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

**PSALMS-014**. **A PRAYER FOR PARDON AND ITS PLEA by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"For Thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great."*

*Psalm 25:11*

The context shows us that this is the prayer of a man who had long loved and served God. He says that on God he waits all the day, that his eyes are ever toward the Lord, that he has integrity and uprightness which will preserve him, for he waits upon God, and yet side by side with this consciousness of devotion and service there lie the profound sense of sin and of the need of pardon. The better a man is, the more clearly he sees, and the more deeply he feels, his own badness. If a shoe is all covered with mud, a splash or two more or less will make no difference, but if it be polished and clean, one speck shows. A black feather on a swan's breast is conspicuous. And so the less sin a man has the more obvious it is, and the more he has the less he generally knows it. But whilst this consciousness of transgression and cry for pardon are inseparable and permanent accompaniments of a devout life all along its course, they are the roots and beginning of all true godliness. And as a rule, the first step which a man takes to knit himself consciously to God is through the gate of recognised and repeated and confessed sin and imploring the divine mercy.

**I. Notice, first, here the cry for pardon.**

I believe in the forgiveness of sins hundreds of thousands of Englishmen have said twice to-day. Most of us, when we pray at all, push in somewhere or other the petition, Forgive us our sins. And how many of us understand what we mean when we ask for that? And how many of us feel that we need the thing which we seem to be requesting? Let me dwell for a moment or two upon the Scriptural idea of forgiveness. Of course we may say that when we ask forgiveness from God we are transferring ideas and images drawn from human relations to the divine. Be it so. That does not show that there is not a basis of reality and of truth in the ideas thus transferred. But there are two elements in forgiveness as we know it, both of which it seems to me to be very important that we should carry in our minds in interpreting the Scriptural doctrine. There is the forgiveness known to law and practised by the lawgiver. There is the forgiveness known to love and practised by the friend, or parent, or lover. The one consists in the remission of external penalties. A criminal is forgiven, or, as we say (with an unconscious restriction of the word forgiven to the deeper thing), pardoned, when, the remainder of his sentence being remitted, he is let out of gaol, and allowed to go about his business without any legal penalties. But there is a forgiveness deeper than that legal pardon. A parent and a child both of them know that parental pardon does not consist in the waiving of punishment. The averted look, the cold voice, the absence of signs of love are far harder to bear than so-called punishment. And the forgiveness, which belongs to love only, comes when the film between the two is swept away, and both the offended and the offender feel that there is no barrier to the free, unchecked flow of love from the heart of the aggrieved to the heart of the aggressor.

We must carry both of these ideas into our thoughts of God's pardon in order to see the whole fulness of it. And perhaps we may have to add yet another illustration, drawn from another region, and which is enshrined in one of the versions of the Lord's Prayer, where we read, Forgive us our debts. When a debt is forgiven it is cancelled, and the payment of it no longer required. But the two elements that I have pointed out, the remission of the penalty and the uninterrupted flow of God's love, are inseparably united in the full Scriptural notion of forgiveness.

Scripture recognises as equally real and valid, in our relations to God, the judicial and the fatherly side of the relationship. And it declares as plainly that the wages of sin is death as it declares that God's love cannot come in its fulness and its sweetness, upon a heart that indulges in unconfessed and unrepented sin. They are poor friends of men who, for the sake of smoothing away the terrible side of the Gospel, minimise or hide the reality of the awful penalties which attach to every transgression and disobedience, because they thereby maim the notion of the divine forgiveness, and lull into a fatal slumber the consciences of many men.

 Dear brethren! I have to stand here saying, Knowing, therefore, the terrors of the Lord, we persuade men. This is sure and certain, that over and above the forcing back upon itself of the love of God by my sin, that sin by necessary consequence will work out awful results for the doer in the present and in the future. I do not wish to dwell upon that thought, only remember that God is a Judge and God is the Father, and that the divine forgiveness includes both of these elements, the sweeping away of the penal consequences of men's sin, wholly in the future, and to some extent in the present; and the unchecked flow of the love of God to a man's heart.

There are awful words in Scripture--which are not to be ruled out of it by any easy-going, optimistic, rose-water system of a mutilated Christianity--there are awful words in Scripture, concerning what you and I must come to if we live and die in our sins, and there would be no message of forgiveness worth the proclaiming to men, if it had nothing to say about the removal of that which a man's own unsophisticated conscience tells him is certain, the fatal and the damnable effects of his departure from God.

But let us not forget that these two aspects do to a large extent coincide, when we come to remember that the worst of all the penal consequences of sin is that it separates from God, and exposes to the wrath of God, a terrible expression by which the Bible means the necessary disapprobation and aversion of the divine nature, being such as it is, from man's sin.

