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

**JEREMIAH-011. SIN'S WRITING AND ITS ERASURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars."*

*Jeremiah 17:1*

*"Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart."*

*2 Corinthians 3:3*

*"Blotting out the handwriting that was against us."*

*Colossians 2:14*

I have put these verses together because they all deal with substantially the same metaphor. The first is part of a prophet's solemn appeal. It describes the sin of the nation as indelible. It is written in two places. First, on their hearts, which reminds us of the promise of the new covenant to be written on the heart. The red-leaved tablets of the heart are like waxen tables on which an iron stylus makes a deep mark, an ineradicable scar. So Judah's sin is, as it were, eaten into their heart, or, if we might so say, tattooed on it. It is also written on the stone horns of the altar, with a diamond which can cut the rock (an illustration of ancient knowledge of the properties of the diamond). That sounds a strange place for the record of sin to appear, but the image has profound meaning, as we shall see presently.

Then the two New Testament passages deal with other applications of the same metaphor. Christ is, in the first, represented as writing on the hearts of the Corinthians, and in the second, as taking away the handwriting contrary to us. The general thought drawn from all is that sin's writing on men's hearts is erased by Christ and a new inscription substituted.

**I. The handwriting of sin.**

Sin committed is indelibly written on the heart of the doer.

The heart, of course, in Hebrew means more than merely the supposed seat of the affections. It is figuratively the centre of the spiritual life, just as physically it is the centre of the natural. Thoughts and affections, purposes and desires are all included, and out of it are the issues of life, the whole outgoings of the being. It is the fountain and source of all the activity of the man, the central unity from which all comes. Taken in this wide sense it is really the whole inner self that is meant, or, as is said in one place, the hidden man of the heart. And so the thought in this vigorous metaphor may be otherwise put, that all sin makes indelible marks on the whole inward nature of the man who does it.

Now to begin with, think for a moment of that truth that everything which we do reacts on us the doers.

We seldom think of this. Deeds are done, and we fancy that when done, they are done with. They pass, as far as outward seeming goes, and their distinguishable consequences in the outward world, in the vast majority of cases, soon apparently pass. All seems evanescent and irrecoverable as last year's snows, or the water that flowed over the cataract a century ago. But there is nothing more certain than that all which we do leaves indelible traces on ourselves. The mightiest effect of a man's actions is on his own inward life. The recoil of the gun is more powerful than the blow from its shot. Our actions strike inwards and there produce their most important effects. The river runs ceaselessly and its waters pass away, but they bring down soil, which is deposited and makes firm land, or perhaps they carry down grains of gold.

This is the true solemnity of life, that in all which we do we are carrying on a double process, influencing others indeed, but influencing ourselves far more.

Consider the illustrations of this law in regard to our sins.

Now the last thing people think of when they hear sermons about sin is that what is meant is the things that they are doing every day. I can only ask you to try to remember, while I speak, that I mean those little acts of temper, or triflings with truth, or yieldings to passion or anger, or indulgence in sensuality, and above all, the living without God, to which we are all prone.

**(a)** All wrong-doing makes indelible marks on character. It makes its own repetition easier. Habit strengthens inclination. Peter found denying his Lord three times easier than doing it once. It weakens resistance. In going downhill the first step is the only one that needs an effort; gravity will do the rest.

It drags after it a tendency to other evil. All wrong things have so much in common that they lead on to one another. A man with only one vice is a rare phenomenon. Satan sends his apostles forth two by two. Sins hunt in couples, or more usually in packs, like wolves, only now and then do they prey alone like lions. Small thieves open windows for greater ones. It requires continually increasing draughts, like indulgence in stimulants. The palate demands cayenne tomorrow, if it has had black pepper to-day.

So, whatever else we do by our acts, we are making our own characters, either steadily depraving or steadily improving them. There will come a slight slow change, almost unnoticed but most certain, as a dim film will creep over the peach, robbing it of all its bloom, or some microscopic growth will steal across a clearly cut inscription, or a breath of mist will dim a polished steel mirror.

**(b)** All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the memory, that awful and mysterious power of recalling past things out of the oblivion in which they seem to lie. How solemn and miserable it is to defile it with the pictures of things evil! Many a man in his later years has tried to turn over a new leaf, and has never been able to get the filth out of his memory, for it has been printed on the old page in such strong colours that it shines through. I beseech you all, and especially you young people, to keep yourselves innocent of much transgression, and simple concerning evil--to make your memories like an illuminated missal with fair saints and calm angels bordering the holy words, and not an Illustrated Police News. Probably there is no real oblivion. Each act sinks in as if forgotten, gets overlaid with a multitude of others, but it is there, and memory will one day bring it to us.

And all sin pollutes the imagination. It is a miserable thing to have one's mind full of ugly foul forms painted on the inner walls of our chamber of imagery, like the hideous figures in some heathen temple, where gods of lust and murder look out from every inch of space on the walls.

