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

**EXODUS-033. SIN AND FORGIVENESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty ..."*

*Exodus 34:7*

The former chapter tells us of the majesty of the divine revelation as it was made to Moses on the mount of God. Let us notice that, whatever was the visible pomp of the external Theophany to the senses, the true revelation lay in the proclamation of the Name; the revelation to the conscience and the heart; and such a revelation had never before fallen on mortal ears. It is remarkable that the very system which was emphatically one of law and retribution should have been thus heralded by a word which is perfectly evangelical in its whole tone. That fact should have prevented many errors as to the relation of Judaism and Christianity. The very centre of the former was God is love, merciful and gracious, and if there follows the difficult addition visiting the iniquities, etc., the New Testament adds its Amen to that. True, the harmony of the two and the great revelation of the means of forgiveness lay far beyond the horizon of Moses and his people, but none the less was it the message of Judaism that there is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared. The law spoke of retribution, justice, duty, and sin, but side by side with the law was another institution, the sacrificial worship, which proclaimed that God was full of love, and that the sinner was welcomed to His side. And it is the root of many errors to transfer New Testament language about the law to the whole Old Testament system. But, passing away from this, I wish to look at two points in these words. The characteristics of human sins and, The divine treatment of them.

**I. The characteristics of human sins.**

Observe the threefold form of expression--iniquity and transgression and sin.

It seems natural that in the divine proclamation of His own holy character, the sinful nature of men should be characterised with all the fervid energy of such words; for the accumulation even of synonyms would serve a moral purpose, expressive at once of the divine displeasure against sin, and of the free full pardon for it in all its possible forms. But the words are very far from all meaning the same thing. They all designate the same actions, but from different points of view, and with reference to different phases and qualities of sin.

Now these three expressions are inadequately represented by the English translation.

Iniquity literally means twisting, or something twisted, and is thus the opposite of righteousness, or rather of what is straight. It is thus like our own right and wrong, or like the Latin in-iquity (by which it is happily enough rendered in our version). So looking at this word and the thoughts which connect themselves with it, we come to this:--

**(a)** All sin of every sort is deviation from a standard to which we ought to be conformed.

Note the graphic force of the word as giving the straight line to which our conduct ought to run parallel, and the contrast between it and the wavering curves into which our lives meander, like the lines in a child's copy-book, or a rude attempt at drawing a circle at one sweep of the pencil. Herbert speaks of

The crooked wandering ways in which we live.

There is a path which is right and one which is wrong, whether we believe so or not.

There are hedges and limitations for us all. This law extends to the ordering of all things, whether great or small. If a line be absolutely straight, and we are running another parallel to it, the smallest possible wavering is fatal to our copy. And the smallest deflection, if produced, will run out into an ever-widening distance from the straight line.

There is nothing which it is more difficult to get into men's belief than the sinfulness of little sins; nothing more difficult to cure ourselves of than the habit of considering quantity rather than quality in moral questions. What a solemn thought it is, that of a great absolute law of right rising serene above us, embracing everything! And this is the first idea that is here in our text--a grave and deep one.

But the second of these expressions for sin literally means apostasy, rebellion, not transgression, and this word brings in a more solemn thought yet, viz.:--

**(b)** Every sin is apostasy from or rebellion against God.

The former word dealt only with abstract thought of a law, this with a Lawgiver.

Our obligations are not merely to a law, but to Him who enacted it. So it becomes plain that the very centre of all sin is the shaking off of obedience to God. Living to self is the inmost essence of every act of evil, and may be as virulently active in the smallest trifle as in the most awful crime.

How infinitely deeper and darker this makes sin to be!

When one thinks of our obligations and of our dependence, of God's love and care, what an evil and a bitter thing every sin becomes!

Urge this terrible contrast of a loving Father and a disobedient child.

This idea brings out the ingratitude of all sin.

But the third word here used literally means missing an aim, and so we come to

**(c)** Every sin misses the goal at which we should aim. There may be a double idea here--that of failing in the great purpose of our being, which is already partially included in the first of these three expressions, or that of missing the aim which we proposed to ourselves in the act. All sin is a failure.

By it we fall short of the loftiest purpose. Whatever we gain we lose more.

Every life which has sin in it is a failure. You may be prosperous, brilliant, successful, but you are a failure.

For consider what human life might be: full of God and full of joy. Consider what the fruits of sin are. Apples of Sodom. How sin leads to sorrow. This is an inevitable law. Sin fails to secure what it sought for. All wrong is a mistake, a blunder. Thou fool!

So this word suggests the futility of sin considered in its consequences. These be thy gods, O Israel! The end of these things is death.

**II. The divine treatment of sins.**

Forgiving, and yet not suffering them to go unpunished.

**(a)** God forgives, and yet He does not leave sin unpunished, for He will by no means clear the guilty.

The one word refers to His love, His heart; the other to the retributions which are inseparable from the very course of nature.

Forgiveness is the flow of God's love to all, and the welcoming back to His favour of all who come. Forgiveness likewise includes the escape from the extreme and uttermost consequences of sin in this life and in the next, the sense of God's displeasure here, and the final separation from Him, which is eternal death. Forgiveness is not inconsistent with retribution. There must needs be retribution, from--

**(i)** The very constitution of our nature.

Conscience, our spiritual nature, our habits all demand it.

**(ii)** The constitution of the world.

In it all things work under God, but only for good to them who love God. To all others, sooner or later, the Nemesis comes. Ye shall eat of the fruit of your doings.

**(b)** God forgives, and therefore He does not leave sin unpunished. It is divine mercy that strikes. The end of His chastisement is to separate us from our sins.

**(c)** Divine forgiveness and retributive justice both centre in the revelation of the Cross.

To us this message comes. It was the hidden heart of the Mosaic system. It was the revelation of Sinai. To Israel it was proclaimed in thunder and darkness, and the way of forgiveness and the harmony of righteousness and mercy were veiled. To us it is proclaimed from Calvary. There in full light the Lord passes before us and proclaims, I am the Lord, the Lord God merciful and gracious. Ye are come ...unto Jesus. See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh. This is my Beloved Son, hear Him !