Experimentalists will sometimes cut off one or other of the triple rays of which sunlight is composed by passing the beam through some medium which intercepts the red, or the violet, or the yellow, as may chance. And my sin makes an atmosphere which cuts off the gentler rays of that divine nature, and lets the fiery ones of retribution come through. It is not that a sinful man, howsoever drenched overhead in the foul pool of his own unrepented iniquity, is shut out from the love of God, which lingers about him and woos him, and lavishes upon him all the gifts of which he is capable, but that he has made himself incapable of receiving the sweetest of these influences, and that so long as he continues thus, his life and his character cannot but be odious and hateful in the pure eyes of perfect love.

But whilst thus there are external consequences which are swept away by forgiveness, and whilst the real hell of hells and death of deaths is the separation from God, and the misery that must necessarily ensue thereupon, there are consequences of man's sin which forgiveness is not intended to remove, and will not remove, just because God loves us. He loves us too well to take away the issues in the natural sphere, in the social sphere, the issues perhaps in bodily health, reputation, position, and the like, which flow from our transgression. Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and Thou didst inflict retribution for their inventions. He does leave much of these outward issues unswept away by His forgiveness, and the great law stands, Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. And yet the pardon that you and I need, and which we can all have for the asking, flows to us unchecked and full--the great stream of the love of God, to whom we are reconciled, when we turn to Him in penitent dependence on the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

This consciousness of sin and cry for pardon lie at the foundation of vigorous practical religion. It seems to me that the differences between different types of Christianity, insipid elegance and fiery earnestness, between coldness and fervour, the difference between a sapless and a living ministry and between a formal and a real Christianity, are very largely due to the differences in realising the fact and the gravity of the fact of transgression. The prominence which we give to that in our thoughts will largely determine our notions of ourselves, and of Christ's work, and to a great extent settle what we think Christianity is for, and what in itself it is. If a man has no deep consciousness of sin he will be satisfied with a very superficial kind of religion. Every man his own redeemer will be his motto. And not knowing the necessity for a Saviour, he will not recognise that Christianity is fundamentally and before anything else, a system of redemption. A moral agent? Yes! A large revelation of great truth? Yes! A power to make men's lives, individually and in the community, nobler and loftier? By all means. But before all these, and all these consequentially on its being a system by which sinful men, else hopeless and condemned, are delivered and set free. So, dear brethren! let me press upon you this,--unless my Christianity gives large prominence to the fact of my own transgression, and is full of a penitent cry for pardon, it lacks the one thing needful, I was going to say--it lacks, at all events, that which will make it a living power blessedly ruling my heart and life.

**II. Note in the next place the plea for pardon.**

For Thy name's sake. The Psalmist does not come with any carefully elaborated plea, grounded upon anything in himself, either on the excuses and palliations of his evil, his corrupt nature, his many temptations, and the like, or on the depth and reality of his repentance. He does not say, Forgive me, for I weep for my evil and loathe myself. Nor does he say, Forgive me, for I could not help doing it, or because I was tempted; or because the thing that I have done is a very little thing after all. He comes empty-handed, and says, For Thy name's sake, O Lord! That means, first, the great thought that God's mercy flows from the infinite depths of His own character. He is His own motive. The fountain of His forgiving love wells up of itself, drawn forth by nothing that we do, but propelled from within by the inmost nature of God. As surely as it is the property of light to radiate and of fire to spread, so surely is it His nature and property to have mercy. He forgives, says our text, because He is God, and cannot but do so. Therefore our mightiest plea is to lay hold of His own strength, and to grasp the fact of the unmotived, uncompelled, unpurchased, and therefore unalterable and eternal pardoning love of God.

Scientists tell us that the sun is fed and kept in splendour by the constant impact of bodies from without falling in upon it, and that if that supply were to cease, the furnace of the heavens would go out. But God, who is light in Himself, needs no accession of supplies from without to maintain His light, and no force of motives from without to sway His will. We do not need to seek to bend Him to mercy, for He is mercy in Himself. We do not need to stir His purpose into action, for it has been working from of old and its goings forth are from everlasting. He is His own motive, He forgives because of what He is. So let us dig down to that deepest of all rock foundations on which to build our confidence, and be sure that, if I may use such an expression, the necessity of the divine nature compels Him to pardon iniquity, transgression, and sin.

