did* the will of God? It is needless to say that He *did* that will of God which appointed Him to make a display of the principles of God's moral government. What did He *do* to achieve that display? And Bushnell must simply answer, He suffered death. Yes; suffered. That is all that he can predicate. He must fall over into the theory of mere suffering, mere passivity; denial of priestly action, and *à fortiori*, of priesthood; mere passivity, which ignores the victory of the Cross, accepts defeats, and canonises the shame.

YOUNG explains Atonement by the notion of Moral Influence. Be it so again, for argument's sake. But the exercise of moral influence—was that the intrinsic nature of any agency of Christ's own, in virtue whereof it could be said, He dismissed His spirit, He poured out His soul? It might follow, as *result*, from His exemplary patience in suffering death; but it could not be identical with, nor explain, the never-to-be-reëmplified deed by which He "gave Himself." There is neither explanation nor room in this theory for priestly agency on the Cross at all.

any man come unto you and bring not this doctrine, bid him not God speed?

Part Fourth.

Pointing the Argument from Christ's Priestly Action.

How the line of thought we have pursued may be pointed into an argument for immediately and powerfully exposing all false and defective views of the Atonement, it is scarcely necessary to indicate,—the polemic use of this great truth being so direct and obvious.

SOCINIANISM stands self-condemned by refusing it. Socinianism does not acknowledge that Christ was a priest in His death, or prior to His resurrection,—and, even then, a priest only metaphorically.

Mr ROBERTSON, of Brighton, has denied all agency of Christ's own in His death, in language of such violence and horror and blasphemy, as almost silences all comment from the lips of piety for ever. He has dared to say of the everlasting Son of the Father: "He approached the whirling wheel of this world's evil, and was torn in pieces"!

Mr MAURICE denies it by affirming that Christ's death was only self-sacrifice, self-surrender, self-denial. If it was *this* sort of sacrifice, and not a propitiatory sacrifice and offering for sin, then Christ's own action cannot be recognised in it. Such sacrifice is passivity, pure and simple. Action of His own in it there could not possibly be,—save such as would resolve into suicide.

acquired a currency unfavourable to clearness and comprehensiveness. Among these we may notice what we have long thought the unhappy and not very intelligible expression—"Christ's active and passive obedience." No doubt, with explanations, the phrase may be allowed; and, without question, it is with these explanations that sound writers have used it. It has been employed to express the fact, that in Christ's life and death as our surety, there meet the endurance of the penalty of the law and the inbringing of a positive righteousness. But it may be safely doubted whether the phrase "passive obedience" naturally indicates anything that can be properly called obedience at all; and the use of it in well-known English history is not favourable to the probability of its suggesting very accurate ideas theologically. Moreover, if there is anything in Christ's interposition for our salvation that may be supposed to be called "passive" obedience, as in express contradiction to "active" obedience, it must be His death: and where this impression prevails, it obviously countenances, and indeed suggests, the idea that His death was exclusively passive—that His own activity or agency is not to be recognised in it.

Then the phrases, "Our Lord's Passion," and "The Passion Week," lead obviously in the same direction. Used exclusively, and used as adequate and complete expressions for the death of Christ, and for that ever-memorable period of His closing sufferings and crowning work as our Redeemer, they evidently concentrate

attention disproportionately, and indeed alone, on that aspect in which Christ appears as the peculiar victim, or the Lamb of Sacrifice; presenting to the mind no suggestion of the great truth that in His "passion" He was an official, and obedient, and triumphant agent.

The Paraphrase also—the forty-fourth—which represents "the pale ensigns" of death as overspreading the cheeks and the "trembling lips" of our Lord, while "life *forsook* His closing eyes and His drooping head," does most manifest injustice to the condition of our Lord's person on the cross, and is clearly most injurious to the scriptural representations that He "cried with a loud voice" and "gave up the ghost"—*dismissed* His spirit. The impression which such phrases are fitted to make upon the mind is just this, and nothing more,—that our Lord un murmuringly *endured* inconceivable sufferings,—that He was being *subjected* to death as the penalty due to sin. All which is true. But they also suggest the idea, that whereas formerly He had been engaged in positive duty, going about doing good, the time for positive and active duty was now passed, and the time for simply suffering had come.

