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

**PSALMS-063**. **FORGIVENESS AND RETRIBUTION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions."*

*Psalm 99:8*

When the prophet Isaiah saw the great vision which called him to service, he heard from the lips of the seraphim around the Throne the threefold ascription of praise: Holy! holy! holy! Lord God of hosts. This psalm seems to be an echo of that heavenly chorus, for it is divided into three sections, each of which closes with the refrain, He is holy, and each of which sets forth some one aspect or outcome of that divine holiness. In the first part the holiness of His universal dominion is celebrated; in the second, the holiness of His revelations and providences to Israel, His inheritance; in the third, the holiness of His dealings with them that call upon His name, both when He forgives their sins and when He scourges for the sins that He has forgiven.

Two remarks of an expository character will prepare the way for what I have further to say. The first is that the word though in my text, which holds together the two statements that it contains, is commentary rather than translation. For the original has the simple and, and the difference between the two renderings is this, that though implies some real or apparent contrariety between forgiveness and taking vengeance, which makes their co-existence remarkable, whereas and lays the two things down side by side. The Psalmist simply declares that they are both there, and puts in no such fine distinction as is represented by the words though, or but, or yet. To me it seems a great deal more eloquent in its simplicity and reticence that he should say, Thou forgavest them and tookest vengeance, than that he should say Thou forgavest them though Thou tookest vengeance.

Then there is another point to be noted, viz. we must not import into that word vengeance, when it is applied to divine actions, the notions which cluster round it when it is applied to ours. For in its ordinary use it means retaliation, inflicted at the bidding of personal enmity or passion. But there are no turbid elements of that sort in God. His retribution is a great deal more analogous to the unimpassioned, impersonal action of public law than it is to the wild justice of revenge. When we speak of His vengeance we simply mean--unless we have dropped into a degrading superstition--the just recompense of reward which divinely dogs all sin. There is one saying in Scripture which puts the whole matter in its true light, Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord; the last clause of which interprets the first. So, then, with these elucidations, we may perhaps see a little more clearly the sequence of the Psalmist's thought here--God's forgiveness, and co-existing with that, God's scourging of the sin which He forgives; and both His forgiveness and the scourging, the efflux and the manifestation of the divine holiness. Now just let us look at these thoughts. Here we have--

**I. The adoring contemplation of the divine forgiveness.**

I suppose that is almost exclusively a thought due to the historical revelation, through the ages, to Israel, crowned, as well as deepened, by the culmination and perfecting of the eternal revelation of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. I suppose the conception of a forgiving God is the product of the Old and of the New Testament. But familiar as the word is to us, and although the thing that it means is embodied in the creed of Christendom, I believe ... in the forgiveness of sins, I think that a great many of us would be somewhat put to it, if we were called upon to tell definitely and clearly what we mean when we speak of the forgiveness of sins. Many of us, prior to thinking about the matter, would answer the non-infliction or remission of penalty. And I am far from denying that that is an element in forgiveness, although it is the lowest and the most external, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament conception of it. But we must rise a great deal higher than that. We are entitled, by our Lord's teaching, to parallel God's forgiveness and man's forgiveness; and so perhaps the best way to understand the perfect type of forgiveness is to look at the imperfect types which we see round us. What, then, do we mean by human forgiveness? It is seen in multitudes of cases where there is no question at all of penalty. Two men get alienated from one another. One of them does something which the other thinks is a sin against friendship or loyalty, and he who is sinned against says, I forgive you. That does not mean that he does not inflict a penalty, because there is no penalty in question. Forgiveness is not a matter of conduct, then, primarily, but it is a matter of disposition, of attitude, or, to put it into a shorter word, it is a matter of the heart; and even on the lower level of the human type, we see that remission of penalty may be a part, sometimes is and sometimes is not, but is always the smallest part of it, and a derivative and secondary result of something that went before. An unconscious recognition of this attitude of mind and heart, as being the essential thing in forgiveness, brings about an instance of the process by which two words that originally mean substantially the same thing come to acquire each its special shade of meaning. What I refer to is this--when a judicial sentence on a criminal is remitted, we never hear any one speak about the criminal being forgiven. We keep the word pardon, in our daily conventional intercourse, for slight offences or for the judicial remission of a sentence. The king pardons a criminal; you never hear about the king forgiving a criminal. And that, as I take it, is just because people have been groping after the thought that I am trying to bring out, viz. that the remission of penalty is one thing, and purging the heart of all alienation and hatred is another; and that the latter is forgiveness, whilst the former has to be content with being pardon.

The highest type of forgiveness is the paternal. Every one of us who remembers our childhood, and every one of us who has had children of his own, knows what paternal forgiveness is. It is not when you put away the rod that the little face brightens again and the tears cease to flow, but it is when your face clears, and the child knows that there is no cloud between it and the father, or still more the mother, that forgiveness is realised. The immediate effect of our transgressions is that we, as it were, thereby drop a great, black rock into the stream of the divine love, and the channel is barred by our action; and God's forgiveness is when, as was the case in another fashion in the Deluge, the floods rise above the tops of the highest hills; and as the good old hymn that has gone out of fashion nowadays, says, over sins:

Like the mountains for their size,

The seas of sovereign grace arise.

When the love of God flows over the black rock, as the incoming tide does over some jagged reef, then, and not merely when the rod is put on the shelf, is forgiveness bestowed and received.