Then there is another thought here, that the past of God is a plea with God for present forgiveness. Thy name in Scripture means the whole revelation of the divine character, and thus the Psalmist looks back into the past, and sees there how God has, all through the ages, been plenteous in mercy and ready to forgive all that called upon Him; and he pleads that past as a reason for the present and for the future. Thousands of years have passed since David, if he was the Psalmist, offered this prayer; and you and I can look back to the blessed old story of his forgiveness, so swift, so absolute and free, which followed upon confession so lowly, and can remember that infinitely pathetic and wonderful word which puts the whole history of the resurrection and restoration of a soul into two clauses. David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord: and Nathan said unto David--finishing the sentence--And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin. What He was He is; what He is He will be. For Thy name's sake, pardon mine iniquity.

There is yet another thought that may be suggested. The divine forgiveness is in order that men may know Him better. That is represented in Scripture as being the great motive of the divine actions--for the glory of Thine own name. That may be so put as to be positively atrocious, or so as to be perfectly divine and lovely. It has often been put, by hard and narrow dogmatists, in such a way as to make God simply an Almighty selfishness, but it ought to be put as the Bible puts it, so as to show Him as an Almighty love. For why does He desire that His name should be known by us but for our sakes, that the light of that great Name may come to us, sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, and that, knowing Him for what He is, we may have peace, and rest, and joy, and love, and purity? It is pure benevolence that makes Him act, for the glory of His great name; sweeping away the clouds that a darkened earth may expand and rejoice, and all the leaves unfold themselves, and every bird sing, in the restored sunshine.

And there is nothing that reveals the inmost hived sweetness and honey of the name of God like the assurance of His pardon. There is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared. Oh, dear brethren! unless you know God as the God that has forgiven you, your knowledge of Him is but shallow and incomplete, and you know not the deepest blessings that flow to them who find that this is life eternal to know the only true God as the all-forgiving Father.

Note the connection between the Psalmist's plea and the New Testament plea. David said, For Thy name's sake, pardon, we say, For Christ's sake, forgive. Are the two diverse? Is the fruit diverse from the bud? Is the complete noonday diverse from the blessed morning twilight? Christ is the Name of God, the Revealer of the divine heart and mind. When Christian men pray For the sake of Christ, they are not bringing a motive, which is to move the divine love which else lies passive and inert, because God's love was the cause of Christ's work not Christ's work the cause of God's love, but they are expressing their own dependence on the Great Mediator and His work, and solemnly offering, as the ground of all their hope, that perfect sacrifice which is the medium by which forgiveness reaches men, and without which it is impossible that the government of the righteous God could exist with pardon. Christ has died; Christ, in dying, has borne the sins of the world; that is, yours and mine. And therefore the pardon of God comes to us through that channel, without, in the slightest degree, trenching on the awfulness of the divine holiness or weakening the sanctities of God's righteous retributive law. For Christ's sake hath forgiven us is the daylight which the Psalmist saw as morning dawn when he cried, For Thy name's sake, pardon mine iniquity.

**III. Lastly, note the reason for the earnest cry, For it is great.**

That may be a reason for the pardon; more probably it is a reason for the prayer. The fact is true in regard to us all. There is no need to suppose any special heinous sin in the Psalmist's mind. I would fain press upon all consciences that listen to me now that these lowly words of confession are true about every one of us, whether we know it or not. For if you consider how much of self-will, how much of indifference, of alienation from, if not of antagonism against, the law of God, go to every trifling transgression, you will think twice before you call it small. And if it be small, a microscopic viper, the length of a cutting from your finger nail, has got the viper's nature in it, and its poison, and its sting, and it will grow. A very little quantity of mud held in solution in a continuously flowing river will make a tremendous delta at the mouth of it in the course of years. And however small may have been the amount of evil and deflection from God's law in that flowing river of my past life, what a filthy, foul bank of slime must be piled up down yonder at the mouth!

If the fact be so, then is not that a reason for our all going to the only One who can dredge it away, and get rid of it? Pardon me; for it is great. That is to say, There is no one else who can deal with it but Thyself, O Lord! It is too large for me to cart away; it is too great for any inferior hand to deal with. I am so bad that I can come only to Thyself to be made better. It is blessed and wise when the consciousness of our deep transgression drives us to the only Hand that can heal, to the only Heart that can forgive.

So, dear friends! in a blessed desperation of otherwise being unable to get rid of this burden which has grown on our backs ounce by ounce for long years, let us go to Him. He and He alone can deal with it. Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and to Thee, Thee only, will I come.

Only remember that, before you ask, God has given. He is like the dew upon the grass, that waiteth not for man. Instead of praying for pardon which is already bestowed, do you see to it that you take the pardon which God is praying you to receive. Swallow the bitter pill of acknowledging your own transgression; and then one look at the crucified Christ and one motion of believing desire towards Him; and the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.