We must never cease to affirm that this representation of the Cross is most inadequate. It exhibits the Cross as the emblem and scene of patience merely, while it conceals those glorious and glorifying aspects of it in which it is seen to be an altar of priestly agency, a throne of powerful action, and a chariot of victory and triumph. It represents Christ's activity as subdued and overborne,

Him the throne, We speak of His "doing" and His "dying." His dying *was* His grandest doing. The light and evidence of His *active* obedience, instead of paling on the Cross, shines out there most brilliantly of all,—shining down the darkness of death, and of the frown of incensed justice, till the dark frown passes off from the face of the Eternal Judge, and the light of a Father's countenance is lifted on the obedient Son in the moment of His saying, "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit." The Father's will is done. It is done by the Eternal Son, through the Eternal Spirit. Consistent actings of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost fill the death of Christ with action and with power unparalleled and transcendent; and the Logos of the Cross is the power of God.

And now, in all this, have we misread the Cross of Christ? Have we been unduly "glorifying in the cross"? Have we attempted to surround it with a dignity and power and victory and majesty—we are weighing every word we pen: Have we attempted to surround it with a dignity and power and victory and majesty, and priestly energy, and kingly might, and brilliant revelation of unconquered eternal life from the "Prince of Life" in His obedience unto death, which do not intrinsically belong to it? If we have, let it be shown where we have erred, and let the unauthorised excess of glory be repudiated and removed. But if we have not, then may we not most warrantably say, If

It was right that on the platform of visible events the personal will and powerful agency of Christ himself should thus far be seen in the transactions that immediately preceded His death. In His actual death itself, indeed, the same palpable representation of His spontaneous action and priestly agency could not, from the nature of the case, be given. His body was subjected to restraint—restraint from which His covenant-duty suffered Him not to free Himself, even at the taunting cry, “If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross: If He be the Christ, let Him save Himself.” And the crowning activity of His office was spiritual and of the soul. But in the unseen spiritual world, while His body was hanging on the Cross, He was “pouring out His soul unto death,” in spontaneous action of His own, as self-instigated, self-sustained, self-controlled as was that of Aaron when he brought the goat on which Jehovali’s lot fell, and offered him as a sin-offering, and the goat on which the lot fell to be the scape-goat, he presented alive before the Lord to make an atonement with him, and let him go for a scape-goat into the wilderness. No priest “standing daily ministering and offering often times” was ever more free from coercion in his office, or so gloriously active in discharging it, as “this Man when He offered one sacrifice for sins.” Nor did “this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever sit down on the right hand of God” a more free and more powerful agent than when He offered that sacrifice which earned

or at least as in abeyance. It pretermits the grand consideration—which direct Scriptural assertions place before us, and which an adoring appreciation of the constitution of Christ’s person, and the intrinsic nature of His work necessitate—that Christ’s actual forthputting of power, and His official, and obedient, and positive agency, never were, and could not be, overborne and subdued; but that, on the contrary, they prevailed to put forth their energy, and their grandest energy, precisely against an inconceivable combination of agencies and instruments naturally fitted, had that been possible, to subdue and overbear them. Earth, and hell, and heaven: earth’s rulers and her rabble; her kings, and priests, and soldiers, and malefactors assailing him; her Jews and Gentiles; her dumb creatures even; earth’s forests furnishing wood; earth’s streams refusing water; earth’s bitterness mingled in vinegar and gall; earth’s curse embodied in her thorns, in mockery and pain to crown Him; earth’s “founded” steadfastness refusing to support Him, and her firmament to shine upon Him: hell’s utmost force and fury gathered up against Him: heaven’s sword devouring Him, and heaven’s God forsaking Him:—earth, and hell, and heaven thus in conspiring action against Him, unto the uttermost of heaven’s extremest justice, and earth’s and hell’s extremest injustice:—what is the glory of the Cross, if it be not *this*; that with such action conspiring to subdue *His* action, His action outlasted and outlived them all, and He did not die subdued and overborne into dying, He did not die

till He *gave* Himself in death? Emmanuel a mere sufferer in His death! ‘Ο λόγος ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ ἡ δύναμις Θεοῦ. “The Logos of the Cross is the Power of God” (1 Cor. i. 18).