But, as I have said, the remission of penalty is an element in forgiveness. Some people say: It is a very dangerous thing, in the interests of Christian truth, to treat that relation of a loving Father as if it expressed all that God is to men. Quite so; God is King as well as Father. There are analogies, both in paternal and regal government, which help us to understand the divine dealings with us; though, of course, in regard to both we must always remember that the analogies are remote and not to be pressed too far. But even in recognising the fact that an integral part of forgiveness is remission of penalty, we come back, by another path, to the same point, that the essence of forgiveness is the uninterrupted flow of love. Remission of penalty;--yes, by all means. But then the question comes, what is the penalty of sin? And I suppose that the deepest answer to that is, separation from God. But if the true New Testament conception of the penalty of sin is the eternal death which is the result of the rending of a man away from the Source of life, then the remission of the penalty is precisely identical with the uninterrupted flow of the divine love. The mists of autumnal mornings drape the sky in gloom, and turn the blessed sun itself into a lurid ball of fire. Sweep away the mists, and its rays again pour out beneficence. The man who sins, piles up, as it were, a cloud-bank between himself and God, and forgiveness, which is the remission of the penalty, is the sweeping away of the cloud-bank, and the pouring out of sunshine upon a darkened heart. So, brethren! the essence of forgiveness is that God shall love me all the same, though I sin against Him.

But now turn, in the next place, to

**II. God's scourging of the sin which He forgives.**

Look at the instances in our psalm, Moses and Aaron among His priests... . They called upon the Lord and He answered them. Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and Thou tookest vengeance of their doings. Moses dies on Pisgah, Aaron is stripped of his priestly robes by his brother's hand and left alone amongst the clouds and the eagles, on the solitary summit of the mountain, and yet Moses and Aaron knew themselves forgiven the sins for which they died those lonely deaths. And these are but instances of what is universally true, that the sin which is pardoned is also avenged in the sense of having retribution dealt out to it.

I need not dwell upon this at any length, but let me just remind you how there are two provinces of human experience in which this is abundantly true: one, that of outward consequences, and another that of inward consequences. Take, for instance, two men, boon companions, who together have wasted their substance in riotous living. One of them is converted, as we call it, becomes a Christian, knows himself forgiven. The other one is not. Is the one less certain to have a corrugated liver than the other? Will the disease, the pauperism, the ruined position in life, the loss of reputation be any different in the cases of him who is pardoned and of him who is not? No; the two will suffer in a similar fashion, and the different attitude that the one has to the divine love from that which the other has, will not make a hair of difference as to the results that follow. The consequences are none the less divine retribution because they are the result of natural laws, and none the less penal because they are automatically inflicted.

There is another department in which we see the same law working, and that is the inward consequences. A man does change his attitude to his former sins, when he knows that he is pardoned; but the results of these sins will follow all the same, whether he is forgiven or not. Memory will be tarnished, habits will be formed and chain a man, capacities will be forfeited, weaknesses will ensue. The wounds may be healed, but the scars will remain, and when we consider how certainly, and as I said, divinely, such issues dog all manner of transgression, we can understand what the Psalmist meant when, not thinking about a future retribution, but about the present life's experiences, he said, Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions. The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold, therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing, and that will be his case whether he is forgiven, or not forgiven, by the divine love.

So, dear friends! do not let us confound the two things which are so widely separated, the flow of the divine love to us irrespective of our sins, which is the true forgiveness, and the remission of the penalty, the infliction of which may itself be a part of forgiveness. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap, and he will reap it whether he has sown darnel and tares and poisonous seeds, of which he is now ashamed, and for which he has received forgiveness, or whether he has not asked nor received it.

Only remember that if we humbly realise the great fact that God has forgiven us, we can, as they say, take our punishment in an altogether different spirit and temper, and it comes to be, not judicial penalty, but paternal chastisement, the token of love, and of which we can say that We are judged of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

Lastly, my text leads us to think of--

**III. Forgiveness and scourging as both issues of holy love.**

Some people, in their narrow and altogether superficial view of Christianity, would divide between the two, and say forgiveness comes from God's love, and scourging comes from His holiness. But this psalm puts the two together, just as we must put together as inseparable from each other the two conceptions of holiness and of love. Now our modern notions of what is meant by the love of God are a great deal too sentimental and gushing and limp. Love is degraded unless there be holiness in it. It becomes immoral good nature, much more than anything that deserves the name of love. A God who is all love, so much so that it makes no difference to Him whether a man is a saint or a sinner, is not a God to be worshipped, and scarcely a God to be admired. He is lower than we, not higher. But His holy love is like a sea of glass mingled with fire; the love being shot all through, as it were, with streams of flame.

This holy love underlies the forgiveness of sins. To forgive may sometimes be profoundly right; it may sometimes be profoundly immoral. A general gaol delivery simply sets the scoundrels free; a universal amnesty is a failure of justice, and a very doubtful benefit. But the forgiveness, which is the issue of holy love, is a means to an end, and the end which it has in view is that, drawn by answering love to a pardoning God, we may be drawn from the sins which alienate us from Him. There is no such sure way of making a man forsake his sins as to give him the assurance that God has forgiven them. Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, because of thy sins, when--I smite? no--I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done. Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and in the very act of forgiving, didst draw them from their sins.

That holy love, in like manner, underlies retribution. I have been speaking of retribution mainly as it is seen in the working of natural law. It is none the less God's act, because it is the operation of the laws which He impressed upon His creation at the beginning. You have weaving machines in your mills that whenever a thread breaks, stop dead. Is it the machine or the maker that is to get the credit of that? God has set us in an order of things wherein, and has given us a nature whereby, automatically, every sin, as it were, stops the loom, and every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward. But men sometimes say that is Nature; that is not God. God lies at the back of Nature, and works through Nature. Although Nature is not God, God is Nature. Therefore it is Thou that takest vengeance of their inventions. Let us, then, remember that retribution is a token of love, meant to drive us from our sins, just as forgiveness is meant to draw us from them. Our Psalmist had come the length of putting these two things together, forgiveness and retribution. We have reached further, and here is the New Testament enlargement and deepening and explanation of the Old Testament thought: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and in the very act, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.