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

**PSALMS-047**. **SIN OVERCOMING AND OVERCOME by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Iniquities prevail against me: as for our transgressions, Thou shalt purge them away."*

*Psalm 65:3*

There is an intended contrast in these two clauses more pointed and emphatic in the original than in our Bible, between man's impotence and God's power in the face of the fact of sin. The words of the first clause might be translated, with perhaps a little increase of vividness, iniquities are too strong for me; and the Thou of the next clause is emphatically expressed in the original, as for our transgressions (which we cannot touch), Thou shalt purge them away. Despair of self is the mother of confidence in God; and no man has learned the blessedness and the sweetness of God's power to cleanse, who has not learned the impotence of his own feeble attempts to overcome his transgression. The very heart of Christianity is redemption. There are a great many ways of looking at Christ's mission and Christ's work, but I venture to say that they are all inadequate unless they start with this as the fundamental thought, and that only he who has learned by serious reflection and bitter personal experience the gravity and the hopelessness of the fact of the bondage of sin, rightly understands the meaning and the brightness of the Gospel of Christ. The angel voice that told us His name, and based His name upon His characteristic work, went deeper into the philosophy of Christianity than many a modern thinker, when it said, Thou shalt call His name Jesus, because He shall save His people from their sins. So here we have the hopelessness and misery of man's vain struggles, and side by side with these the joyful confidence in the divine victory. We have the problem and the solution, the barrier and the overleaping of it; man's impotence and the omnipotence of God's mercy. My iniquities are too strong for me, but Thou art too strong for them. As for our transgressions, of which I cannot purge the stain, with all my tears and with all my work, Thou shalt purge them away. Note, then, these two--first, the cry of despair; second, the ringing note of confidence.

**I. The cry of despair.**

Too strong for me, and yet they are me. Me, and not me; mine, and yet, somehow or other, my enemies, although my children--too strong for me, yet I give them their strength by my own cowardly and feeble compliance with their temptations; too strong for me and overmastering me, though I pride myself often on my freedom and spirit when I am yielding to them. Mine iniquities are mine, and yet they are not mine; me and yet, blessed be God! they can be separated from me.

The picture suggested by the words is that of some usurping power that has mastered a man, and laid its grip upon him so that all efforts to get away from the grasp are hopeless. Now, I dare say, that some of you are half consciously thinking that this is a piece of ordinary pulpit exaggeration, and has no kind of application to the respectable and decent lives that most of you live, and that you are ready to say, with as much promptitude and as much falsehood as the old Jews did, even whilst the Roman eagles, lifted above the walls of the castle, were giving them the lie: We were never in bondage to any man. You do not know or feel that anything has got hold of you which is stronger than you. Well, let us see.

Consider for a moment. You are powerless to master your evil, considered as habits. You do not know the tyranny of the usurper until a rebellion is got up against him. As long as you are gliding with the stream you have no notion of its force. Turn your boat and try to pull against it, and when the sweat-drops come on your brow, and you are sliding backwards, in spite of all your effort, you will begin to find out what a tremendous down-sucking energy there is in that quiet, silent flow. So the ready compliance of the worst part of my nature masks for me the tremendous force with which my evil tyrannises over me, and it is only when I face round and try to go the other way, that I find out what a power there is in its invisible grasp.

Did you ever try to cure some trivial bad habit, some trick of your fingers, for instance? You know what infinite pains and patience and time it took you to do that, and do you think that you would find it easier if you once set yourself to cure that lust, say, or that petulance, pride, passion, dishonesty, or whatsoever form of selfish living in forgetfulness of God may be your besetting sin? If you will try to pull the poison fang up, you will find how deep its roots are. It is like the yellow charlock in a field, which seems only to spread in consequence of attempts to get rid of it--as the rough rhyme says; One year's seeding, seven years weeding--and more at the end of the time than at the beginning. Any honest attempt at mending character drives a man to this--My iniquities are too strong for me.

I do not for a moment deny that there may be, and occasionally is, a magnificent force of will and persistency of purpose in efforts at self-improvement on the part of perfectly irreligious men. But, if by the occasional success of such effort, a man conquers one form of evil, that does not deliver him from evil. You have the usurping dominion deep in your nature, and what does it matter in essence which part of your being is most conspicuously under its control? It may be some animal passion, and you may conquer that. A man, for instance, when he is young, lives in the sphere of sensuous excitement; and when he gets old he turns a miser, and laughs at the pleasures that he used to get from the flesh, and thinks himself ever so much wiser. Is he any better? He has changed, so to speak, the kind of sin. That is all. The devil has put a new viceroy in authority, but it is the old government, though with fresh officials. The house which is cleared of the seven devils without getting into it the all-filling and sanctifying grace of God and love of Jesus Christ will stand empty. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does Satan, and the empty house invites the seven ill-tenants, and back they come in their diabolical completeness.