Part Second.

Direct scriptural evidence of this truth.

We may notice briefly some of the more obvious Scriptural assertions of this truth,—as well as some of the less obvious implications of it, which, when duly considered, are frequently even more instructive.

Among some of the more obvious testimonies to the doctrine that the death of Christ was an *action* of His priestly office, may be reckoned the assertion of Isaiah (liii. 12), that “He *poured out* His soul unto death;” the phrases frequently used by the apostle Paul, that “He loved the Church, and *gave* Himself for it” (Eph. v. 21), and, specialising this love and loving service to the individual believer, “He loved me, and *gave* Himself for me” (Gal. ii. 20); and again, “Christ also hath loved us, and (παρέδωκεν) hath *delivered Himself* for us an *offering* and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour” (Eph. v. 2); and again, “When He had *by Himself purged* our sins” (Heb. i. 2). The doxology of John: “Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood” (Rev. i. 5). The frequent expressions of the Lord himself: “The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to *minister*, and to

mortal woe. An emanation of His divine majesty therefore goes forth with power to fell His captors to the ground. They shall be made to feel, and Judas, who stands by, shall be made to see—is it not for that very reason that we are told that “Judas which betrayed Him stood with them”?—that the traitor’s wickedness in betrayal was superfluous, and the captors’ power and efforts useless against one who is “doing” the will of God, and giving Himself unto death as He will soon also give Himself *in* death. “The Good Shepherd *giveth* His life.” This is the will of God concerning Him—that “will” which He came “to do.”

But there is another part of the will of God to be provided for. “The Good Shepherd giveth His life *for the sheep*.” If Christ is now “to do” the will of God in its completeness, He has to bring into play that other side of it which Paul doctrinally presents when he says, “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once for all.” Jesus has not only to offer Himself, but to offer Himself for the sheep. Accordingly, “Then asked He them again, Whom seek ye? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus answered, I have told you that I am he: *if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way*; that the saying might be fulfilled which He spake, Of those whom Thou hast given me I have lost none” (John xviii. 7-9).

Is not the prayer of Gethsemane answered? Has not the suppliant been heard—heard in that He feared? Is He not strengthened—“to do Thy will, O God”?

herefore absolutely and unconditionally secure the consecration and salvation of His people. "By the *which will*"—Paul therefore adds most emphatically—"by the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once for all" (ver. 10). That was the full, complete "will of God" which Jesus "came to do":—to offer Himself; and, by the offering of Himself, to sanctify, or consecrate, and render acceptable, unto God those whom the Father had given to Him.

(2.) Look now—as so singularly confirmatory of the doctrine—to the *history* of what immediately followed the prayer of Gethsemane; a history in which the answer to the prayer, "Thy will be done,"—Thy will be done *by me*,—may be read as in a brilliant mirror. Immediately after the prayer in the garden, "a band of men and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees cometh thither, with lanterns, and torches, and weapons," to apprehend Him. He has to provide for the "doing" of the Father's will in both its aspects; *first*, as respects the placing in a clear light His own voluntary agency in offering Himself; and *secondly*, as it respects the deliverance of His disciples thereby. Accordingly, "He went forth and said unto them, Whom seek ye? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus saith unto them, I am he. And Judas also that betrayed him stood with them. As soon as he had said unto them, I am he, they went backward and fell to the ground." He is not to be captured: He is to surrender. For He is not to suffer merely, but to offer Himself in

give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. xx. 28):—and, very specially, His ever-memorable account of Himself as the Good Shepherd, "The Good Shepherd *giveth* His life for His sheep:" So solicitous is our Lord on this point, that He repeats it again and again, in the strongest and most emphatic terms, positive and negative alike: "No one taketh it from me; I lay it down of myself." And so powerfully does He bring out the idea of His own agency being concerned in His death, that He places it on a level with the agency He should put forth in His resurrection, and represents obedient action equally in the two cases as constituting jointly what His Father's commandment had enjoined upon Him, and what His Father's love and approbation rested in so com- placently: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I *lay down* my life, that I might take it again. No one (*οὐδεὶς*) taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself,—at my own instance, of my own will, by my own deed. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment received I of my Father" (John x. 11, 18).

