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

**2 SAMUEL-010. DAVIS AND NATHAN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin."*

*2 Samuel 12:13*

We ought to be very thankful that Scripture never conceals the faults of its noblest men. High among the highest of them stands the poet-king. Whoever, for nearly three thousand years, has wished to express the emotions of trust in God, longing after purity, aspiration, and rapture of devotion, has found that his words have been before him.

And this man sins; black, inexcusable, aggravated transgression. You know the shameful story; I need not tell it over again. The Bible gives it us in all its naked ugliness, and there are precious lessons to be got out of it; such, for instance, as that it is not innocence that makes men good. This is the man after God's own heart! people sneer. Yes! Not because saints have a peculiar morality, and atone for adultery and murder by making or singing psalms, but because, having fallen into foul sin, he learned to abhor it, and with many tears, with unconquerable resolution, with deepened trust in God, set his face once more to press toward the mark. That is a lesson worth learning.

And, again, David was not a hypocrite because he thus fell. All sin is inconsistent with devotion; but, thank God, we cannot say how much or how dark the sin must be which is incompatible with devotion, nor how much evil there may still lurk and linger in a heart of which the main set and aspiration are towards purity and God.

And, again, the worst transgressions are not the passionate outbursts contradictory of the main direction of a life which sometimes come; but the habitual, though they be far smaller, evils which are honey-combing the moral nature. White ants will pick a carcase clean sooner than a lion. And many a man who calls himself a Christian, and thinks himself one, is in far more danger, from little pieces of chronic meanness in his daily life, or sharp practice in his business, than ever David was in his blackest evil.

But the main lesson of all is that great and blessed one of the possibility of any evil and sin like this black one, being annihilated and caused to pass away through repentance and confession. It is to that aspect of our text that I turn, and ask you to look with me at the three things that come out of it: David's penitence; David's pardon consequent upon his penitence; and David's punishment, notwithstanding his penitence and pardon.

**I. First, then, the penitence.**

What a divine simplicity there is in the words of our text: David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. That is all. In the original, two words are enough to revolutionise the man's whole life, and to alter all his relations to the divine justice and the divine Friend. I have sinned against the Lord. Not an easy thing to say; and as the story shows us, a thing that David took a long time to mount up to.

Remember the narrative. A year has passed since his transgression. What sort of a year has it been? One of the Psalms tells us, When I kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long; for day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture was turned into the drought of summer. There were long months of sullen silence, in which a clear apprehension and a torturing experience of divine disapprobation, like a serpent's fang, struck poison into his veins. His very physical frame seems to have suffered. His heart was as dry as the parched grass upon the steppes. That was what he got by his sin. A moment of turbid animal delight, and long days of agony; dumb suffering in which the sense of evil had not yet broken him down into a rain of sweet tears, but lay, like a burning consciousness, within his heart.

And then came the prophet with his parable, so tender, so ingenious, so powerful. And the quick flash of generous indignation, which showed how noble the man was after all, with which he responded to the picture, unknowing that it was a picture of his own dastardly conduct, led on to the solemn words in which Nathan tore away the veil; and with a threefold lever, if I may so say, overthrew the toppling structure of his impenitence.

First of all, and most chiefly, he seeks to win him to repentance by a picture of God's great love and goodness. I have done this and that and the other thing for thee. What hast thou done for Me? Ah, that is the true beginning. You cannot frighten men into penitence, you may frighten them into remorse; and the remorse may or may not lead on to repentance. But bring to bear upon a man's heart the thought of the infinite and perfect love of God, and that is the solvent of all his obstinate impenitence, and melts him to cry, I have sinned. And along with that element there is the other, the plain striking away of all disguises from the ugly fact of the sin. The prophet gives it its hideous name, and that is one element in the process which leads to true repentance. For so strange and subtle are the veils which we cast over our own evils, that it comes sometimes to us with a shock and a start when some word, that we know to connote wickedness of the deepest dye, is applied to them. David had very likely so sophisticated his conscience that, though he had been writhing under the sense that he was a wrongdoer, it came to him with a kind of ugly surprise when the naked words adultery and murder were pressed up against his consciousness.