So, dear friends! though you may do a great deal--thank God!--in subduing evil habits and inclinations, you cannot touch, so as to master, the central fact of sin unless you get God to help you to do it, and you have to go down on your knees before you can do that work. Iniquities are too strong for me.

Then, again, consider our utter impotence in dealing with our own evil regarded as guilt. When we do wrong, the judge within, which we call conscience, says to us two things, or perhaps three. It says first, That is wrong; it says secondly, You have got to answer for it; and I think it says thirdly, And you will be punished for it. That is to say, there is a sense of demerit that goes side by side with our evil, as certainly as the shadow travels with the substance. And though, sometimes, when the sun goes behind a cloud, there is no shadow, and sometimes, when the light within us is darkened, conscience does not cast the black shade of demerit across the mind; yet conscience is there, though silent. When it does speak it says, You have done wrong, and you are answerable. Answerable to whom? To it? No! To society? No! To law? No! You can only be answerable to a person, and that is God. Against Him we have sinned. We do wrong; and if wrong were all that we had to charge ourselves with, it would be because there was nothing but law that we were answerable to. We do unkind things, and if unkindness and inhumanity were all that we had to charge ourselves with, it would be because we were only answerable to one another. We do suicidal things, and if self-inflicted injury were all our definition of evil, it would be because we were only answerable to our conscience and ourselves. But we sin, and that means that every wrong thing, big or little, which we do, whether we think about God in the doing of it or no, is, in its deepest essence, an offence against Him.

The judgment of conscience carries with it the solemn looking for of future judgment. It says, I am only a herald: He is coming. No man feels the burden of guilt without an anticipation of judgment. What are you going to do with these two feelings? Do you think that you can deal with them? It is no use saying, I am not responsible for what I did; I inherited such-and-such tendencies; circumstances are so-and-so. I could not help it; environment, and evolution, and all the rest of it diminish, if they do not destroy, responsibility. Be it so! And yet, after all, this is left--the certainty in my own convictions that I had the power to do or not to do. That is a fundamental part of a man's consciousness. If it is a delusion, what is to be trusted, and how can we be sure of anything? So that we are responsible for our action, and can no more elude the guilt that follows sin than we can jump off our own shadow. And I want you to consider what you are going to do about your guilt.

One thing you cannot do--you cannot remove it. Men have tried to do so by sacrifices, and false religions. They have swung in the air by means of hooks fastened into their bodies, and I do not know what besides, and they have not managed it. You can no more get rid of your guilt by being sorry for your sin than you could bring a dead man to life again by being sorry for his murder. What is done is done. What I have written I have written! Nothing will ever wash that little lily hand white again, as the magnificent murderess in Shakespeare's great creation found out. You can forget your guilt; you can ignore it. You can adopt some of the easily-learned-by-rote and fashionable theories that will enable you to minimise it, and to laugh at us old-fashioned believers in guilt and punishment. You do not take away the rock because you blow out the lamps of the lighthouse, and you do not alter an ugly fact by ignoring it. I beseech you, as reasonable men and women, to open your eyes to these plain facts about yourselves, that you have an element of demerit and of liability to consequent evil and suffering which you are perfectly powerless to touch or to lighten in the slightest degree.

Consider, again, our utter impotence in regard to our evil, looked upon as a barrier between us and God. That is the force of the context here. The Psalmist has just been saying, O Thou that hearest prayer! unto Thee shall all flesh come. And then he bethinks himself how flesh compassed with infirmities can come. And he staggers back bewildered. There can be no question but that the plain dictate of common sense is, We know that God heareth not sinners. My evil not only lies like a great black weight of guilt and of habit on my consciousness and on my activity, but it actually stands like a frowning cliff, barring my path and making a barrier between me and God. Your hands are full of blood; I hate your vain oblations, says the solemn Voice through the prophet. And this stands for ever true--The prayer of the wicked is an abomination. There frowns the barrier. Thank God! mercies come through it, howsoever close-knit and impenetrable it may seem. Thank God! no sin can shut Him out from us, but it can shut us out from Him. And though we cannot separate God from ourselves, and He is nearer us than our consciousness and the very basis of our being, yet by a mysterious power we can separate ourselves from Him. We may build up, of the black blocks of our sins flung up from the inner fires, and cemented with the bituminous mortar of our lusts and passions, a black wall between us and our Father. You and I have done it. We can build it--we cannot throw it down; we can rear it--we cannot tunnel it. Our iniquities are too strong for us.

