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

**GENESIS-005. WHAT CROUCHES AT THE DOOR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If thou doest not well, sin croucheth at the door: and unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him."*

*Genesis 4:7 (R.V.)*

These early narratives clothe great moral and spiritual truths in picturesque forms, through which it is difficult for us to pierce. In the world's childhood God spoke to men as to children, because there were no words then framed which would express what we call abstract conceptions. They had to be shown by pictures. But these early men, simple and childlike as they were, had consciences; and one abstraction they did understand, and that was sin. They knew the difference between good and evil.

So we have here God speaking to Cain, who was wroth because of the rejection of his sacrifice; and in dim, enigmatical words setting forth the reason of that rejection. If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? Then clearly his sacrifice was rejected because it was the sacrifice of an evil-doer. His description as such is given in the words of my text, which are hard for us to translate into our modern, less vivid and picturesque language. If thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door; and unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. Strange as the words sound, if I mistake not, they convey some very solemn lessons, and if well considered, become pregnant with meaning.

The key to the whole interpretation of them is to remember that they describe what happens after, and because of, wrong-doing. They are all suspended on If thou doest not well. Then, in that case, for the first thing--sin lieth at the door. Now the word translated here lieth is employed only to express the crouching of an animal, and frequently of a wild animal. The picture, then, is of the wrong-doer's sin lying at his door there like a crouching tiger ready to spring, and if it springs, fatal. If thou doest not well, a wild beast crouches at thy door.

Then there follow, with a singular swift transition of the metaphor, other words still harder to interpret, and which have been, as a matter of fact, interpreted in very diverse fashions. And unto thee shall be its (I make that slight alteration upon our version) desire, and thou shalt rule over it. Where did we hear these words before? They were spoken to Eve, in the declaration of her punishment. They contain the blessing that was embedded in the curse. Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. The longing of the pure womanly heart to the husband of her love, and the authority of the husband over the loving wife--the source of the deepest joy and purity of earth, is transferred, by a singularly bold metaphor, to this other relationship, and, in horrible parody of the wedded union and love, we have the picture of the sin, that was thought of as crouching at the sinner's door like a wild beast, now, as it were, wedded to him. He is mated to it now, and it has a kind of tigerish, murderous desire after him, while he on his part is to subdue and control it.

The reference of these clauses to the sin which has just been spoken of involves, no doubt, a very bold figure, which has seemed to many readers too bold to be admissible, and the words have therefore been supposed to refer to Abel, who, as the younger brother, would be subordinate to Cain. But such a reference breaks the connection of the sentence, introduces a thought which is not a consequence of Cain's not doing well, has no moral bearing to warrant its appearance here, and compels us to travel an inconveniently long distance back in the context to find an antecedent to the his and him of our text. It seems to be more in consonance, therefore, with the archaic style of the whole narrative, and to yield a profounder and worthier meaning, if we recognise the boldness of the metaphor, and take sin as the subject of the whole. Now all this puts in concrete, metaphorical shape, suited to the stature of the bearers, great and solemn truths. Let us try to translate them into more modern speech.

**I. First think, then, of that wild beast which we tether to our doors by our wrong-doing.**

We talk about responsibility and guilt, and consequences that never can be effaced, and the like. And all these abstract and quasi-philosophical terms are implied in the grim, tremendous metaphor of my text If thou doest not well, a tiger, a wild beast, is crouching at thy door. We are all apt to be deceived by the imagination that when an evil deed is done, it passes away and leaves no permanent results. The lesson taught the childlike primitive man here, at the beginning, before experience had accumulated instances which might demonstrate the solemn truth, was that every human deed is immortal, and that the transitory evil thought, or word, or act, which seems to fleet by like a cloud, has a permanent being, and hereafter haunts the life of the doer, as a real presence. If thou doest not well, thou dost create a horrible something which nestles beside thee henceforward. The momentary act is incarnated, as it were, and sits there at the doer's doorpost waiting for him; which being turned into less forcible but more modern language, is just this: every sin that a man does has perennial consequences, which abide with the doer for evermore.

