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

**PSALMS-039**. **DAVID'S CRY FOR PARDON by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. ... Blot out my transgressions. 2. Wash me throughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."*

*Psalm 51:1, 2*

A whole year had elapsed between David's crime and David's penitence. It had been a year of guilty satisfaction not worth the having; of sullen hardening of heart against God and all His appeals. The thirty-second Psalm tells us how happy David had been during that twelvemonth, of which he says, My bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy on me. Then came Nathan with his apologue, and with that dark threatening that the sword should never depart from his house, the fulfilment of which became a well-head of sorrow to the king for the rest of his days, and gave a yet deeper poignancy of anguish to the crime of his spoiled favourite Absalom. The stern words had their effect. The frost that had bound his soul melted all away, and he confessed his sin, and was forgiven then and there. I have sinned against the Lord is the confession as recorded in the historical books; and, says Nathan, The Lord hath made to pass from thee the iniquity of thy sin. Immediately, as would appear from the narrative, that very same day, the child of Bathsheba and David was smitten with fatal disease, and died in a week. And it is after all these events--the threatening, the penitence, the pardon, the punishment--that he comes to God, who had so freely forgiven, and likewise so sorely smitten him, and wails out these prayers: Blot out my transgressions, wash me from mine iniquity, cleanse me from my sin.

One almost shrinks from taking as the text of a sermon words like these, in which a broken and contrite spirit groans for deliverance, and which are, besides, hallowed by the thought of the thousands who have since found them the best expression of their sacredest emotions. But I would fain try not to lose the feeling that breathes through the words, while seeking for the thoughts which are in them, and hope that the light which they throw upon the solemn subjects of guilt and forgiveness may not be for any of us a mere cold light.

**I. Looking then at this triad of petitions, they teach us first how David thought of his sin.**

You will observe the reiteration of the same earnest cry in all these clauses, and if you glance over the remainder of this psalm, you will find that he asks for the gifts of God's Spirit, with a similar threefold repetition. Now this characteristic of the whole psalm is worth notice in the outset. It is not a mere piece of Hebrew parallelism. The requirements of poetical form but partially explain it. It is much more the earnestness of a soul that cannot be content with once asking for the blessings and then passing on, but dwells upon them with repeated supplication, not because it thinks that it shall be heard for its much speaking, but because it longs for them so eagerly.

And besides that, though the three clauses do express the same general idea, they express it under various modifications, and must be all taken together before we get the whole of the Psalmist's thought of sin.

Notice again that he speaks of his evil as transgressions and as sin, first using the plural and then the singular. He regards it first as being broken up into a multitude of isolated acts, and then as being all gathered together into one knot, as it were, so that it is one thing. In one aspect it is my transgressions--that thing that I did about Uriah, that thing that I did about Bathsheba, those other things that these dragged after them. One by one the acts of wrongdoing pass before him. But he does not stop there. They are not merely a number of deeds, but they have, deep down below, a common root from which they all came--a centre in which they all inhere. And so he says, not only Blot out my transgressions, but Wash me from mine iniquity. He does not merely generalise, but he sees and he feels what you and I have to feel, if we judge rightly of our evil actions, that we cannot take them only in their plurality as so many separate deeds, but that we must recognise them as coming from a common source, and we must lament before God not only our sins but our sin--not only the outward acts of transgression, but that alienation of heart from which they all come; not only sin in its manifold manifestations as it comes out in the life, but in its inward roots as it coils round our hearts. You are not to confess acts alone, but let your contrition embrace the principle from which they come.

Further, in all the petitions we see that the idea of his own single responsibility for the whole thing is uppermost in David's mind. It is my transgression, it is mine iniquity, and my sin. He has not learned to say with Adam of old, and with some so-called wise thinkers to-day: I was tempted, and I could not help it. He does not talk about circumstances, and say that they share the blame with him. He takes it all to himself. It was I did it. True, I was tempted, but it was my soul that made the occasion a temptation. True, the circumstances led me astray, but they would not have led me astray if I had been right, and where as well as what I ought to be. It is a solemn moment when that thought first rises in its revealing power to throw light into the dark places of our souls. But it is likewise a blessed moment, and without it we are scarcely aware of ourselves. Conscience quickens consciousness. The sense of transgression is the first thing that gives to many a man the full sense of his own individuality. There is nothing that makes us feel how awful and incommunicable is that mysterious personality by which every one of us lives alone after all companionship, so much as the contemplation of our relations to God's law. Every man shall bear his own burden. Circumstances, yes; bodily organisation, yes; temperament, yes; the maxims of society, the conventionalities of the time, yes,--all these things have something to do with shaping our single deeds and with influencing our character; but after we have made all allowances for these influences which affect me, let us ask the philosophers who bring them forward as diminishing or perhaps annihilating responsibility, And what about that me which these things influence? After all, let me remember that the deed is mine, and that every one of us shall, as Paul puts it, give account of himself unto God.