And the third element that brought him to his senses, and to his knees, was the threatening of punishment, which is salutary when it follows these other two, the revelation of a divine love and the unveiling of the essential nature of my own act; but which without these is but the hangman's whip to which only inferior natures will respond. And these three, the appeal to God's love, the revelation of his own sin, the solemn warning of its consequences--these three brought to bear upon David's heart, broke him down into a passion of penitence in which he has only the two words to say, I have sinned against the Lord. That is all. That is enough.

And what is it? It is the recognition--which is essential to all real penitence--that I have not merely broken some impersonal law, or done something that hurts my fellows, but that I have broken the relations which I ought to sustain to a living, loving Person, who is God. We commit crimes against society, we commit faults against one another, we commit sins against God, and the very notion of sin involves, as its correlative, the thought of the divine Lawgiver.

So, dear brethren, penitence goes deeper than a recognition of demerit and unworthiness. It is more than an acknowledgment of imperfection and breach of morality. It is something different altogether from the acknowledgment that I have committed a fault against my fellow. David had done Bathsheba and Uriah, and in them his whole kingdom, foul wrong, but, as he says in Psalm li., Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned. His account with these is of a less grave character, but against Thee I sinned.

And in like manner, this penitence contains in it the recognition of transgression against a loving Friend and Father, which had been brought home to his mind by all the words of the rebuking prophet, who was a kind of incarnate conscience for him now. And it contains, still further, confession to God against whom he had sinned. The first impulse of a man when he dimly discerns how far he has departed from God's law, is that which the old story represents was the first impulse of the first sinners--to hide himself in the trees of the garden. The second impulse is to go to Him against whom we have sinned, and who only therefore can deal with the sin in the way of forgiveness, and to pour it all out before Him. Once an Apostle, when he caught a partial glimpse of his own demerit and transgression, said to the Master with a natural impulse, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord! But Peter had a deeper sense of his own sin, and a happier knowledge of what Christ could do for his sin, when his brother Apostle whispering to him in the boat, It is the Lord, the traitor Apostle cast himself into the shallow water and floundered through it anyhow, to get as close as he could to the Master's feet.

Do not go away from God because you feel that you have sinned against Him. Where should you go but to your mother's bosom, and hide your face there, if you have committed faults against her? Where should you go but to God if against Him you have transgressed? Look, my brother, at your own character and conduct; measure the deficiencies and imperfections, the transgressions and faults; ay! perhaps with some of you, the crimes against men and society and human laws; but see beneath all these a deeper thought; and stifle not the words that would come to your lips as a relief, like a surgeon's lancet struck into some foul gathering, I have sinned against the Lord.

**II. And now, secondly, notice with me David's pardon consequent upon his repentance.**

Can there be anything more striking--I do not say dramatic, for the circumstances are far too serious for terms of art--can there be anything more in the nature of a gospel to us all than that brief dialogue? David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin.

Immediate forgiveness, that is the first lesson that I would press upon you. Dear brethren, it is an experience which you may each repeat in your own history at this moment. It needs but the confession in order that the forgiveness should come. At this end of the telephone whisper your confession, and before it has well passed your lips there comes back the voice sweet as that of angels, The Lord hath forgiven thy sin. One word, one motion of a heart aware of, and hating, and desiring to escape from, its evil, brings with a rush the whole fulness of fatherly and forgiving love into any heart. And that one confession may be the turning-point of a man's life, and may obliterate all the sinful past, and may bring him into loving, reconciled, harmonious relations with the Almighty Judge.

Learn, too, not only the immediacy of the answer and the simplicity of the means, but learn how thorough and complete God's dealing with your sin may be. The original language of my text might be rendered, The Lord hath caused thy sin to pass away; the thought being substantially that of some impediment or veil between man and Him which, with a touch of His hand, He dissolves as it were into vapour, and so leaves all the sky clear for His warmth and sunshine to pour down upon the heart. We do not need to enter upon theological language in talking about this great gift of forgiveness. It means substantially that howsoever you and I have piled up mountain upon mountain, Alp upon Alp, of our evils and transgressions, all pass away and become non-existent. Another word of the Old Testament expresses the same idea when it speaks about sin being covered. Another word expresses the same idea when it speaks about God as casting men's sins into the depths of the sea--all meaning this one thing, that they no longer stand as barriers between the free flow of His love and our poor hearts. He takes away the sense of guilt, touches the wounded conscience, and there is healing in His hand. As, according to the old belief, the sovereign, by laying his hand upon sufferers from the King's evil healed them and cleansed them, so the touch of His forgiving love takes away the sense of guilt and heals the spirit. He removes all the impediments between His love and us. His love can now come undisturbed. His deepest and solemnest judgments do not need to come; and no more does there stand frowning between us and Him the spectre of our past.

