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

**JEREMIAH-018. A THREEFOLD DISEASE AND A TWOFOLD CURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against Me; and I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against Me."*

*Jeremiah 33:8*

Jeremiah was a prisoner in the palace of the last King of Judah. The long, national tragedy had reached almost the last scene of the last act. The besiegers were drawing their net closer round the doomed city. The prophet had never faltered in predicting its fall, but he had as uniformly pointed to a period behind the impending ruin, when all should be peace and joy. His song was modulated from a saddened minor to triumphant jubilation. In the beginning of this chapter he has declared that the final struggles of the besieged will only end in filling the land with their corpses, and then, from that lowest depth, he soars in a burst of lyrical prophecy conceived in the highest poetic style. The exiles shall return, the city shall be rebuilt, its desolate streets shall ring with hymns of praise and the voices of the bridegroom and the bride. The land shall be peopled with peaceful husbandmen, and white with flocks. There shall be again a King upon the throne; sacrifices shall again be offered. In those days, and at that time, will I cause the branch of righteousness to grow up unto David... . In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely; and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, the Lord our righteousness. That fair vision of the future begins with the offer of healing and cure, and with the exuberant promise of my text. The first thing to be dealt with was Judah's sin; and that being taken away, all good and blessing would start into being, as flowerets will spring when the baleful shadow of some poisonous tree is removed. Now, my text at first reading seems to expend a great many unnecessary words in saying the same thing over and over again, but the accumulation of synonyms not only emphasises the completeness of the promise, but also presents different aspects of that promise. And it is to these that I crave your attention in this sermon. The great words of my text are as true a gospel for us--and as much needed by us, God knows!--as they were for Jeremiah's contemporaries; and we can understand them better than either he or they did, because the days that were to come then have come now, and the King who was to reign in righteousness is reigning to-day, and His Name is Christ. My object now is, as simply as I can, to draw your attention to the two points in this text: a threefold view of our sad condition, and a twofold bright hope.

Now for the first of these. There is here--

**I. A threefold view of the sad condition of humanity.**

Observe the recurrence of the same idea in our text in different words: Their iniquity whereby they have sinned against Me. ... Their iniquity whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against Me. You see there are three expressions which roughly may be taken as referring to the same ugly fact, but yet not meaning quite the same--iniquity, or iniquities, sin, transgression. These three all speak of the same sad element in your experience and mine, but they speak it from somewhat different points of view, and I wish to try to bring out that difference for you.

Suppose that three men were to describe a snake. One of them fixes his attention on its slimy coils, and describes its sinuous gliding movements. Another of them is fascinated by its wicked beauty, and talks about its livid markings and its glittering eye. The third thinks only of the swift-darting fangs, and of the poison-glands. They all three describe the snake, but they describe it from different points of view; and so it is here. Iniquity, sin, transgression are synonyms to some extent, but they do not cover the same ground. They look at the serpent from different points of view.

First, a sinful life is a twisted or warped life. The word rendered iniquity, in the Old Testament, in all probability literally means something that is not straight, but is bent, or, as I said, twisted or warped. That is a metaphor that runs through a great many languages. I suppose right expresses a corresponding image, and means that which is straight and direct; and I suppose that wrong has something to do with wrung--that which has been forcibly diverted from a right line. We all know the conventional colloquialism about a man being straight, and such-and-such a thing being on the straight. All sin is a twisting of the man from his proper course. Now there underlies that metaphor the notion that there is a certain line to which we are to conform. The schoolmaster draws a firm, straight line in the child's copybook; and then the little unaccustomed hand takes up on the second line its attempt, and makes tremulous, wavering pot-hooks and hangers. There is a copyhead for us, and our writing is, alas! all uneven and irregular, as well as blurred and blotted. There is a law, and you know it. You carry in yourself--I was going to say, the standard measure, and you can see whether when you put your life by the side of that, the two coincide. It is not for me to say; I know about my own, and you may know about yours, if you will be honest. The warped life belongs to us all.

The metaphor may suggest another illustration. A Czar of Russia was once asked what should be the course of the railway from St. Petersburg to Moscow, and he took up a ruler and drew a straight line upon the chart, and said, There; that is the course. There is a straight road marked out for us all, going, like the old Roman roads, irrespective of physical difficulties in the contour of the country, climbing right over Alps if necessary, and plunging down into the deepest valleys, never deflecting one hairsbreadth, but going straight to its aim. And we--what are we? what are our crooked, wandering ways in which we live, by the side of that straight path? This very prophet has a wonderful illustration, in which he compares the lives of men who have departed from God to the racing about in the wilderness of a wild dromedary, entangling her ways, as he says, crossing and recrossing, and getting into a maze of perplexity. Ah, my friend, is that not something like your life? Here is a straight road, and there are the devious footpaths that we have made, with many a detour, many a bend, many a coming back instead of going forward. The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city. All sin is deflection from the straight road, and we are all guilty of that.

