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

**ISAIAH-054. WRITING BLOTTED OUT AND MIST MELTED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins."*

*Isaiah 44:22*

Isaiah has often and well been called the Evangelical Prophet. Many parts of this second half of his prophecies referring to the Messiah read like history rather than prediction. But it is not only from the clearness with which the great figure of the future king of Israel stands out on his page that he deserves that title. Other thoughts belonging to the very substance of the gospel appear in him with a vividness and a frequency which well warrants its application to him. He speaks much of the characteristically Christian conceptions of sin, forgiveness, and redemption. The whole of the latter parts of this book are laden with that burden. They are gathered up in the extraordinarily pregnant and blessed words of my text, in which metaphors are blended with much disregard to oratorical propriety, in order to bring out the whole fulness of the prophet's meaning. I have blotted out--that suggests a book. I have blotted out as a cloud--that suggests the thinning away of morning mists. The prophet blends the two thoughts together, and on that great revelation of a forgiveness granted before it has been asked, and given, not only to one penitent soul wailing out like the abased king of Israel in his deep contrition, according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions, but promised to a whole people, is rested the great invitation, Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.

Let me try and bring out, as simply and earnestly as I can, the great teaching that is condensed into these words.

**I. Observe here the penetrating glance into the very essential characteristics of all sin.**

There are two words, as you see, employed in my text, transgressions and sins. They apply to the same kind of actions, but they look at them from different angles and points of view. They are partially synonymous, but they cover very various conceptions, and if we take note of the original significations of the two words, we get two very important and often forgotten thoughts.

For that expression rendered in my text, and rendered correctly enough --transgressions--means at bottom, rebellion, the rising up of a disobedient will, not only against a law, but against a lawgiver. There we have a deepening of that solemn fact of a man's wrongdoing, which brings it into immediate connection with God, and marks its foulness by reason of that connection.

Ah! brethren, it makes all the difference to a man's notions of right and wrong, whether he stops on the surface or goes down to the depths; whether he says to himself, The thing is a vice; it is wrong; it is contrary to what I ought to be; or whether he gets down to the darker, deeper, and truer thought, and says, The damnable thing about every little evil that I do is this, that in it I--poor puny I--perk myself up against God, and say to Him, "Thou wilt; wilt thou? I shall not!" Sin is rebellion.

And so what becomes of the hazy distinction between great sins and little ones? An overt act of rebellion is of the same gravity, whatsoever may be its form. The man that lifts his sword against the sovereign, and the man behind him that holds his horse, are equally criminal. And when once you let in the notion that in all our actions we have to do with a Person, to whom we are bound to be obedient, then the distinction which sophisticates so many people's consciences, and does such infinite harm in so many lives, between great and small transgressions, disappears altogether. Sin is rebellion.

Then the other word of my text is equally profound and significant. For it, literally taken, means--as the words for sin do in other languages besides the Hebrew--missing a mark. Every wrong thing that any man does is beside the mark, at which he, by virtue of his manhood, and his very make and nature, ought to aim. It is beside the mark in another sense than that. As some one says, A rogue is a roundabout fool. No man ever secures that, and only that, which he aims at by any departure from the straight path of imperative duty. For if he gets some vulgar and transient titillation of appetite, or satisfaction of desire, he gets along with it something that takes all the gilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the satisfaction. So that it is always a blunder to be bad, and every arrow that is drawn by a sinful hand misses the target to which all our arrows should be pointed, and misses even the poor mark that we think we are aiming at. Take these two thoughts with you--I will not dwell on them, but I desire to lay them upon all your hearts--all evil is sin, and every sin is rebellion against God, and a blunder in regard to myself.