How clearly is the forthputting of positive power im- plied in all these various expressions; as it is, also, with such emphatic iteration in the prophecy of Daniel, which went before concerning the "Anointed most Holy," that He should "finish transgression, and make an end of sin, and make reconciliation for iniquity, and bring in everlasting righteousness" (Dan. ix. 24). "Nor yet that— He should *offer* Himself often, for then must He often

have *suffered* since the foundation of the world; but now once, in the end of the world, hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. ix. 25, 26):—an utterance of inspiration which fearlessly presents the sacrifice of the Cross as an *offering in suffering*, and as *suffering in offering*, doing justice alike to both aspects of the truth, together constituting one truth indissoluble, its unique singularity arising from a combination of what, in none but the God-man, could be combined.

For is it not thoroughly unique and singular, and altogether transcendently glorious? "I lay down my life that I might take it again: I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." The death of Christ is not less glorious than His resurrection, nor is there less of His own glorious power in it. Nay, it would seem no hard thesis to maintain,—That Emmanuel hath put forth and glorified His power, *more* in dying than in rising again. For, if there be truth, as there is both truth and wondrous beauty, in Professor MACLAGAN'S figure of the empty scabbard bound upon the warrior's person, while the unsheathed sword is in his hand,—the fine conception by which that great divine illustrates that in the state of the dead, Emmanuel's body and His soul remained each in union with His Godhead: then it remains to ask;—Is there the action of greater power and prowess in the gentle ease with which that warrior, the battle being fought and won, returns the sword to its sheath; or in the prior, princely, peerless act in which,—what shall I say?—in which, having girt thy sword

sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me) to *do thy will*, O God" (Heb. x. 5-7). I come "to *do thy will*." It is no passive endurance of God's will to which He is in death to be subjected. It is an active performance of it. Nor is it His active performance of duty during His life on earth, as contrasted with His sufferings at its close, that this *doing* of God's will can indicate. It is precisely and exactly His sacrificial death to which it most clearly and immediately applies. For that "will" of God which he is to "do," is that same service by which He is to replace the offerings and sacrifices which are disparaged and set aside to make room for the sacrifice of the Son of God. To bring this out unmistakably is the design of the emphatic and otherwise unnecessary repetition in the verses which immediately follow:—
 "Above, when he said, Sacrifice, and offering, and burnt-offerings, and offerings for sin thou wouldst not, neither hadst pleasure therein (which are offered by the law); *then* said I"—manifestly concerning that offering in which the Lord *hath* pleasure—"Lo, I come to do thy will, O God" (ver. 8, 9). In the death of Christ, there was the action of Christ; there was the *doing* of the will of God.

But this is not the whole amount of God's "will" in the death of Christ, namely, that He should actively offer himself. It was in the will of God also that Christ's offering of Himself should be vicarious, and should

article of death itself. In precisely this was He heard: "He was heard in that He feared: though He were a Son, yet learned He OBEDIENCE by the things He suffered." And in this inherency and forthputting of obedient offering in patient suffering—in this combination of piacular patience and priestly power—in thus prevailing to act upon His own person after death could no more act upon Him, and so to die, not by death's will, but by His own, offering Himself to God: in *this* "being made perfect"—being *thus* and hereby "made perfect, He became the *author*"—not passively the occasion and the means, but the author—"of eternal salvation to all them that obey Him."

V. Consider the final petition of Gethsemane, which constitutes the substance and whole aim of the prayer, in respect of which, therefore, He was answered when He was heard in that He feared. "Not my will, but thine, be done." Does this mean, Thy will be done upon me? Or does it not rather mean, Thy will be done by me? Can any one who knows either the scriptural doctrine or the subsequent history have any hesitation as to which of these interpretations is to be placed on our Lord's believing and obedient utterance, "Thy will be done"?