Passing from that, let me point for one moment to another set of ideas that are involved in these petitions. The three words which the Psalmist employs for sin give prominence to different aspects of it. Transgression is not the same as iniquity, and iniquity is not the same as sin. They are not aimless, useless synonyms, but they have each a separate thought in them. The word rendered transgression literally means rebellion, a breaking away from and setting oneself against lawful authority. That translated iniquity literally means that which is twisted, bent. The word in the original for sin literally means missing a mark, an aim. And this threefold view of sin is no discovery of David's, but is the lesson which the whole Old Testament system had laboured to print deep on the national consciousness. That lesson, taught by law and ceremonial, by denunciation and remonstrance, by chastisement and deliverance, the penitent king has learned. To all men's wrongdoings these descriptions apply, but most of all to his. Sin is ever, and his sin especially is, rebellion, the deflection of the life from the straight line which God's law draws so clearly and firmly, and hence a missing the aim.

Think how profound and living is the consciousness of sin which lies in calling it rebellion. It is not merely, then, that we go against some abstract propriety, or break some impersonal law of nature when we do wrong, but that we rebel against a rightful Sovereign. In a special sense this was true of the Jew, whose nation stood under the government of a divine king, so that sin was treason, and breaches of the law acts of rebellion against God. But it is as true of us all. Our theory of morals will be miserably defective, and our practice will be still more defective, unless we have learned that morality is but the garment of religion, that the definition of virtue is obedience to God, and that the true sin in sin is not the yielding to impulses that belong to our nature, but the assertion in the act of yielding, of our independence of God and of our opposition to His will. And all this has application to David's sin. He was God's viceroy and representative, and he sets to his people the example of revolt, and lifts the standard of rebellion. It is as if the ruler of a province declared war against the central authority of which he was the creature, and used against it the very magazines and weapons with which it had intrusted him. He had rebelled, and in an eminent degree, as Nathan said to him, given to the enemies of God occasion to blaspheme.

Not less profound and suggestive is that other name for sin, that which is twisted, or bent, mine iniquity. It is the same metaphor which lies in our own word wrong, that which is wrung or warped from the straight line of right. To that line, drawn by God's law, our lives should run parallel, bending neither to the right hand nor to the left. But instead of the firm directness of such a line, our lives show wavering deformity, and are like the tremulous strokes in a child's copy-book. David had the pattern before him, and by its side his unsteady purpose, his passionate lust, had traced this wretched scrawl. The path on which he should have trodden was a straight course to God, unbending like one of these conquering Roman roads, that will turn aside for neither mountain nor ravine, nor stream nor bog. If it had been thus straight, it would have reached its goal. Journeying on that way of holiness, he would have found, and we shall find, that on it no ravenous beast shall meet us, but with songs and everlasting joy upon their lips the happy pilgrims draw ever nearer to God, obtaining joy and gladness in all the march, until at last sorrow and sighing shall flee away. But instead of this he had made for himself a crooked path, and had lost his road and his peace in the mazes of wandering ways. The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to come to the city.

Another very solemn and terrible thought of what sin is, lies in that final word for it, which means missing an aim. How strikingly that puts a truth which siren voices are constantly trying to sing us out of believing! Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. And that for two reasons, because, first, God has made us for Himself, and to take anything besides for our life's end or our heart's portion is to divert ourselves from our true destiny; and because, second, that being so, every attempt to win satisfaction or delight by such a course is and must be a failure. Sin misses the aim if we think of our proper destination. Sin misses its own aim of happiness. A man never gets what he hoped for by doing wrong, or, if he seem to do so, he gets something more that spoils it all. He pursues after the fleeing form that seems so fair, and when he reaches her side, and lifts her veil, eager to embrace the tempter, a hideous skeleton grins and gibbers at him. The siren voices sing to you from the smiling island, and their white arms and golden harps and the flowery grass draw you from the wet boat and the weary oar; but when a man lands he sees the fair form end in a slimy fish, and she slays him and gnaws his bones. He knows not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell. Yes! every sin is a mistake, and the epitaph for the sinner is Thou fool!

**II. These petitions also show us, in the second place, How David thinks of forgiveness.**

As the words for sin expressed a threefold view of the burden from which the Psalmist seeks deliverance, so the triple prayer, in like manner, sets forth that blessing under three aspects. It is not merely pardon for which he asks. He is making no sharp dogmatic distinction between forgiveness and cleansing.

The two things run into each other in his prayer, as they do, thank God! in our own experience, the one being inseparable, in fact, from the other. It is absolute deliverance from the power of sin, in all forms of that power, whether as guilt or as habit, for which he cries so piteously; and his accumulative petitions are so exhaustive, not because he is coldly examining his sin, but because he is intensely feeling the manifold burden of his great evil.