Let me urge you to consult the standard that you carry within yourselves. If you never have done it before, do it now; or, better, when you are alone by yourselves. It is easy to imagine that a line is straight. But did you ever see the point of a needle under a microscope? However finely it is polished, and apparently tapering regularly, the scrutinising investigation of the microscope shows that it is all rough and irregular. What would a builder do if he had not a T-square and a level? His wall would be ever so far out, whilst he thought it perfectly perpendicular. And remember that a line at a very acute angle of deflection only needs to be carried out far enough to diverge so widely from the other line that you could put the whole solar system in between the two. The smallest departure from the line of right will end, unless it is checked, away out in the regions of darkness beyond. That is the lesson of the first of the words here.

The second of them, rendered in our version sin, if I may recur to my former illustration, looks at the snake from a different point of view, and it declares that all sin misses the aim. The meaning of the word in the original is simply that which misses its mark. And the meaning of the prevalent word in the New Testament for sin means, in accordance with the ethical wisdom of the Greek, the same thing. Now, there are two ways in which that thought may be looked at. Every wrong thing that we do misses the aim, if you consider what a man's aim ought to be. We have grown a great deal wiser than the Puritans nowadays, and people make cheap reputations for advanced thought by depreciating their theology. We have not got beyond the first answer of the Shorter Catechism, Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever. That is the only aim which corresponds to our constitution, to our circumstances. A palaeontologist will pick up part of a skeleton embedded in the rocks, and from the study of a bone or two will tell you whether that creature was meant to swim, or to fly, or to walk; whether its element was sea, or sky, or land. Our destination for God is as plainly stamped on heart, mind, will, practical powers, as is the destination of such a creature deducible from its skeleton. Whose image and superscription hath it? God's, stamped deep upon us all. And so, brother, whatever you win, unless you win God, you have missed the aim. Anything short of knowing Him and loving Him, serving Him, being filled and inspired by Him, is contrary to the destiny stamped upon us all. And if you have won God, then, whatever other human prizes you may have missed, you have made the best of life. Unless He is yours, and you are His, you have made a miss, and if I might venture to add, a mess, of yourself and of your life.

Then there is another side to this. The solemn teaching of this word is not confined to that thought, but also opens out into this other, that all godlessness, all the low, sinful lives that so many of us live, miss the shabby aim which they set before themselves. I do not believe that any men or women ever got as much good, even of the lowest kind, out of a wrong thing as they expected to get when they ventured on it. If they did, they got something else along with it that took all the gilt off the gingerbread. Take the lowest kind of gross evil--sins of lust or of drunkenness. Well, no doubt the physical satisfaction desired is secured. Yes; and what about what comes after, in addition, that was not aimed at? The drunkard gets his pleasurable oblivion, his desired excitement. What about the corrugated liver, the palsied hand, the watery eye, the wrecked life, the broken hearts at home, and all the other accompaniments? There is an old Greek legend about a certain messenger that came to earth with a box, in which were all manner of pleasant gifts, and down at the bottom was a speckled pest that, when the box was emptied, crawled out into the sunshine and infected the land. That Pandora's box is like the good things that sin brings to men. You gain, perhaps, your advantage, and you get something that spoils it all. Is not that your experience? I do not deny that you may satisfy your lower desires by a godless life. I know only too well how hard it is to get people to have higher tastes, and how all we ministers of religion are spending our efforts in order to win people to love something better than the world can give them. I also know that, if I could get to the very deepest recess of your hearts, you would admit that pleasures or advantages that are complete, that is to say, that satisfy you all round, and that are lasting, and that can front conscience and God who is at the back of conscience, are not to be won on the paths of sin and godlessness.

There is an old story that speaks of a knight and his company who were travelling through a desert, and suddenly beheld a castle into which they were invited and hospitably welcomed. A feast was spread before them, and each man ate and drank his fill. But as soon as they left the enchanted halls, they were as hungry as before they sat at the magic table. That is the kind of food that all our wrongdoing provides for us. He feedeth on ashes, and hungers after he has fed. So, dear friends, learn this ancient wisdom, which is as true today as it ever was; and be sure, of this, that there is only one course in this world which will give a man true, lasting satisfaction; that there is only one life, the life of obedience to and love of God, about which, at the end, there will not need to be said, This their way is their folly.

