

The Cloud of Sin and Its Dispersal.

BY REV. ALEX. MACLAREN, D.D.

"I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thine iniquities: return unto Me; for I have redeemed thee."—Isa. xlv. 22.

The evangelical element in Old Testament prophecy reaches its clearest expression in this second part of Isaiah. As we know, the prophecy of the suffering Messiah is there so distinct that many portions of it read rather like history than prophecy, so minute and clear are the details.

And in like manner, nowhere else in the Old Testament does the glad assurance of forgiveness receive such clear, full, jubilant expression as here. One main purpose of Judaism was to print deeply on the conscience of Israel the idea of sin. And throughout the Old Testament that idea is grasped with a clearness and a boldness which the Bible in Isaiah's words that the farther thought, for which that consciousness of sin was only preparatory, and to which the promise of a Messiah led, has reached its loftiest clearness.

David, long before the words of my text were written, had in his prayer, "According to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." And Isaiah hears the plaintive notes sounding across the centuries, and catches them up and represents the divine voice as uttering a more abundant assurance than the Psalmist was able to expect, an answer which not only blots out the sins of the individual, but clears away, like a cloud from the heavens, the whole sin of the collective Israel. "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thine iniquities: return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee."

Now, in these great words there lie many very large and solemn and blessed thoughts, which I can scarcely venture to do more than glance at this morning.

I. Let me ask you, in the first place, to look at the first of these words, "I have redeemed thee." It is the most precious teaching as to the inmost nature of sin.

I refer especially here to the two words in which are employed here. That translated transgression, literally means "breach" or "rebellion," and that translated sin, "missing a mark." In these two words, the profound insight into what sin is in its inmost nature is most vividly expressed. Take the first of them. All sin is treacherous rebellion. That is to say, it has relation not only to a law, but to a Lawgiver. It is not merely a departure from that which is right, but a wilful defiance of God. It is not only a breach of the law, but it is an act of rebellion against a loving will which is in definite relations to man. And so it assumes a far graver and more serious aspect than when we think of it as merely being a breach of law, a transgression of duty, a want of conscience, or society, or public opinion, or expediency, or some abstract idea of morality. It is all these, but it is something much worse than these. The inmost recesses of the ugliness and wickedness of the wicked and ugly thing is this, that it throws into direct opposition to a loving person, and that all sin is rebellion.

And then, still further, the other word which is employed here conveys a profound and a tragic lesson. All sin misses the mark. The arrow is shot aside from the point to which it ought to be directed. That is to say, whoever transgresses against conscience and God, misses the true aim and scope of his life. Every sin is a deflection from that which ought to be the goal of all that we do.

And, more than this, not only does each transgression miss the true aim of life, but it also misses what it aims at. For no man ever gets, by his sin, what he expects, or if he gets it he gets something along with it that takes all the goodness out of it. There has been some bitter weed sown with the seed, which spoils the taste of the bread made from it.

So, my brother, every sin is a blunder, whether we consider the aim and end for which we were made, which is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever," or whether, even putting that out of consideration, we consider the purpose that we have in view when we do the wrong thing, which purpose we never accomplish by the wrong thing that we do.

All iniquity is stamped with this damning characteristic, it is rebellion against a loving will, an intention to offend Father. And all iniquity has that by which the irony of Providence, associated with it, that it is a blunder as well as a crime.

It is, so much, then, for the first thought that is here. Now let me ask you to look at the second, conveyed by the form in which this truth is given us, viz., the permanent record of sin.

"I have blotted out." That points, of course, to something that has been written, and which it promises shall be erased. It may be, perhaps, the idea rather of a stain which is covered and removed, but that I think is probably the other one, that the evil is written down somewhere. There is a book—call it a ledger—in which there is an account opened in your name, and all the sins are down on the debit side; or call it an indictment drawn against you, in which all your sins are chronicled and set forth; whichever of these two emblems be employed, either the debt or the indictments the figures remain the same. A book written; a permanent record of my evil doing.

Where is it written? Where, rather, is it not written? Written on characters, written to a very large extent even on circumstances, written above all in the calm, perfect memory of the all-just God. The book is written by ourselves, moment by moment, and day by day. We write with invisible ink, and it only needs to be held to the fire to flash up into legibility.

The story in the book of Daniel tells us that the king, when he could not slumber, had the records of the kingdom brought out and read them in the night-watches. And our King "that slumbereth not and sleepeth" in all the dark hours of our earthly night, has before him the written records of our deeds, and reads therein. That is to say, every one of these evanescent actions of mine, that flits across the field of vision and seems to disappear, it is all preserved and recorded.

