**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GALATIANS-004**. **THE UNIVERSAL PRISON by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"But the Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe."*

*Galatians 3:22*

The Apostle uses here a striking and solemn figure, which is much veiled for the English reader by the ambiguity attaching to the word concluded. It literally means shut up, and is to be taken in its literal sense of confining, and not in its secondary sense of inferring. So, then, we are to conceive of a vast prison-house in which mankind is confined. And then, very characteristically, the Apostle passes at once to another metaphor when he goes on to say under sin. What a moment before had presented itself to his vivid imagination as a great dungeon is now represented as a heavy weight, pressing down upon those beneath; if, indeed, we are not, perhaps, rather to think of the low roof of the dark dungeon as weighing on the captives.

Further, he says that Scripture has driven men into this captivity. That, of course, cannot mean that revelation makes us sinners, but it does mean that it makes us more guilty, and that it declares the fact of human sinfulness as no other voice has ever done. And then the grimness of the picture is all relieved and explained, and the office ascribed to God's revelation harmonised with God's love, by the strong, steady beam of light that falls from the last words, which tell us that the prisoners have not been bound in chains for despair or death, but in order that, gathered together in a common doleful destiny, they may become recipients of a common blessed salvation, and emerge into liberty and light through faith in Jesus Christ.

So here are three things--the prison-house, its guardian, and its breaker. The Scripture hath shut up all under sin, in order that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given unto all them that believe.

**I. First, then, note the universal prison-house.**

Now the Apostle says two things--and we may put away the figure and look at the facts that underlie it. The one is that all sin is imprisonment, the other is that all men are in that dungeon, unless they have come out of it through faith in Jesus Christ.

All sin is imprisonment. That is the direct contrary of the notion that many people have. They say to themselves, Why should I be fettered and confined by these antiquated restrictions of a conventional morality? Why should I not break the bonds, and do as I like? And they laugh at Christian people who recognise the limitations under which God's law has put them; and tell us that we are cold-blooded folks who live by rule, and contrast their own broad emancipation from narrow prejudice. But the reality is the other way. The man who does wrong is a slave in the measure in which he does it. If you want to find out--and mark this, you young people, who may be deceived by the false contrasts between the restraints of duty and the freedom of living a dissolute life--if you want to find out how utterly he that committeth sin is the slave of sin, try to break it off, and you will find it out fast enough. We all know, alas! the impotence of the will when it comes to hand grips with some evil to which we have become habituated; and how we determine and determine, and try, and fail, and determine again, with no better result. We are the slaves of our own passions; and no man is free who is hindered by his lower self from doing that which his better self tells him he ought to do. The tempter comes to you, and says, Come and do this thing, just for once. You can leave off when you like, you know. There is no need to do it a second time. And when you have done it, he changes his note, and says, Ah! you are in, and you cannot get out. You have done it once; and in my vocabulary once means twice, and once and twice mean always.

Insane people are sometimes tempted into a house of detention by being made to believe that it is a grand mansion, where they are just going to pay a flying visit, and can come away when they like. But once inside the walls, they never get past the lodge gates any more. The foolish birds do not know that there is lime on the twigs, and their little feet get fastened to the branch, and their wings flutter in vain. He that committeth sin is the slave of sin--shut up, dungeoned, under sin.

But do not forget, either, the other metaphor in our text, in which the Apostle, with characteristic rapidity, and to the horror of rhetorical propriety, passes at once from the thought of a dungeon to the thought of an impending weight, and says, Shut up under sin.

What does that mean? It means that we are guilty when we have done wrong; and it means that we are under penalties which are sure to follow. No deed that we do, howsoever it may fade from the tablets of our memory, but writes in visible characters, in proportion to its magnitude, upon our characters and lives. All human acts have perpetual consequences. The kick of the rifle against the shoulder of the man that fires it is as certain as the flight of the bullet from its muzzle. The chalk cliffs that rise above the Channel entomb and perpetuate the relics of myriads of evanescent lives; and our fleeting deeds are similarly preserved in our present selves. Everything that a man wills, whether it passes into external act or not, leaves, in its measure, ineffaceable impressions on himself. And so we are not only dungeoned in, but weighed upon by, and lie under, the evil that we do.