**(c)** All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the conscience. It does so partly by sophisticating it--the sensibility to right and wrong being weakened by every evil act, as a cold in the head takes away the sense of smell. It brings on colour-blindness to some extent. One does not know how far one may go towards Evil! be thou my good--or how far towards incapacity of distinguishing evil. But at all events the tendency of each sin is in that direction. So conscience may become seared, though perhaps never so completely as that there are no intervals when it speaks. It may long lie dormant, as Vesuvius did, till great trees grow on the floor of the crater, but all the while the communication with the central fires is open, and one day they will burst out.

The writing may be with invisible ink, but it will be legible one day. So, then, all this solemn writing on the heart is done by ourselves. What are you writing? There is a presumption in it of a future retribution, when you will have to read your autobiography, with clearer light and power of judging yourselves. At any rate there is retribution now, which is described by many metaphors, such as sowing and reaping, drinking as we have brewed, and others--but this one of indelible writing is not the least striking.

Sin is graven deep on sinful men's worship.

The metaphor here is striking and not altogether clear. The question rises whether the altars are idolatrous altars, or Jehovah's. If the former, the expression may mean simply that the Jews idolatry, which was their sin, was conspicuously displayed in these altars, and had, as it were, its most flagrant record in their sacrifices. The altar was the centre point of all heathen and Old Testament worship, and altars built by sinners were the most conspicuous evidences of their sins.

So the meaning would be that men's sin shapes and culminates in their religion; and that is very true, and explains many of the profanations and abominations of heathenism, and much of the formal worship of so-called Christianity.

For instance, a popular religion which is a mere Deism, a kind of vague belief in a providence, and in a future state where everybody is happy, is but the product of men's sin, striking out of Christianity all which their sin makes unwelcome in it. The justice of God, punishment, sinfulness of sin, high moral tone, are all gone. And the very horns of their altars are marked with the signs of the worshippers sin.

But the altars may be God's altars, and then another idea will come in. The horns of the altar were the places where the blood of the sacrifice was smeared, as token of its offering to God. They were then a part of the ritual of propitiation. They had, no doubt, the same meaning in the heathen ritual. And so regarded, the metaphor means that a sense of the reality of sin shapes sacrificial religion.

There can be no doubt that a very real conviction of sin lies at the foundation of much, if not all, of the system of sacrifices. And it is a question well worth considering whether a conviction so widespread is not valid, and whether we should not see in it the expression of a true human need which no mere culture, or the like, will supply.

At all events, altars stand as witnesses to the consciousness of sin. And the same thought may be applied to much of the popular religion of this day. It may be ineffectual and shallow but it bears witness to a consciousness of evil. So its existence may be used in order to urge profounder realisation of evil on men. You come to worship, you join in confessions, you say miserable sinners--do you mean anything by it? If all that be true, should it not produce a deeper impression on you?

But another way of regarding the metaphor is this. The horns of the altar were to be touched with the blood of propitiation. But look! the blood flows down, and after it has trickled away, there, deep carven on the horns, still appears the sin, i.e. the sin is not expiated by the sinner's sacrifice. Jeremiah is then echoing Isaiah's word, Bring no more vain oblations. The picture gives very strikingly the hopelessness, so far as men are concerned, of any attempt to blot out this record. It is like the rock-cut cartouches of Egypt on which time seems to have no effect. There they abide deep for ever. Nothing that we can do can efface them. What I have written, I have written. Pen-knives and detergents that we can use are all in vain.

**II. Sin's writing may be erased, and another put in its place.**

The work of Christ, made ours by faith, blots it out.

**(a)** Its influence on conscience and the sense of guilt. The accusations of conscience are silenced. A red line is drawn across the indictment, or, as Colossians has it, it is nailed to the cross. There is power in His death to set us free from the debt we owe.

**(b)** Its influence on memory. Christ does not bring oblivion, but yet takes away the remorse of remembrance. Faith in Christ makes memory no longer a record which we blush to turn over, or upon which we gloat with imaginative delight in guilty pleasures past, but a record of our shortcomings that humbles us with a penitence which is not pain, but serves as a beacon and warning for the time to come. He who has a clear beam of memory on his backward track, and a bright light of hope on his forward one, will steer right.

**(c)** Its influence on character.

We attain new hopes and tastes. We become epistles of Christ known and read of all men, like palimpsests, Homer or Ovid written over with the New Testament gospels or epistles.

Christ's work is twofold, erasure and rewriting. For the one, I will blot out as a cloud their transgressions. None but He can remove these. For the other, I will put My law into their minds and will write it on their hearts. He can impress all holy desires on, and can put His great love and His mighty spirit into, our hearts.

So give your hearts to Him. They are all scrawled over with hideous and wicked writing that has sunk deep into their substance. Graven as if on rock are your sins in your character. Your worship and sacrifices will not remove them, but Jesus Christ can. He died that you might be forgiven, He lives that you may be purified. Trust yourself to Him, and lean all your sinfulness on His atonement and sanctifying power, and the foul words and bad thoughts that have been scored so deep into your nature will be erased, and His own hand will trace on the page, poor and thin though it be, which has been whitened by His blood, the fair letters and shapes of His own likeness. Do not let your hearts be the devil's copybooks for all evil things to scrawl their names there, as boys do on the walls, but spread them before Him, and ask Him to make them clean and write upon them His new name, indicating that you now belong to another, as a new owner writes his name on a book that he has bought.