The mistletoe fronds of the ferns and palm-like trees that grew on the earth millenniums before Adam, are embedded for us in our coal-measures; and the flakes into which the same may be parted are like the leaves of a book, which the botanist has spread them. So in God's great book, though all the greenness and the life may be out of what was once waving woods, and they be dried into a small space on the leaves of that book, as if grass on the rocks for ever, all our actions are recorded, themselves, and abide for ever.

And there is contained further in this metaphor not only the thought of the per-

manence of the record, but also that the permanent record brings with it the burden of guilt and debt. I said the image is an indictment, and that is the burden of guilt. Take it either way, the suggestion that comes out of the words is the same; the very being that all of us carry a permanent weight of obligation un-discharged; that we are very guilty before God. That is to say, God has a book, a book concerning each of us, the knowledge of our past actions is accompanied in the divine Mind with a judgment concerning us. The judgment is passed already; a judgment concerning us, and his actions towards us are modified by the facts of our moral nature.

And there is another thought still, on which I do not more than touch. I read in the last book of scripture, "The dead were judged out of the books according to their works." So, then, this writing, which is alluded to in my text, is to be produced on a day in open court, and spread out before the "pure eyes and perfect judgment" that comes from heaven. You have to take your portion of the great blessing by the simple act and exercise of faith in Jesus Christ. Then it becomes your portion, your name may remain unrecorded. And although it be true that he bore upon the cross, and bore away by the cross, the sins of the whole world, your sin may remain unborne away. Trust your sinful soul to Christ, then your rebellion will be recorded, and that it has the pardon which it takes from him.—Christian Commonwealth.

III. Now there is another thought, and that is the damning power of sin. "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud," says the text.

When the cloud draws its veil over the heavens, the sunshine and the blue are shut out from a man's eye, and all the flowers and the birds cease to sing. So says Isaiah, like a misty veil drawn across the face of the heavens are man's sins. That emblem has a double truth in it, viz., that every evil deed tends to obscure and hide from us the face of God; and also that every evil deed tends to "blot out" the reception of the blessings that come down from above.

Take these two thoughts for a moment. Our only way of knowing God is by sympathy, and conformity. We do not see him; we cannot find our way up to him by reason and inference. We know only him by being in harmony with him, and by being like him. As some light film of cloud, scarcely visible, may hide the night stars, which vary in brightness; as the cloud rack, which only we know to be there by its shining light, sweeps across the heavens, so a slight, but unsuspected, film of evil may float vaporously between us and God and dim his face.

The heart that is addicted to evil, that is in love with sin, that is clogged and burdened with guilt, has lost the capacity of discerning the true nature of God, and of near him. His name is not welcome; the idea of him is not pleasant; we are neither willing nor able when we are plunged in our selfishness and sinfulness, to cherish the purifying thought of our loving Father.

As a cloud darkens the heavens, the mist of sin darkens the vision of God. As our sky, and blots out all the starry intentions of our spirit and drapes the face of God himself in a blackness that can be felt. The blessing of the pure in heart is seen to God.

Order, quietness, neatness, pleasant words and ways, will do more to keep the family circle full and the firelight of the heart-robe bright than all the treasures that riches alone can bring. On the other hand, the slovenly home and the slattern in that home can accomplish more in the least of ways, with a little more of darkening the ruddy light of home-life than all other causes combined.

And, in like manner, all evil-robe men of the capacity to receive the highest blessing from above. The cloud is drawn across the sky, the sunlight cannot get to the earth. In the same way, the sin that darkens the ruddy light of home-life, and all other causes combined.

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out thy transgressions." Because Isaiah could also proclaim: "The punishment of our people was upon thee, because thou art iniquitous. The mystery of forgiveness is explained, so far as man is capable of understanding, or needs an explanation by the mystery of the cross. And because "Christ has borne our sins in his own body on the tree," therefore God has blotted them all out.

Now, dear brethren, mark this, that this removal of sin, in all its aspects and powers, is regarded in my text as a past accomplished fact. It is not set forth as contingent upon the man's return, but as the result of his return. "I have redeemed thee, therefore come back to me," not "Come back to me that I may redeem thee," but in confident assured gladness of this fact that all sin is forgiven, come back and claim your portion in the universal amnesty which has been proclaimed and sealed the cross.