People tell us that forgiveness is impossible, that whatsoever a man soweth, that must he also reap; that law is law, and that the consequences cannot be averted. That is all quite true if there is not a God. It is not true if there is; and if there is no God, there is no sin. So if there is a God, there is forgiveness.

Consequences, as I shall have to show you in a moment, may still remain, but pardon may be ours all the same. When you forgive your child, does it mean that you do not thrash it, or does it mean that you take it to your heart? And when God pardons, does it mean that He waives His laws, or does it mean that He lets us come into the whole warmth and sunshine of His love? Will you go there?

Forgiveness was to Jews a thing difficult to apprehend. It was hard for them to understand the harmony of it with the rigid retribution on which their whole system of religion reposed. But you and I have come further into the light than Nathan and David had. And I have to preach a modification of the words of my text which is not a limitation of them, but the unveiling of their basis and the surest confirmation of them, when I say In Him--Jesus Christ--we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.

The New Testament teaches us that the Cross of Christ threw its power back upon former transgressions as well as forward upon future ones; and that in Him past ages, though they knew Him not, received remission. Christ is the Medium of the divine forgiveness; Christ's Cross is the ground of the divine pardon; Christ's sacrifice is the guarantee for us that the sin which He has borne He has borne away. By His stripes we are healed. Wherefore, men and brethren, be it known unto you, that through this Man is preached unto us the forgiveness of our sins.

**III. Third and lastly, look at the punishment which follows--shall I say notwithstanding or because of?--the penitence and the pardon.**

In David's life there came the immediate retribution in kind, which was signalised as such by the divine message--the death of the child who was conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity. But beyond that, look at David's life after his great fall. There was no more brightness in it. His own sin and example of lust loosed the bonds of morality in his household, and his son followed his example and improved upon it. And from that came Absalom's murder of his brother, and from that Absalom's exile, and from that Absalom's rebellion, and from that Absalom's death, which nearly killed his poor old father. And for all the rest of his days his home was troubled, and his last years ended with the turmoil of a disputed succession before his eyes were closed, all traceable to this one foul crime.

Joab was the torment of David's later days, and Joab's power over him depended upon his having been the instrument of Uriah's murder; and so the master of the king, whose bidding he had done. Ahithophel was the brain of Absalom's conspiracy. His defection struck a sharp arrow into David's heart--mine own familiar friend in whom I trusted. He evidently hated the king with fierce hatred. He was Bathsheba's grandfather; and we are not going wrong, I think, in tracing his passionate hatred, and the peculiar form of insult which he counselled Absalom to adopt, to the sense of foul wrong which had been done to his house by David's crime.

And so all through his days this poor old king had to do what you and I have to do--to bear the temporal results of sin. Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.

So of our pleasant vices the gods make whips to scourge us. And it is in mercy that we have to drink as we have brewed, that we have to lie upon the beds that we have made; that in regard to outward consequences, and in regard to our own hearts and inward history, we are the architects of our own fortunes, and cannot escape the penalties of our sins and of our faults. Better to have it so than be cursed with impunity!

Some of you young men are sowing diseases in your bones that will either make you invalids or will kill you before your time. All of us are bearing about with us, in some measure and sense, the issues, which are the punishments, of our evil. Let us thank Him and take up the praise of the old psalm, Thou wast a God that forgivest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions. There is either merciful chastisement here, that we may be parted from our sins, or there is judgment hereafter.

O my brother! let me beseech you, do not commit the suicide of impenitence, but go to Christ, in whom all our sins are taken away, and lay your hands on the head of that great Sacrifice, and the Lord shall cause to pass the iniquity of your sin.