I need not dwell upon illustrations of that to any length. Let me just run over two or three ways in which it is true. First of all, there is that solemn fact which we put into a long word that comes glibly off people's lips, and impresses them very little--the solemn fact of responsibility. We speak in common talk of such and such a thing lying at some one's door. Whether the phrase has come from this text I do not know. But it helps to illustrate the force of these words, and to suggest that they mean this, among other things, that we have to answer for every deed, however evanescent, however long forgotten. Its guilt is on our heads. Its consequences have to be experienced by us. We drink as we have brewed. As we make our beds, so we lie on them. There is no escape from the law of consequences. If twere done, when tis done, then twere well it were done quickly. But seeing that it is not done when tis done, then perhaps it would be better that it were not done at all. Your deed of a moment, forgotten almost as soon as done, lies there at your door; or to take a more modern and commercial figure, it is debited to your account, and stands inscribed against you for ever.

Think how you would like it, if all your deeds from your childhood, all your follies, your vices, your evil thoughts, your evil impulses, and your evil actions, were all made visible and embodied there before you. They are there, though you do not see them yet. All round your door they sit, ready to meet you and to bay out condemnation as you go forth. They are there, and one day you will find out that they are. For this is the law, certain as the revolution of the stars and fixed as the pillars of the firmament: Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap There is no seed which does not sprout in the harvest of the moral life. Every deed germinates according to its kind. For all that a man does he has to carry the consequences, and every one shall bear his own burden. If thou doest not well, it is not, as we fondly conceive it sometimes to be, a mere passing deflection from the rule of right, which is done and done with, but we have created, as out of our very own substance, a witness against ourselves whose voice can never be stifled. If thou doest not well thy sin takes permanent form and is fastened to thy door.

And then let me remind you, too, how the metaphor of our text is confirmed by other obvious facts, on which I need but briefly dwell. Putting aside all the remoter bearings of that thought of responsibility, I suppose we all admit that we have consciences; I suppose that we all know that we have memories; I suppose we all of us have seen, in the cases of others, and have experienced for ourselves, how deeds long done and long forgotten have an awful power of rising again after many long years.

Be sure that your memory has in it everything that you ever did. A landscape may be hidden by mists, but a puff of wind will clear them away, and it will all lie there, visible to the furthest horizon. There is no fact more certain than the extraordinary swiftness and completeness with which, in certain circumstances of life, and often very near the close of it, the whole panorama of the past may rise again before a man, as if one lightning flash showed all the dreary desolation that lay behind him. There have been men recovered from drowning and the like, who have told us that, as in an instant, there seemed unrolled before their startled eyes the whole scroll of their earthly career.

The records of memory are like those pages on which you write with sympathetic ink, which disappears when dry, and seems to leave the page blank. You have only to hold it before the fire, or subject it to the proper chemical process, and at once it stands out legible. You are writing your biography upon the fleshly tables of your heart, my brother; and one day it will all be spread out before you, and you will be bid to read it, and to say what you think of it. The stings of a nettle will burn for days, if they are touched with water. The sting and inflammation of your evil deeds, though it has died down, is capable of being resuscitated, and it will be.

What an awful menagerie of unclean beasts some of us have at our doors! What sort of creatures have you tethered at yours? Crawling serpents, ugly and venomous; wild creatures, fierce and bloody, obscene and foul; tigers and bears; lustful and mischievous apes and monkeys? or such as are lovely and of good report,--doves and lambs, creatures pure and peaceable, patient to serve and gentle of spirit? Remember, remember, that what a man soweth--be it hemlock or be it wheat--that, and nothing else, shall he reap.

**II. Now, let us look for a moment at the next thought that is here; which is put into a strong, and, to our modern notions, somewhat violent metaphor;--the horrible longing, as it were, of sin toward the sinner: Unto thee shall be its desire.**

As I explained, these words are drawn from the previous chapter, where they refer to the holy union of heart and affection in husband and wife. Here they are transferred with tremendous force, to set forth that which is a kind of horrible parody of that conjugal relation. A man is married to his wickedness, is mated to his evil, and it has, as it were, a tigerish longing for him, unhallowed and murderous. That is to say--our sins act towards us as if they desired to draw our love to themselves. This is just another form of the statement, that when once a man has done a wrong thing, it has an awful power of attracting him and making him hunger to do it again. Every evil that I do may, indeed, for a moment create in me a revulsion of conscience; but it also exercises a fascination over me which it is hard to resist. It is a great deal easier to find a man who has never done a wrong thing than to find a man who has only done it once. If the wall of the dyke is sound it will keep the water out, but if there is the tiniest hole in it, the flood will come in. So the evil that you do asserts its power over you, or, in the vigorous metaphor of my text, it has a fierce, longing desire after you, and it gets you into its clutches.