And now, further, there is yet another word here, carrying with it important lessons. The expression which is translated in our text transgressed, literally means rebelled. And the lesson of it is, that all sin is, however little we think it, a rebellion against God. That introduces a yet graver thought than either of the former have brought us face to face with. Behind the law is the Lawgiver. When we do wrong, we not only blunder, we not only go aside from the right line, but also we lift up ourselves against our Sovereign King, and we say, Who is the Lord that we should serve Him? Our tongues are our own. Who is Lord over us? Let us break His bands asunder, and cast away His cords from us. There are crimes against law; there are faults against one another. Sins are against God; and, dear friends, though you do not realise it, this is plain truth, that the essence, the common characteristic, of all the acts which, as we have seen, are twisted and foolish, is that in them we are setting up another than the Lord our God to be our ruler. We are enthroning ourselves in His place. Do you not feel that that is true, and that in some small thing in which you go wrong, the essence of it is that you are seeking to please yourself, no matter what duty--which is only a heathen name for God--says to you?

Does not that thought make all these apparently trivial and insignificant deeds terribly important? Treason is treason, no matter what the act by which it is expressed. It may be a little thing to haul down a union-jack from a flagstaff, or to tear off a barn-door a proclamation with the royal arms at the top of it, but it may be rebellion. And if it is, it is as bad as to turn out a hundred thousand men in the field, with arms in their hands. There are small faults, there are trivial crimes; there are no small sins. An ounce of arsenic is arsenic, just as much as a ton; and it is a poison just as surely.

Now I have enlarged perhaps unduly on this earlier part of my subject, and can but briefly turn to the second division which I suggested, viz.:--

**II. The twofold bright hope which shines through this darkness.**

I will cleanse ... I will pardon.

If sin combines in itself all these characteristics that I have touched upon, then clearly there is guilt, and clearly there are stains; and the gracious promise of this text deals with both the one and the other.

I will pardon. What is pardon? Do not limit it to the analogy of a criminal court. When the law of the land pardons, or rather when the administrator of the law pardons, that simply means that the penalty is suspended. But is that forgiveness? Certainly it is only a part of it, even if it is a part. What do you fathers and mothers do when you forgive your child? You may use the rod or you may not, that is a question of what is best for the child. Forgiveness does not lie in letting him off the punishment; but forgiveness lies in the flowing to the child, uninterrupted, of the love of the parent heart, and that is God's forgiveness. Penalties, some of them, remain--thank God for it! Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions, and the chastisement was part of the sign of the forgiveness. The great penalty of all, which is separation from God, is taken away; but the essence of that pardon, which it is my blessed work to proclaim to all men, is, that in spite of the prodigal's rags and the stench of the sty, the Father's love is round about him. It is round about you, brother.

Do you need pardon? Do you not? What does conscience say? What does the sense of remorse that sometimes blesses you, though it tortures, say? There are tendencies in this generation, as always, but very strong at present, to ignore the fact that all sin must necessarily lead to tremendous consequences of misery. It does so in this world, more or less. A man goes into another world as he left this one, and you and I believe that after death is the judgment. Do you not require pardon? And how are you to get it? Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died that the loving forgiveness of God might find its way to every heart, and might take all men to its bosom, whilst yet the righteousness of God remained untarnished. I know not any gospel that goes deep enough to touch the real sore place in human nature, except the gospel that says to you and me and all of us, Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.

But forgiveness is not enough, for the worst results of past sin are the habits of sin which it leaves within us; so that we all need cleansing. Can we cleanse ourselves? Let experience answer. Did you ever try to cure yourself of some little trick of gesture, or manner, or speech? And did you not find out then how strong the trivial habit was? You never know the force of a current till you try to row against it. Can the Ethiopian change his skin? No; but God can change it for him. So, again, we say that Jesus Christ who died for the remission of sins that are past, lives that He may give to each of us His own blessed life and power, and so draw us from our evil, and invest us in His good. Dear brother, I beseech you to look in the face the fact of your rebellion, of your missing your aim, of your perverted life, and to ask yourself the question, Can I deal either with the guilt of the past, or with the imperative tendency to repeated sin in the future? You may have your leprous flesh made like the flesh of a little child. You may have your stained robe washed and made lustrous white in the blood of the Lamb. Pardon and cleansing are our two deepest needs. There is one hand from which we can receive them both, and one only. There is one condition on which we shall receive them, which is that we trust in Him, Who was crucified for our offences, and lives to hallow us into His own likeness.