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

**PSALMS-022**. **A THREEFOLD THOUGHT OF SIN AND FORGIVENESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. 2. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile."*

*Psalm 32:1-2*

This psalm, which has given healing to many a wounded conscience, comes from the depths of a conscience which itself has been wounded and healed. One must be very dull of hearing not to feel how it throbs with emotion, and is, in fact, a gush of rapture from a heart experiencing in its freshness the new joy of forgiveness. It matters very little who wrote it. If we accept the superscription, which many of those who usually reject these ancient Jewish notes do in the present case, the psalm is David's, and it fits into some of the specific details of his great sin and penitence. But that is of very small moment. Whoever wrote it, he sings because he must.

The psalm begins with an exclamation, for the clause would be better translated, Oh! the blessedness of the man. Then note the remarkable accumulation of clauses, all expressing substantially the same thing, but expressing it with a difference. The Psalmist's heart is too full to be emptied by one utterance. He turns his jewel, as it were, round and round, and at each turn it reflects the light from a different angle. There are three clauses in my text, each substantially having the same meaning, but which yet present that substantially identical meaning with different shades. And that is true both in regard to the three words which are employed to describe the fact of transgression, and to the three which are employed to describe the fact of forgiveness. It is mainly to these, and the large lessons which lie in observing the shades of significance in them, that I wish to turn now.

**I. Note the solemn picture which is here drawn of various phases of sin.**

There are three words employed--transgression, sin, iniquity. They all mean the same thing, but they mean it with a different association of ideas and suggestions of its foulness. Let me take them in order. The word translated transgression seems literally to signify separation, or rending apart, or departure, and hence comes to express the notion of apostasy and rebellion.

So, then, here is this thought; all sin is a going away. From what? Rather the question should be--from whom? All sin is a departure from God. And that is its deepest and darkest characteristic. And it is the one that needs to be most urged, for it is the one that we are most apt to forget. We are all ready enough to acknowledge faults; none of us have any hesitation in saying that we have done wrong, and have gone wrong. We are ready to recognise that we have transgressed the law; but what about the Lawgiver? The personal element in every sin, great or small, is that it is a voluntary rending of a union which exists, a departure from God who is with us in the deepest recesses of our being, unless we drag ourselves away from the support of His enclosing arm, and from the illumination of His indwelling grace.

So, dear brethren! this was the first and the gravest aspect under which the penitent and the forgiven man in my text thought of his past, that in it, when he was wildly and eagerly rushing after the low and sensuous gratification of his worst desires, he was rebelling against, and wandering far away from, the ever-present Friend, the all-encircling support and joy, the Lord, his life. You do not understand the gravity of the most trivial wrong act when you think of it as a sin against the order of Nature, or against the law written on your heart, or as the breach of the constitution of your own nature, or as a crime against your fellows. You have not got to the bottom of the blackness until you see that it is flat rebellion against God Himself. This is the true devilish element in all our transgression, and this element is in it all. Oh! if once we do get the habit formed and continued until it becomes almost instinctive and spontaneous, of looking at each action of our lives in immediate and direct relation to God, there would come such an apocalypse as would startle some of us into salutary dread, and make us all feel that it is an evil and a bitter thing (and the two characteristics must always go together), to depart from the living God. The great type of all wrongdoers is in that figure of the Prodigal Son, and the essence of his fault was, first, that he selfishly demanded for his own his father's goods; and, second, that he went away into a far country. Your sins have separated between you and God. And when you do those little acts of selfish indulgence which you do twenty times a day, without a prick of conscience, each of them, trivial as it is, like some newly-hatched poisonous serpent, a finger-length long, has in it the serpent nature, it is rebellion and separation from God.

Then another aspect of the same foul thing rises before the Psalmist's mind. This evil which he has done, which I suppose was the sin in the matter of Bathsheba, was not only rebellion against God, but it was, according to this text, in the second clause, a sin, by which is meant literally missing an aim. So this word, in its pregnant meaning, corresponds with the signification of the ordinary New Testament word for sin, which also implies error, or missing that which ought to be the goal of our lives. That is to say, whilst the former word regarded the evil deed mainly in its relation to God, this word regards it mainly in its relation to ourselves, and that which before Him is rebellion, the assertion of my own individuality and my own will, and therefore in separation from His will, is, considered in reference to myself, my fatally missing the mark to which my whole energy and effort ought to be directed. All sin, big or little, is a blunder. It never hits what it aims at, and if it did, it is aiming at the wrong thing. So doubly, all transgression is folly, and the true name for the doer is Thou fool! For every evil misses the mark which, regard being had to the man's obvious destiny, he ought to aim at. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever; and whosoever in all his successes fails to realise that end is a failure through and through, in whatever smaller matters he may seem to himself and to others to succeed. He only strikes the target in the bull's eye who lets his arrows be deflected by no gusts of passion, nor aimed wrong by any obliquity of vision; but with firm hand and clear eye seeks and secures the absolute conformity of his will to the Father's will, and makes God his aim and end in all things. Thou hast created us for Thyself, and only in Thee can we find rest. O brother! whatever be your aims and ends in life, take this for the surest verity, that you have fatally misunderstood the purpose of your being, and the object to which you should strain, if there is anything except God, who is the supreme desire of your heart and the goal of your life. All sin is missing the mark which God has set up for man.