Nor, dear friends, dare I pass in silence what is too often passed in silence in the modern pulpit, the plain fact that there is a future waiting for each of us beyond the grave, of which the most certain characteristic, certified by our own forebodings, required by the reasonableness of creation, and made plain by the revelation of Scripture, is that it is a future of retribution, where we shall have to carry our works; and as we have brewed so shall we drink; and the beds that we have made we shall have to lie upon. God shut up all under sin.

Note, again, the universality of the imprisonment.

Now I am not going to exaggerate, I hope. I want to keep well within the limits of fact, and to say nothing that is not endorsed by your own consciences, if you will be honest with yourselves. And I say that the Bible does not charge men universally with gross transgressions. It does not talk about the virtues that grow in the open as if they were splendid vices; but it does say, and I ask you if our own hearts do not tell us that it says truly, that no man is, or has been, does, or has done, that which his own conscience tells him he should have been and done. We are all ready to admit faults, in a general way, and to confess that we have come short of what our own consciousness tells us we ought to be. But I want you to take the other step, and to remember that since we each stand in a personal relation to God, therefore all imperfections, faults, negligences, shortcomings, and, still more, transgressions of morality, or of the higher aspirations of our lives, are sins. Because sin--to use fine words--is the correlative of God. Or, to put it into plainer language, the deeds which in regard to law may be crimes, or those which in regard to morality may be vices, or in regard to our own convictions of duty may be shortcomings, seeing they all have some reference to Him, assume a very much graver character, and they are all sins.

Oh, brethren, if we realise how intimately and inseparably we are knit to God, and how everything that we do, and do not do, but should have done, has an aspect in reference to Him, I think we should be less unwilling to admit, and less tinged with levity and carelessness in admitting, that all our faults are transgressions of His law, and we should find ourselves more frequently on our knees before Him, with the penitent words on our lips and in our hearts, Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight.

That was the prayer of a man who had done a foul evil in other people's sight; who had managed to accumulate about as many offences to as many people in one deed as was possible. For, as a king he had sinned against his nation, as a friend he had sinned against his companion, as a captain he had sinned against his brave subordinate, as a husband he had sinned against his wife, and he had sinned against Bathsheba. And yet, with all that tangle of offences against all these people, he says, Against Thee, Thee only. Yes! Because, accurately speaking, the sin had reference to God, and to God alone. And I wish for myself and for you to cultivate the habit of connecting, thus, all our actions, and especially our imperfections and our faults, with the thought of God, that we may learn how universal is the enclosure of man in this dreadful prison-house.

**II. And so, I come, in the second place, to look at the guardian of the prison.**

That is a strange phrase of my text attributing the shutting of men up in this prison-house to the merciful revelation of God in the Scripture. And it is made still more striking and strange by another edition of the same expression in the Epistle to the Romans, where Paul directly traces the concluding all in disobedience to God Himself.

There may be other subtle thoughts connected with that expression which I do not need to enter upon now. But one that I would dwell upon, for a moment, is this, that one great purpose of Scripture is to convince us that we are sinful in God's sight. I do not need to remind you, I suppose, how that was, one might almost say, the dominant intention of the whole of the ceremonial and moral law of Israel, and explains its many else inexplicable and apparently petty commandments and prohibitions. They were all meant to emphasise the difference between right and wrong, obedience and disobedience, and so to drive home to men's hearts the consciousness that they had broken the commandments of the living God. And although the Gospel comes with a very different guise from that ancient order, and is primarily gift and not law, a Gospel of forgiveness, and not the promulgation of duty or the threatening of condemnation, yet it, too, has for one of its main purposes, which must be accomplished in us before it can reach its highest aim in us, the kindling in men's hearts of the same consciousness that they are sinful men in God's sight.