The foolish woman sitteth in the high places of the city, and saith, Whoso is simple let him turn in hither. And foolish men go after her, and--know not that her guests are in the depth of hell. Ah! my brother! beware of that siren voice that draws you away from all the sweet and simple and pure food which Wisdom spreads upon her table, to tempt the beast that is in you with the words, Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. Beware of the first step, for as sure as you are living, the first step taken will make the second seem to become necessary. The first drop will be followed by a bigger second, and the second, at a shorter interval, by a more copious third, until the drops become a shower, and the shower becomes a deluge. The river of evil is ever wider and deeper, and more tumultuous. The little sins get in at the window, and open the front door for the full-grown house-breakers. One smooths the path for the other. All sin has an awful power of perpetuating and increasing itself. As the prophet says in his vision of the doleful creatures that make their sport in the desolate city, None of them shall want her mate. The wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the wild beasts of the island. Every sin tells upon character, and makes the repetition of itself more and more easy. None is barren among them. And all sin is linked together in a slimy tangle, like a field of seaweed, so that the man once caught in its oozy fingers is almost sure to be drowned.

**III. And now, lastly, one word about the command, which is also a promise: To thee shall be its desire, and thou shalt rule over it.**

Man's primitive charter, according to the earlier chapters of Genesis, was to have dominion over the beasts of the field. Cain knew what it was to war against the wild creatures which contested the possession of the earth with man, and to tame some of them for his uses. And, says the divine voice, just as you war against the beasts of prey, just as you subdue to your purposes and yoke to your implements the tamable animals over which you have dominion, so rule over this wild beast that is threatening you. It is needful for all men, if they do not mean to be torn to pieces, to master the animal that is in them, and the wild thing that has been created out of them. It is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh. It is your own evil that is thus incarnated there, as it were, before you; and you have to subdue it, if it is not to tyrannise over you. We all admit that in theory, but how terribly hard the practice! The words of our text seem to carry but little hope or comfort in them, to the man who has tried--as, no doubt, many of us have tried--to flee the lusts that war against the soul, and to bridle the animal that is in him. Those who have done so most honestly know best how hard it is, and may fairly ask, Is this useless repetition of the threadbare injunction all that you have to say to us? If so, you may as well hold your tongue. A wild beast sits at my door, you say, and then you bid me, Rule thou over it! Tell me to tame the tiger! Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? Wilt thou take him a servant for ever?'

I do not undervalue the earnest and sometimes partially successful efforts at moral reformation which some men of more than usual force of character are able to make, emancipating themselves from the outward practice of gross sin, and achieving for themselves much that is admirable. But if we rightly understand what sin is--namely, the taking self for our law and centre instead of God--and how deep its working and all-pervading its poison, we shall learn the tragic significance of the prophets question, Can the leopard change his spots? Then may a man cast out sin from his nature by his own resolve, when the body can eliminate poison from the veins by its own energy. If there is nothing more to be said to the world than this message, Sin lieth at thy door--rule thou over it, we have no gospel to preach, and sin's dominion is secure. For there is nothing in all this world of empty, windy words, more empty and windy than to come to a poor soul that is all bespattered and stained with sin, and say to him: Get up, and make thyself clean, and keep thyself so! It cannot be done.

So my text, though it keeps itself within the limits of the law and only proclaims duty, must have hidden, in its very hardness, a sweet kernel of promise. For what God commands God enables us to do.

Therefore these words, Rule thou over it, do really point onwards through all the ages to that one fact in which every man's sin is conquered and neutralised, and every man's struggles may be made hopeful and successful, the great fact that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, came down from heaven, like an athlete descending into the arena, to fight with and to overcome the grim wild beasts, our passions and our sins, and to lead them, transformed, in the silken leash of His love.

My brother! your sin is mightier than you. The old word of the Psalm is true about every one of us, Our iniquities are stronger than we. And, blessed be His name! the hope of the Psalmist is the experience of the Christian: As for my transgressions, Thou wilt purge them away. Christ will strengthen you, to conquer; Christ will take away your guilt; Christ will bear, has borne your burden; Christ will cleanse your memory; Christ will purge your conscience. Trusting to Him, and by His power and life within us, we may conquer our evil. Trusting to Him, and for the sake of His blood shed for us all upon the cross, we are delivered from the burden, guilt, and power of our sins and of our sin. With thy hand in His, and thy will submitted to Him, thou shalt tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the dragon thou shalt trample under foot.