Therefore let us press to the mark where hangs the prize which whoso possesses succeeds, whatsoever other trophies may have escaped his grasp.

But there is another aspect of this same thought, and that is that every piece of evil misses its own shabby mark. A rogue is a round-about fool. No man ever gets, in doing wrong, the thing he did the wrong for, or if he gets it, he gets something else along with it that takes all the sweet taste out of it. The thief secures the booty, but he gets penal servitude besides. Sin tempts us with glowing tales of the delight to be found in drinking stolen waters and eating her bread in secret; but sin lies by suppression of the truth, if not by suggestions of the false, because she says never a word about the sickness and the headache that come after the debauch, nor about the poison that we drink down along with her sugared draughts. The paltering fiend keeps the word of promise to the ear, and breaks it to the hope. All sin, great or little, is a blunder, and missing of the mark.

And lastly, yet another aspect of the ugly thing rises before the Psalmist's eye. In reference to God, evil is separation and rebellion; in reference to myself, it is an error and missing of my true goal; and in reference to the straight standard and law of duty, it is, according to the last of the three words for sin in the text, iniquity, or, literally, something twisted or distorted. It is thus brought into contrast with the right line of the plain, straight path in which we ought to walk. We have the same metaphor in our own language. We talk about things being right and wrong, by which we mean, in the one case, parallel with the rigid law of duty, and in the other case, wrung, or wavering, crooked and divergent from it. There is a standard as well as a Judge, and we have not only to think of evil as being rebellion against God and separation from Him, and as, for ourselves, issuing in fatal missing of the mark, but also as being divergent from the one manifest law to which we ought to be conformed. The path to God is a right line; the shortest road from earth to Heaven is absolutely straight. The Czar of Russia, when railways were introduced into that country, was asked to determine the line between St. Petersburg and Moscow. He took a ruler and drew a straight line across the map, and said, There! Our Autocrat has drawn a line as straight as the road from earth to Heaven, and by the side of it are the crooked, wandering ways in which we live.

Take these three thoughts then--as for law, divergence; as for the aim of my life, a fatal miss; as for God, my Friend and my Life, rebellion and separation--and you have, if not the complete physiognomy of evil, at least grave thoughts concerning it, which become all the graver when we think that they are true about us and about our deeds.

**II. And so let me ask you to look secondly at the blessed picture drawn here of the removal of the sin.**

There are three words here for forgiveness, each of which adds its quota to the general thought. It is forgiven, covered, not imputed. The accumulation of synonyms not only sets forth various aspects of pardon, but triumphantly celebrates the completeness and certainty of the gift.

As to the first, it means literally to lift and bear away a load or burden. As to the second, it means, plainly enough, to cover over, as one might do some foul thing, that it may no longer offend the eye or smell rank to Heaven. Bees in their hives, when there is anything corrupt and too large for them to remove, fling a covering of wax over it, and hermetically seal it, and no foul odour comes from it. And so a man's sin is covered over and ceases to be in evidence, as it were before the divine Eye that sees all things. He Himself casts a merciful veil over it and hides it from Himself. A similar idea, though with a modification in metaphor, is included in that last word, the sin is not reckoned. God does not write it down in His Great Book on the debit side of the man's account. And these three things, the lifting up and carrying away of the load, the covering over of the obscene and ugly thing, the non-reckoning in the account of the evil deed; these three things taken together do set forth before us the great and blessed truth that a man's transgressions may become, in so far as the divine heart and the divine dealings with him are concerned, as if non-existent.

Men tell us that that is not possible and that it is immoral to preach a doctrine of forgiveness. O dear brethren! there is no gospel to preach that will touch a man's heart except the gospel that begins with this--God bears away, covers over, does not reckon to a man, his rebellions, his errors, his departures from the law of right. Sin is capable of forgiveness, and, blessed be God! every sin He is ready to forgive. I should be ashamed of myself to stand here, and not preach a gospel of pardon. I know not anything else that will touch consciences and draw hearts except this gospel, which I am trying in my poor way to lay upon your hearts.

Notice how my text includes also a glance at the condition on our part on which this absolute and utter annihilation of our wicked past is possible. That last clause of my text, In whose spirit there is no guile, seems to me to refer to the frank sincerity of a confession, which does not try to tell lies to God, and, attempting to deceive Him, really deceives only the self-righteous sinner. Whosoever opens his heart to God, makes a clean breast of it, and without equivocation or self-deception or the palliations which self-love teaches, says, I have played the fool and erred exceedingly, to that man the Psalmist thinks pardon is sure to come.