**II. And now I come to the second point of our text, and ask you to note the permanent record which every sin leaves.**

I explained in the earlier part of my remarks that we have a case here of the thing that horrifies rhetoricians, but does not matter a bit to a prophet, the blending or confusing of two metaphors. The first of them--I have blotted out--suggests a piece of writing, a book, or manuscript of some sort. And the plain English of what lies behind that metaphor is this solemn thought, which I would might blaze before each of us, in all our lives, that God's calm and all-comprehensive knowledge and remembrance takes and keeps filed, and ready for reference, the whole story of our whole acts. There is a book. It is a violent metaphor, no doubt, but there is a solemn truth underlying it which we are too apt to forget. The world is groaning nowadays with two-volume memoirs of men that nobody wants to know anything more about. But every man is ever writing his autobiography with invisible but indelible ink. You have seen those old-fashioned manifold writers in your places of business, and the construction of them is this: a flimsy sheet of tissue paper, a bit of black to be put in below it, and then another sheet on the other side; and the pen that writes on the flimsy top surface makes an impression that is carried through the black to the sheet below, and there is a duplicate which the writer keeps. You and I, upon the flimsinesses of this fleeting--sometimes, we think, futile--life, are penning what is neither flimsy nor futile, which goes through the opaque dark, and is reproduced and docketed yonder. That is what we are doing every day and every minute, writing, writing, writing our own biography. And who is going to read it? Well, God does read it now, and you will have to read it out one day, and how will you like that?

This metaphor will bear a little further expansion. Scripture tells us, and conscience tells us, what manner of manuscript it is that we are each so busy adding line upon line to. It is a ledger; it is an indictment. Our own handwriting puts down in the ledger our own debts, and we cannot deny our own handwriting when we are confronted with it. It is an indictment, and our own hand draws it, and we have to plead guilty, or not guilty, to it. Which, being translated into plain fact, is this--that there goes with all our deeds some sense and reality of responsibility for them, and that all our rebellions against God, and our blunders against self, be they great or small, carry with them a sense of guilt and a reality of guilt whether we have the sense of it or not. God has a judgment at this moment about every man and woman, based upon the facts of the unfinished biography which they are writing.

Mystical and awful, yet blessed and elevating, is the thought that nothing--nothing, ever dies; and that what was, is now, and always will be.

Amongst the specimens from the coal measures in a museum you will find slabs upon which the tiniest fronds of ferns that grew nobody knows how many millenniums since are preserved for ever. Our lives, when the blow of the last hammer lays them open, will, in like manner, bear the impress of the minutest filament of every deed that we have ever done.

But my metaphor will bear yet further expansion, for this autobiographical record which we are busy preparing, which is at once ledger and indictment, is to be read out one day. There is a great scene in the last book of Scripture, the whole solemn significance of which, I suppose, we shall not understand till we have learned it by experience, but the truth of which we have sufficient premonitions to assure us of, which declares that at a given time, on the confines of Eternity, the Great White Throne is to be set, and the books are to be opened, and the dead are judged out of the books, which, the seer goes on to explain, is according to their works. The story of Esther tells us how the sleepless monarch in the night-watches sent for the records of the kingdom and had them read to him. The King who never slumbers nor sleeps, in that dawning of heaven's eternal morning, will have the books opened before Him, and my deeds will be read out. He and I will hear them, whether any else may hear or no. That is my second lesson.

**III. The third is, that we have here suggested the darkening power of sin.**

The prophet, as I said, mixes metaphors. I have blotted out as a cloud thy transgressions. He uses two words for cloud here; both of them mean substantially the same thing, and both suggest the same idea. When cloud fills the sky it darkens the earth, and shuts out the sunshine and the blue, it closes the petals of the little flowers, it hushes the songs of the birds. Sin makes for the sinning man an under-roof of doleful grey, which shuts out all the glories above. Put that metaphor into plain English, and it is just this, Your sins have separated between you and your God, and your iniquities have hid His face from you that He will not hear. It is impossible for a man that has his heart all stiffened by the rebellion of his will against God's, or all seething with unrestrained passions, or perturbed with worldly longings and desires, to enter into calm fellowship with God or to keep the thought of God clear before his mind. For we know Him, not by sense nor by reason, but by sympathy and by feeling. And whatsoever comes in to disturb a man's purity, comes in to hinder his vision of God. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they--and they only--shall see God. Whenever from the undrained swamps of my own passions and sensualities, or from the as malarious though loftier grounds of my own self-regard, be I student or thinker, or moral man, there rise up these light mists, they will fill the sky and hide the sun. On a winter's night you will see the Pleiades, or other bright constellations, varying in brilliancy from moment to moment as some invisible cloud-wrack floats across the heavens. So, brother, every evil thing that we do rises up and gets diffused through our atmosphere, and blots out from our vision the face of God Himself, the blessed Son.