(1.) Take the *doctrine* of Scripture concerning this "will of God." "Wherefore, when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body hast thou prepared me: in burnt-offerings and

upon thy thigh, O Most Mighty, thy right hand, teaching terrible things, flashed it forth for victory!

How dishonourable, to imagine that the body of the Word made flesh was, in death, torn and reaved away from Him! How melancholy, even to have indistinct views of the glorious truth that it was not so! Alike *in* death and *after* death, both the soul and the body of Emmanuel were in His own power. In the very grave, His dead body was in His own power, for it was in His own person,—in union indissoluble with His Godhead. So likewise, of course, was His soul,—united still, as ever, with His Godhead. And here, in death, was a check to death, such as that last enemy had never hitherto received. Here are a human soul and a human body of the self-same person, thoroughly separated from each other, precisely as in the case of a dead mere man,—verifying the assertion therefore that this Man, though not a mere man, is nevertheless a dead man,—and all death's claims are therefore satisfied: while, notwithstanding, His disembodied soul and dead body remain in a certain glorious union with each other still, through the intermedium of that Godhead with which, in the person of the Son, who is this dead Christ, they are each of them in immediate and direct union, although thoroughly severed from each other. Here is an element of victory over death to which perhaps adequate attention has not always been given. And it is reproduced in its measure, in the victory of every dying believer, every member of the body of Christ. For "the souls of believers, being at death made perfect in holi-

ness, do immediately pass into glory, and *their bodies being still united to Christ* do rest in their graves till the resurrection." The soul and the body of the believer, separated from each other in death, remain still united indirectly, through the intervention of the person of Christ, to which each of them is directly united by the Spirit. Yet how shall these glorious mysteries be conserved, if we overlook Christ's own *action* in His death?

Part Third.

Implicit scriptural evidence.

But, perhaps, the most instructive Scriptural evidences of this great truth are those which require a little thought to disclose their import and their force. Amongst such we may notice:—

I. In the first place, the remarkable saying of Paul to the Romans (v. 9), "Being now justified by His blood." What can this imply, but that in the blood or death of Christ we are to recognise, not merely such *endurance* as satisfies the penalty of the law, and procures the pardon of sin, but such *obedience* also, such positive righteousness, as secures the complete justification of the sinner's person? Without a perfect and positive objective righteousness, justification is impossible. The announcement of it would be the announcement of an unreality; and, with God, this simply could not be. And hence, if to

might as well have been designated from any of His attributes, or any of His works,—as, for instance, "Him that created the stars of heaven,"—if we be not given to understand that Jesus selected this designation because He prayed for that which it sets forth God as able to give,—salvation from death. And for this unquestionably, therefore, we are to understand that Jesus did pray. And "He was heard." He did not indeed pray to be saved from dying. In the early progress of His agony in the garden He had said, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But the Apostle here, in writing to the Hebrews, is summing up the tenor and substance of the prayer—not, surely, excluding that in which the suppliant's soul finally rested, or giving merely the preliminary conflict through which it passed on to the subject-matter of the final supplication. And, moreover, it is expressly said by Paul, that whatever Jesus here prayed for He obtained. In the self-same petition, made to "Him that was able to save Him from death," we are told, "He was heard"—heard in that He feared."

What, then, does it inevitably follow that He must have prayed for, if He prayed to be saved from death, and yet prayed not to be saved from dying? What but for strength *actively* to die; to die in the active service of His office, and not as the down-borne victim of death; to die as a Priest—"a Priest for ever"—a Priest in death itself; His priestly action uninterrupted in death, yea, triumphing in death—an offerer as well as a sufferer—an obedient official agent in the very