That first petition conceives of the divine dealing with sin as being the erasure of a writing, perhaps of an indictment. There is a special significance in the use of the word here, because it is also employed in the description of the Levitical ceremonial of the ordeal, where a curse was written on a scroll and blotted out by the priest. But apart from that the metaphor is a natural and suggestive one. Our sin stands written against us. The long gloomy indictment has been penned by our own hands. Our past is a blurred manuscript, full of false things and bad things. We have to spread the writing before God, and ask Him to remove the stained characters from its surface, that once was fair and unsoiled.

Ah, brethren! some people tell us that the past is irrevocable, that the thing once done can never be undone, that the life's diary written by our own hands can never be cancelled. The melancholy theory of some thinkers and teachers is summed up in the words, infinitely sad and despairing when so used, What I have written I have written. Thank God! we know better than that. We know who blots out the handwriting that is against us, nailing it to His Cross. We know that of God's great mercy our future may copy fair our past, and the past may be all obliterated and removed. And as sometimes you will find in an old monkish library the fair vellum that once bore lascivious stories of ancient heathens and pagan deities turned into the manuscript in which a saint has penned his Contemplations, an Augustine his Confessions, or a Jerome his Translations, so our souls may become palimpsests. The old wicked heathen characters that we have traced there may be blotted out, and covered over by the writing of that divine Spirit who has said, I will put My laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts. As you run your pen through the finished pages of your last year's diaries, as you seal them up and pack them away, and begin a new page in a clean book on the first of January, so it is possible for every one of us to do with our lives. Notwithstanding all the influence of habit, notwithstanding all the obstinacy of long-indulged modes of thought and action, notwithstanding all the depressing effect of frequent attempts and frequent failures, we may break ourselves off from all that is sinful in our past lives, and begin afresh, saying, God helping me! I will write another sort of biography for myself for the days that are to come.

We cannot erase these sad records from our past. The ink is indelible; and besides all that we have visibly written in these terrible autobiographies of ours, there is much that has sunk into the page, there is many a secret fault, the record of which will need the fire of that last day to make it legible, Alas for those who learn the black story of their own lives for the first time then! Learn it now, my brother! and learn likewise that Christ can wipe it all clean off the page, clean out of your nature, clean out of God's book. Cry to Him, with the Psalmist, Blot out my transgressions! and He will calm and bless you with the ancient answer, I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins.

Then there is another idea in the second of these prayers for forgiveness: Wash me throughly from mine iniquity. That phrase does not need any explanation, except that the word expresses the antique way of cleansing garments by treading and beating. David, then, here uses the familiar symbol of a robe, to express the habit of the soul, or, as we say, the character. That robe is all splashed and stained. He cries to God to make it a robe of righteousness and a garment of purity.

And mark that he thinks the method by which this will be accomplished is a protracted and probably a painful one. He is not praying for a mere declaration of pardon, he is not asking only for the one complete, instantaneous act of forgiveness, but he is asking for a process of purifying which will be long and hard. I am ready, says he, in effect, to submit to any sort of discipline, if only I may be clean. Wash me, beat me, tread me down, hammer me with mallets, dash me against stones, rub me with smarting soap and caustic nitre--do anything, anything with me, if only those foul spots melt away from the texture of my soul! A solemn prayer, my brethren! if we pray it aright, which will be answered by many a sharp application of God's Spirit, by many a sorrow, by much very painful work, both within our own souls and in our outward lives, but which will be fulfilled at last in our being clothed like our Lord, in garments which shine as the light.

We know, dear brethren! who has said, I counsel thee to buy of Me white raiment, that the shame of thy nakedness may not appear. And we know well who were the great company before the throne of God, that had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. Wash me throughly from mine iniquity.

The deliverance from sin is still further expressed by that third supplication, Cleanse me from my sin. That is the technical word for the priestly act of declaring ceremonial cleanness--the cessation of ceremonial pollution, and for the other priestly act of making, as well as declaring, clean from the stains of leprosy. And with allusion to both of these uses, the Psalmist employs it here. That is to say, he thinks of his guilt not only as a blotted past record which he has written, not only as a garment spotted by the flesh which his spirit wears, but he thinks of it too as inhering in himself, as a leprosy and disease of his own personal nature. He thinks of it as being, like that, incurable, fatal, twin sister to and precursor of death; and he thinks of it as capable of being cleansed only by a sacerdotal act, only by the great High Priest and by His finger being laid upon it. And we know who it was that--when the leper, whom no man in Israel was allowed to touch on pain of uncleanness, came to His feet--put out His hand in triumphant consciousness of power, and touched him, and said, I will! be thou clean. Let this be thy prayer, Cleanse me from my sin; and Christ will answer, Thy leprosy hath departed from thee.