Now notice that this great cry of despair in my text is the cry of a single soul. This is the only place in the psalm in which the singular person is used. Iniquities are too strong for us, is not sufficient. Each man must take guilt to himself. The recognition and confession of evil must be an intensely personal and individual act. My question to you, dear friend! is, Did you ever know it by experience? Going apart by yourself, away from everybody else, with no companions or confederates to lighten the load of your felt evil, forgetting tempters and associates and all other people, did you ever stand, you and God, face to face, with nobody to listen to the conference? And did you ever feel in that awful presence that whether the world was full of men, or deserted and you the only survivor, would make no difference to the personal responsibility and weight and guilt of your individual sin? Have you ever felt, Against Thee, Thee only, have I--solitary-- sinned, and confessed that iniquities are too strong for me?

**II. Now, let me say a word or two about the second clause of this great verse, the ringing cry of confident hope.**

The confidence is, as I said, the child of despair. You will never go into that large place of assured trust in God's effacing finger passed over all your evil until you have come through the narrow pass, where the black rocks all but bar the traveller's foot, of conscious impotence to deal with your sin. You must, first of all, dear friends! go down into the depths, and learn to have no trust in yourselves before you can rise to the heights, and rejoice in the hope of the glory and of the mercy of God. Begin with too strong for me, and the impotent me leads on to the almighty Thou.

Then, do not forget that what was confidence on the Psalmist's part is knowledge on ours. As for our transgressions, Thou wilt purge them away. You and I know why, and know how. Jesus Christ in His great work for us has vindicated the Psalmist's confidence, and has laid bare for the world's faith the grounds upon which that divine power proceeds in its cleansing mercy. Thou wilt purge them away, said he. Christ hath borne our sins in His own body on the tree, says the New Testament. I have spoken about our impotence in regard to our own evil, considered under three aspects. I meant to have said more about Christ's work upon our sins, considered under the same three aspects. But let me just, very briefly, touch upon them.

Jesus Christ, when trusted, will do for sin, as habit, what cannot be done without Him. He will give the motive to resist, which is lacking in the majority of cases. He will give the power to resist, which is lacking in all cases. He will put a new life and spirit into our nature which will strengthen and transform our feeble wills, will elevate and glorify our earthward trailing affections, will make us love that which He loves, and aspire to that which He is, until we become, in the change from glory to glory, reflections of the image of the Lord. As habit and as dominant power within us, nothing will cast out the evil that we have entertained in our hearts except the power of the life of Christ Jesus, in His Spirit dwelling within us and making us clean. When a strong man keeps his house, his goods are in peace, but when a stronger than he cometh he taketh from him all his implements in which he trusteth, and divideth his spoil. And so Christ has bound the strong man, in that one great sacrifice on the Cross. And now He comes to each of us, if we will trust Him, and gives motives, power, pattern, hopes, which enable us to cast out the tyrant that has held dominion over us. If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

And I tell all of you, especially you young men and women, who presumably have noble aspirations and desires, that the only way to conquer the world, the flesh, and the devil, is to let Christ clothe you with His armour; and let Him lay His hand on your feeble hands whilst you aim the arrows and draw the bow, as the prophet did in the old story, and then you will shoot, and not miss. Christ, and Christ alone, within us will make us powerful to cast out the evil.

In like manner, He, and He only, deals with sin, considered as guilt. Here is the living secret and centre of all Christ's preciousness and power--that He died on the Cross; and in His spirit, which knew the drear desolation of being forsaken by God, and in His flesh, which bore the outward consequences of sin, in death as a sinful world knows it, bare our sins and carried our sorrows, so that by His stripes we are healed.

If you will trust yourselves to the mighty Sacrifice, and with no reservation, as if you could do anything, will cast your whole weight and burden upon Him, then the guilt will pass away, and the power of sin will be broken. Transgressions will be buried--covered, as the original of my text has it--as with a great mound piled upon them, so that they shall never offend or smell rank to heaven any more, but be lost to sight for ever.

Christ can take away the barrier reared by sin between God and the human spirit. Solid and black as it stands, His blood dropped upon it melts away. Then it disappears like the black bastions of the aerial structures in the clouds before the sunshine. He hath opened for us a new and living way, that we might have access and confidence, and, sinners as we are, that we might dwell for ever more at the side of our Lord.

So, dear brother! whilst humanity cries--and I pray that all of us may cry like the Apostle, Oh, wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?--Faith lifts up, swift and clear, her ringing note of triumph, which I pray God or rather, which I beseech you that you will make your own, I thank God! I through Jesus Christ our Lord.