Ah, brethren, we all need it. There is nothing that we need more than to have driven deep into us the penetrating point of that conviction. There must be some external standard by which men may be convinced of their sinfulness, for they carry no such standard within them. Your conscience is only you judging on moral questions, and, of course, as you change, it will change too. A man's whole state determines the voice with which conscience shall speak to him, and so the worse he is, and the more he needs it, the less he has it. The rebels cut the telegraph wires. The waves break the bell that hangs on the reef, and so the black rocks get many a wreck to gnaw with their sharp teeth. A man makes his conscience dumb by the very sins that require a conscience trumpet-tongued to reprehend them. And therefore it needs that God should speak from Heaven, and say to us, Thou art the man, or else we pass by all these grave things that I am trying to urge upon you now, and fall back upon our complacency and our levity and our unwillingness to take stock of ourselves, and front the facts of our condition. And so we build up a barrier between ourselves and God, and God's grace, which nothing short of that grace and an omnipotent love and an all-powerful Redeemer can ever pull down.

I wish to urge in a few words, yet with much earnestness, this thought, that until we have laid to heart God's message about our own personal sinfulness we have not got to the place where we can in the least understand the true meaning of His Gospel, or the true work of His Son. May I say that I, for one, am old-fashioned enough to look with great apprehension on certain tendencies of present-day presentations of Christianity which, whilst they dwell much upon the social blessings which it brings, do seem to me to be in great peril of obscuring the central characteristic of the Gospel, that it is addressed to sinful men, and that the only way by which individuals can come to the possession of any of its blessings is by coming as penitent sinners, and casting themselves on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ? The beginning of all lies here, where Paul puts it, the Scripture hath herded all men, in droves, into the prison, that it might have mercy upon all.

Dear friend, as the old proverb has it, deceit lurks in generalities. I have no doubt you are perfectly willing to admit that all are sinful. Come a little closer to the truth, I beseech you, and say each is sinful, and I am one of the captives.

**III. And so, lastly, the breaker of the prison-house.**

I need not spend your time in commenting on the final words of this text. Suffice it to gather their general purport and scope. The apparently stern treatment which God by revelation applies to the whole mass of mankind is really the tenderest beneficence. He has shut them up in the prison-house in order that, thus shut up, they may the more eagerly apprehend and welcome the advent of the Deliverer. He tells us each our state, in order that we may the more long for, and the more closely grasp, the great mercy which reverses the state. And so how shallow and how unfair it is to talk about evangelical Christianity as being gloomy, stern, or misanthropical! You do not call a doctor unkind because he tells an unsuspecting patient that his disease is far advanced, and that if it is not cured it will be fatal. No more should a man turn away from Christianity, or think it harsh and sour, because it speaks plain truths. The question is, are they true? not, are they unpleasant?

If you and I, and all our fellows, are shut up in this prison-house of sin, then it is quite clear that none of us can do anything to get ourselves out. And so the way is prepared for that great message with which Jesus opened His ministry, and which, whilst it has a far wider application, and reference to social as well as to individual evils, begins with the proclamation of liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.

There was once a Roman emperor who wished that all his enemies had one neck, that he might slay them all at one blow. The wish is a fact in regard to Christ and His work, for by it all our tyrants have been smitten to death by one stroke; and the death of Jesus Christ has been the death of sin and death and hell--of sin in its power, in its guilt, and in its penalty. He has come into the prison-house, and torn the bars away, and opened the fetters, and every man may, if he will, come out into the blessed sunshine and expatiate there.

And if, brethren, it is true that the universal prison-house is opened by the death of Jesus Christ, who is the Propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and the power by which the most polluted may become clean, then there follows, as plainly, that the only thing which we have to do is, recognising and feeling our bound impotence, to stretch out chained hands and take the gift that He brings. Since all is done for each of us, and since none of us can do sufficient for himself to break the bond, then what we should do is to trust to Him who has broken every chain and let the oppressed go free.

Oh, dear friend, if you want to get to the heart of the sweetness and the blessedness and power of the Gospel, you must begin here, with the clear and penitent consciousness that you are a sinful man in God's sight, and can do nothing to cleanse, help, or liberate yourself. Is Jesus Christ the breaker of the bond for you? Do you learn from Him what your need is? Do you trust yourself to Him for Pardon, for cleansing, for emancipation? Unless you do, you will never know His most precious preciousness, and you have little right to call yourself a Christian. If you do, oh, than a great light will shine in the prison-house, and your chains will drop from your wrists, and the iron door will open of its own accord, and you will come out into the morning sunshine of a new day, because you have confessed and abhorred the bondage into which you have cast yourselves, and accepted the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free.