

"WOE BECAUSE OF OFFENCES."

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When the Bible was translated into English, the word "offence" had a different meaning from that which is commonly given to it now. If you see a blind man groping his way with timid and hesitating steps, and lead him into broken and dangerous ground, so that he falls and is hurt,—by so doing, according to the old English expression, you cause him to "offend." It is exactly what is forbidden in one of the provisions of the Law of Moses, where it is said: "Thou shalt not put a stumbling-block before the blind, but shalt fear thy God." (Levit. xix. 14) Or if, when a young child is unsuspecting, you place something in his way which may throw him down and bruise him and fill him with fear, that stumbling-block, which you have cruelly placed there, is called, in the language of Scripture, an "offence."

Now apply this to spiritual things, and we see immediately the meaning of the word.—"Offences," in the spiritual sense, are the occasions of falling into sin—the stumbling-blocks of the soul. If any man misleads the ignorant into false doctrines or wicked practices,—whether it be done consciously and with deliberate intention as by the evil spirits and those who imitate them,—or whether it be "the blind leading the blind," so that they both "fall into the ditch,"—such conduct is an "offence." And if any man tempts a child into sin, or one who is like a child in simplicity or in weakness, it was of him that our Saviour spoke when He said (and the child whom He had called was standing there in the midst of the disciples). "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matt. xviii. 6.)

And then he proceeds to add, in reference to the whole world which He came to redeem:—"Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe unto that man by whom they come." (ib. 7.)—a threefold sentence of warning and of prophecy, which brings three subjects before our attention. 1. The misery of the world because of the offences or stumbling-blocks of the soul; 2. The inevitable necessity of the prevalence of these offences, and the existence of this misery; and, 3. The certain judgment which fall on those who place these hindrances in the way of the soul's progress from earth to heaven.

The misery of the world arises entirely

from sin. Everything that makes sin easier and more prevalent, increases the misery.—And nothing makes sin so easy or so prevalent, as the mutual example we set to each other, and the mutual encouragement we derive from each other. It may truly be said, that a very large portion of the life of most men is spent in affording to others the occasions of falling, and in fulfilling the prophetic words. "*Woe unto the world because of offences!*" I do not speak of open persecution—of deliberate attempts to corrupt the principles of others, or of the effects produced by flagrant examples of notorious profligacy; but rather of what takes place in the ordinary course of the world's proceedings. Take the world as it is, and view some of its ordinary features. Consider, for instance, some of the common distinctions—as of rich and poor—of educated and ignorant—those, on the one hand, who exercise influence on others—and those, on the other, who are influenced by the former. How do men use their wealth, their power, their talents, their knowledge? The answer is very easy. For the most part, they use them for themselves, without thinking of God. They use them not according to the principles of faith, but of unbelief.—And unbelief is the parent of all sin. Their life is a testimony against the necessity of faith. And so far as their temporal advantages or mental superiority may give them influence over others, so far their influence tends in the direction of sin.

Now this principle is evidently applicable to all ranks and all ages of life. For no man is quite without influence. Most men have more than they imagine. Wherever a man is placed, his conduct is an example to those around him. He cannot be worldly and selfish without doing harm. An ungodly habit of mind is a perpetual "offence:" and most men are ungodly. This is true everywhere. Neighbours in a village, children at a school, servants in a household, not only by persecution, by ridicule, by profaneness, but by the silent effect of indifference to religion—is it not too true that they continually cause each other to stumble and to fall?

But to see the extent of this woe and misery, "because of offences," it is useful to consider this influence, where it is strongest and most marked, by looking at the broad distinctions between man and man, which were alluded to before.

If a man is eminent for his professions or his power, he is closely observed by his