order of Melchisedec" (ver. 6). And it is not completed without a reiteration of the truth that this agony of prayer, and its answer, and the fruit of its answer, all belong to our Lord's priestly duty and activities: "Called of God an high priest, after the order of Melchisedec" (ver. 10). Why re-affirm so expressly, and so soon, the priestly dignity and glory of our Lord? What is the meaning of thus so solicitously guarding and hemming in, on the right hand and on the left, these prayers and supplications, and strong crying and tears of Emmanuel, with allusions, we were about to say, but rather with reiterations, of the one strongest possible assertion of Christ's priesthood which the Holy Spirit had put on record, and which is fortified even with the oath of God: "The Lord hath sworn and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchisedec" (Ps. cx. 4)? What, but to convince us that we utterly misread and misconceive the whole design and issue of these prayers of Christ, unless we recognise them as priestly prayers, offered in the discharge of priestly duty, and contemplating and conserving the unsubdued maintenance of His priestly service and activity. In bringing His glorious priestly service to "perfection," He knew that He had to meet death—death armed with its "sting," which is "sin," and borne home with that "strength" which it derives from the "law." It is not indeed affirmed that He prayed to be saved from death. But it is implied. Why otherwise is God here designated as "Him that was able to save Him from death"? He

the "blood" or death of Christ our "justification" is to be attributed, it can only be because in His blood a true obedience is couched,—in His death, the crowning activity of His sacerdotal work is to be recognised.

II. The same thing is obvious when Paul, to the Hebrews (ix. 14), says that "The blood of Christ, who, through the Eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God, purges the conscience from dead works to serve the living God." In fact, there are several testimonies to the same effect in this one illustrious utterance. The activity of Christ in His death is expressly affirmed in the usual priestly phrase—"He offered Himself." Our attention is expressly called, moreover, to the great truth that it was precisely *this* which the Eternal Spirit furnished Him with grace and power to achieve, and to achieve in all the faultlessness—"without spot"—and all the moral beauty, which rendered it of sweet-smelling savour unto God. And over and above these more obvious assertions, we have the implication that *obedience* is couched in the blood of Jesus, in the fact that it "purges the conscience from dead works to serve *the living God*." Had the Apostle's deliverance stopped short of this—attributing to Christ's blood power only to "purge the conscience," we might have regarded that atoning blood as couching in it merely a removal, because an endurance, of the curse. But when we find its action on the conscience not exhausted without embracing the communication of power and right to "serve the living

God," we see that it procures and conveys not merely deliverance from the dread and shame of guilt, but acceptance for the believer's "service," and *à fortiori*, therefore, acceptance for his person. And what is this but complete justification, such as rests, and can rest only, upon a perfect, positive righteousness—an "obedience unto death"?

III. And this reminds us to point out the true meaning of the inspired expression into the use of which the train of thought so naturally leads us:—He "became obedient unto death." Here, "death" is evidently a limit to the obedience of Christ. But is the obedience to be considered as exclusive of the limit, or inclusive of it? We doubt not that many read this saying of Paul's as if it implied that Christ was obedient *up to* the limit of His death, but not *in* death, and as including death in His "obedience." Making no allowance for the singular peculiarity of Christ's person as God-man, they read this phrase as if it could be applied, *pari passu*, to a mere man, and as if it were synonymous in import with the exhortation to the believer, "Be thou faithful unto death." But Christ was not merely positively obedient up to the point at which death's work upon His person began, but obedient up to the point at which death's utmost action on His person terminated; Himself with a loud voice, and as a conqueror, "dismissing His spirit." To have faltered in His *obedience*, or resigned His positive agency, a hair's-breadth short of this, would have been

to abandon all the active obedience He had hitherto wrought; to leave it behind Him on this side of Calvary; and to fail to bring His righteousness safely through the ordeal of the Cross.

IV. Strength through the Eternal Spirit to offer Himself to God—strength to carry His righteousness safely through the ordeal of the cross to the throne within the veil, "perfecting" it in and by positive and victorious priestly agency in death—was precisely what Jesus prayed for in His agony, and obtained.

It is impossible in any other light than this, as the real tenor and issue of His prayer, to understand the Apostle's very solemn and memorable description of it: "Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears, unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared: though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered; and being made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation to all them that obey Him" (Heb. v. 7-9). These three verses, it is to be feared, have been too often read apart from the verse that precedes and from the verse that follows them. Yet, by these two verses, this description of our Lord's agony of prayer is shut in between two explicit assertions of His priesthood. It is heralded with quotation of the divine oath by which Christ was called to the priestly office: "As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever, after the