Not only by reason of dimming and darkening my thoughts of Him is my sin rightly compared to an obscuring cloud; but the comparison also holds good because, just as the blanket of a wet mist swathing the wintry fields prevents the sunshine from falling upon them in blessing, so the accumulated effect of my evil doings and evil designings and thinkings and willings comes between me and all spiritual blessings which God can bestow, so that the very light of light, the highest blessings that He yearns to give, and we faint for want of possessing, are impossible even to His love to communicate until the cloud is swept away. So my sin darkens my soul, and separates me from the light of life.

But the metaphor carries with it, too, a suggestion of the limitations of the power of sin. For when the cloud is thickest and most obscuring it only hugs the earth, and rises but a little way Into the heavens; and far above it the blue is as blue, and the sunshine as bright, as if there were no mist or fog in the lower regions. Therefore, let us remember that, while the cloud must veil us from the light, the light is above it, and every cloud that veileth love may some day be thinned away by the love it veils.

**IV. That brings me to the last word of my text,--viz. the prophet's teaching as to the removal of the sin.**

We have to carry both the metaphors together with us here. I have blotted out--that is, as erasing from a book. I have blotted out as a cloud--that is, the thinning away of the mist. The blurred and stained page can be cancelled. Chemicals will take the ink out. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin; and it, passed over all that foul record, makes it pure and clean. What I have written, I have written, said Pilate in his obstinacy. What I have written, I have written, wails many a man in the sense of the irrevocableness of his past. Brother! be not afraid. Christ can take away all that stained record, and give you back the page ready to receive holier words.

The cloud is thinned away. What thins the cloud? As I have said, the light which the cloud obscures, shining on the upper surface of it, dissipates it layer by layer till it gets down at last to the lowermost, and then rends a gap in it, and sends the shaft of the sunbeam through on to the green earth. And that is only a highly imaginative way of saying that it is the love against which we transgress that thins away the cloud of transgression, and at last, as the placid moon, by simply shining silently on, will sweep the whole sky clear of its clouds, dissipates them all, and leaves the calm blue. God forgives. The ledger account--if I may use so grossly commercial a figure--is settled in full; the indictment is endorsed, acquitted. He remembers the sins only to breathe into the child's heart the assurance of pardon, and no obstacle rises by reason of forgiven transgression between the sinning man and the reconciled God.

Now, all this preaching of Isaiah's is enlarged and confirmed, and to some extent the rationale of it is set before us in the great Gospel truth of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. Unless we know that truth, we may well stand amazed and questioning as to whether a righteous God, administering a rigorous universe, can ever pardon sin. And unless we know that by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, granted to our spirits, our whole nature may be remade and moulded, we might well be tempted to say, Ah! the Ethiopian cannot change his skin nor the leopard his spots. But Jesus Christ can change more than skin, even the heart and spirit, the inmost depths of the nature.

Now, brother, my text speaks of this great blotting out as a past fact. It is so in the divine mind with regard to each of us, because Christ's great work has made reconciliation and atonement for all the sins of all the world. And on the fact that it is past is based the exhortation, Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee. God does not say, Come back and I will forgive; He does not say, Return and I will blot out; but He says, Return, for I have blotted out. Though accomplished, the forgiveness has to be appropriated by individual faith. The sins of the world have been borne, and borne away, by the Lamb of God, but your sins are not borne away unless your hand is laid on this head.

If it is, then you do not need to say, What I have written is written, and it cannot be blotted out. But as in the old days a monk would take some manuscript upon which filthy stories about heathen gods and foolish fables were written, and erase these to write the legends of saints, or perhaps the words of the Gospels themselves; so on our hearts, which have been scribbled all over with obscenities and follies, He will write His new best name of Love, and we may be epistles of Christ, written with the Spirit of the living God.