Now remember that the very heart and centre of that Jewish system was an altar, and that on that altar was sacrificed the expiatory victim. I am not going to insist upon any theory of an atonement, but I do want to urge this, that Christianity is nothing, if it have not explained and taken up into itself that which was symbolised in that old ritual. The very first words from human lips which proclaimed Christ's advent to man were, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world, and amongst the last words which Christ spoke upon earth, in the way of teaching His disciples, were these, This is My blood, shed for many for the remission of sins. The Cross of Christ explains my psalm, the Cross of Christ answers the confidence of the Psalmist, which was fed upon the shadow of the good things to come. He has died, the Just for the unjust, that the sins which were laid upon Him might be taken away, covered, and not reckoned to us.

Brethren! unless my sins are taken away by the Lamb of God they remain. Unless they are laid upon Christ, they crush me. Unless they are covered by His expiation, they lie there before the Throne of God, and cry for punishment. Unless His blood has wiped out the record that is against us, the black page stands for ever. And to you and me there will be said one day, in a voice which we dare not dispute, Pay Me that thou owest! The blacker the sin the brighter the Christ. I would that I could lay upon all your hearts this belief, the blood of Jesus Christ, and nothing else, cleanses from all sin!

**III. I will touch in a word only upon the last thought suggested by the text, and that is the blessedness of this removal of sin.**

As I said, my text is really an exclamation, a gush of rapture from a heart that is tasting the fresh-drawn blessedness of pardon. And the rest of the psalm is little more than an explanation of the various aspects and phases of that blessedness. Let me just run over them in the briefest possible manner.

If we receive this forgiveness through Jesus Christ and our faith in Him, then we have manifold blessedness in one. There is the blessedness of deliverance from sullen remorse and of the dreadful pangs of an accusing conscience. How vividly, and evidently as a transcript from a page in his own autobiography, the Psalmist describes that condition, When I kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long! When a man's heart is locked against confession he hears a tumult of accusing voices within himself, and remorse and dread creep over his heart. The pains of sullen remorse were never described more truly and more dreadfully than in this context. Day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me, my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Some of us may know something of that. But there is a worse state than that, and one or other of the two states belongs to us. If we have not found our way into the liberty of confession and forgiveness, we have but a choice between the pains of an awakened conscience and the desolation of a dead one. It is worse to have no voice within than to have an accusing one. It is worse to feel no pressure of a divine Hand than to feel it. And they whose consciences are seared as with a hot iron have sounded the lowest depths. They are perfectly comfortable, quite happy; they say all these feelings that I am trying to suggest to you seem to them to be folly. They make a solitude and call it peace. It is an awful thing when a man has come to this point, that he has got past the accusations of conscience, and can swallow down the fiercest draughts without feeling them burn. Dear brethren! there is only one deliverance from an accusing conscience which does not murder the conscience, and that is that we should find our way into the peace of God which is through Christ Jesus and His atoning death.

Then, again, my psalm goes on to speak about the blessedness of a close clinging to God in peaceful trust, which will ensure security in the midst of all trials, and a hiding-place against every storm. The Psalmist uses a magnificent figure. God is to him as some rocky island, steadfast and dry, in the midst of a widespread inundation; and taking refuge there in the clefts of the rock, he looks down upon the tossing, shoreless sea of troubles and sorrows that breaks upon the rocky barriers of his Patmos, and stands safe and dry. Only through forgiveness do we come into that close communion with God which ensures safety in all disasters.

And then there follows the blessedness of a gentle guidance and of a loving obedience. Thou shalt guide me with Thine eye. No need for force, no need for bit and bridle, no need for anything but the glance of the Father, which the child delights to obey. Docility, glad obedience unprompted by fear, based upon love, are the fruits of pardon through the blood of Christ.

And, lastly, there is the blessedness of exuberant gladness; the joy that comes from the sorrow according to God is a joy that will last. All other delights, in their nature, are perishable; all other raptures, by the very necessity of their being and of ours, die down, sometimes into vanity, always into commonplace or indifference. But the joy that springs in the pardoned heart, and is fed by closeness of communion with God, and by continual obedience to His blessed guidance, has in it nothing that can fade, nothing that can burn out, nothing that can be disturbed. The deeper the penitence the surer the rebound into gladness. The more a man goes down into the depths of his own heart and learns his own evil, the more will he, trusting in Christ, rise into the serene heights of thankfulness, and live, if not in rapture, at least in the calm joy of conscious communion and unending fellowship. Every tear may be crystallised into a diamond that shall flash in the light. And they, and only they, who begin in the valley of weeping, confessing their sins and imploring forgiveness through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Lord, will rise to heights of a joy that remains, and remaining, is full.