**III. These petitions likewise show us whence the Psalmist draws his confidence for such a prayer.**

According to the multitude of Thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. His whole hope rests upon God's own character, as revealed in the endless continuance of His acts of love. He knows the number and the greatness of his sins, and the very depth of his consciousness of sin helps him to a corresponding greatness in his apprehension of God's mercy. As he says in another of his psalms, Innumerable evils have compassed me about; they are more than the hairs of my head... . Many, O Lord my God! are Thy wonderful works... . They are more than can be numbered. This is the blessedness of all true penitence, that the more profoundly it feels its own sore need and great sinfulness, in that very proportion does it recognise the yet greater mercy and all-sufficient grace of our loving God, and from the lowest depths beholds the stars in the sky, which they who dwell amid the surface-brightness of the noonday cannot discern.

God's own revealed character, His faithfulness and persistency, notwithstanding all our sins, in that mode of dealing with men which has blessed all generations with His tender mercies--these were David's pleas. And for us who have the perfect love of God perfectly expressed in His Son, that same plea is incalculably strengthened, for we can say, According to Thy tender mercy in Thy dear Son, for the sake of Christ, blot out my transgressions. Is the depth of our desire, and is the firmness of our confidence, proportioned to the increased clearness of our knowledge of the love of our God? Does the Cross of Christ lead us to as trustful a penitence as David had, to whom meditation on God's providences and the shadows of the ancient covenant were chiefest teachers of the multitude of His tender mercies?

Remember further that a comparison of the narrative in the historical books seems to show, as I said, that this psalm followed Nathan's declaration of the divine forgiveness, and that therefore these petitions of our text are the echo and response to that declaration.

Thus we see that the revelation of God's love precedes, and is the cause of, the truest penitence; that our prayer for forgiveness is properly the appropriating, or the effort to appropriate, the divine promise of forgiveness; and that the assurance of pardon, so far from making a man think lightly of his sin, is the thing that drives it home to his conscience, and first of all teaches him what it really is. As long as you are tortured with thoughts of a possible hell because of guilt, as long as you are troubled by the contemplation of consequences affecting your happiness as ensuing upon your wrongdoing, so long there is a foreign and disturbing element in even your deepest and truest penitence. But when you know that God has forgiven--when you come to see the multitude of Thy tender mercies, when the fear of punishment has passed out of your apprehension, then you are left with a heart at leisure from dread, to look the fact and not the consequences in the face, and to think of the moral nature, and not of the personal results, of your sin. And so one of the old prophets, with profound truth, says, Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy sin, when I am pacified towards thee for all thou hast done.

Dear friends! the wheels of God's great mill may grind us small, without our coming to know or to hate our sin. About His chastisements, about the revelation of His wrath, that old saying is true to a great extent: If you bray a fool in a mortar, his folly will not depart from him. You may smite a man down, crush him, make his bones to creep with the preaching of vengeance and of hell, and the result of it will often be, if it be anything at all, what it was in the case of that poor wretched Judas, who, because he only saw wrath, flung himself into despair, and was lost, not because he had betrayed Christ, but because he believed that there was no forgiveness for the man that had betrayed.

But Love comes, and Love is Lord of all. God's assurance, I have forgiven, the assurance that we do not need to plead with Him, to bribe Him, to buy pardon by tears and amendment, but that it is already provided for us--the blessed vision of an all-mighty love treasured in a dying Saviour, the proclamation God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them--Oh! these are the powers that break, or rather that melt, our hearts; these are the keen weapons that wound to heal our hearts; these are the teachers that teach a godly sorrow that needeth not to be repented of. Think of all the patient, pitying mercy of our Father, with which He has lingered about our lives, and softly knocked at the door of our hearts! Think of that unspeakable gift in which are wrapped up all His tender mercies--the gift of Christ who died for us all! Let it smite upon your heart with a rebuke mightier than all the thunders of law or terrors of judgment. Let it unveil for you not only the depths of the love of God, but the darkness of your own selfish rebellion from Him. Measure your crooked lives by the perfect rightness of Christ's. Learn how you have missed the aim which He reached, who could say, I delight to do Thy will, O my God! And let that same infinite love that teaches sin announce frank forgiveness and prophesy perfect purity. Then, with heart fixed upon Christ's Cross, let your cry for pardon be the echo of the most sure promise of pardon which sounds from His dying lips; and as you gaze on Him who died that we might be freed from all iniquity, ask Him to blot out your transgressions, to wash you throughly from your iniquity, and to cleanse you from your sins. Ask, for you cannot ask in vain; ask earnestly, for you need it sorely; ask confidently, for He has promised before you ask; but ask, for unless you do, you will not receive. Ask, and the answer is sent already--The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.