"Because iniquity and transgression are pardoned, come back," is the invitation that comes from heaven. You have to take your portion of the great blessing by the simple act and exercise of faith in Jesus Christ. Then it becomes your portion, your name may remain unrecorded. And although it be true that he bore upon the cross, and bore away by the cross, the sins of the whole world, your sin may remain unborne away. Trust your sinful soul to Christ, then your rebellion will be recorded, and that it has the pardon which it takes from him.—Christian Commonwealth.

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show. Looks like the wind's again to blow. Come across that hill—Well! I never!"

Old Rackback was not in favor of live-to-live movements, but Jack in his anxiety to do something in the way of game did not object to a slow ride. Reaching towards noon the little town about eight miles from Farmer Snow's he procured the medicine which he fastened securely in an inner pocket. Striking out on his return he varied his course a little, still in the hope of finding something in the way of fresh meat.

He could go back to the poor little kilt with a model of anything for legs, to taste delicate corn-meal and beans and bacon. I do believe 'twould do 'em more good than all the medicine," he said, as he rounded the head of a slough, and struck into a hazel thicket through which were scattered some trees of scrub oak. He wondered about this for some time without a chance for a shot, and was about to give up and turn homeward, when a crackling branch at some little distance attracted his attention. And his very heart stood still as through an opening in the bushes he caught sight of the hairy hide of some large animal.

"Cow! so it can't be a cow—it's too bold. And it ain't a horse neither—he held his breath as he drew cautiously nearer, and—then, only a hunter can imagine the sensations with which he beheld a deer, whose legs he saw protrude with its white asters within fair range of his gun. Quick as thought Jack fired and it fell.

In a whirl of surprise and delight at this his first deer, the boy leaped from his horse and drew his knife, ran and set his foot on the animal's nose. He felt like a flash of lightning the deer sprang to its feet, knocking down the knife. Jack grasped him by one of his horns, whereupon he made desperate lunges to get away, while Jack hung on with all his strength. At length, thoroughly enraged, the buck turned upon his money, trying to force him under his feet. Falling in this he reared and struck at Jack with his fore feet, his sharp hoofs tearing his clothes to rags and inflicting some scratches upon his chest and arms.

With a shriek he fell by desperation Jack tried to work his way towards the tree which stood near, still holding on to the horns for his life. Presently he let go and dived towards it. The deer followed in hot pursuit, striking at him with his asters from which he received several ugly blows, the last of which he felt as if he had been struck by a sledge hammer. He tried to get away, but his horns were caught in a bush, and he was forced to retreat. "Bones, siccum! Here good dog—siccum! siccum!" Bones had never been noted for courage, but was stimulated by Jack's cries to make an attack upon the heels of the deer, who quickly turned upon his new foe, when Bones dropped his all in the way of his legs and beat an inglorious retreat. Jack had tried to improve the interval by rushing for his gun, but had barely grasped it when the buck again jumped towards him. He swung himself into the small tree where his antagonist stood guard, while Jack, who had been watching him, tried to work his way towards the tree which stood near, still holding on to the horns for his life. Presently he let go and dived towards it. The deer followed in hot pursuit, striking at him with his asters from which he received several ugly blows, the last of which he felt as if he had been struck by a sledge hammer. He tried to get away, but his horns were caught in a bush, and he was forced to retreat.

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Trixie and Mrs. Roberts. Mrs. Roberts, however, called her name Mrs. Roberts. Nina showed her in the parlor, and then went upstairs to help Mrs. Roberts who was dressing as fast as she could. Trixie, who was standing in the room, looking at pictures.

"It is Mrs. Roberts, ma'am," said Nina. "Oh, bother!" sighed Mrs. Roberts; "she always stays so long; and dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

"Trixie put down her book, and leaving the room, went slowly down stairs, and finally stopped at the parlor door. Mamma had often told her not to go in there without permission; but this naughty little girl, dearly loved to have her own way; and so she stood there she said to herself, 'I never saw the lady before; I should like to see her more fully if I could go and talk to her till my mamma's roomed down.' So in the event, when Mrs. Roberts saw her, she said: 'Well, well! whose little girl is this? Come and sit in my lap, and give me a sweet, sweet kiss. Now, little girl, what is your name?'

"Oh, ma'am, my name is Trixie, and I am four years old next September."

"Dear me, how dreadfully old you are getting to be sure! What will you do when you are four?'

"Trixie thought hard for a minute, and then said: 'I think I'll keep a card-table and play cards, ma'am; because Dick likes to play cards.'"

"Who's Dick? Your cousin?'

"Trixie's brown eyes opened wide, and such an absurd look crept over her little face. 'I think you are not a very good lady to call my Dick a cousin. I want to get down.'"

"Oh, what a minute," said Mrs. Roberts. 'I know who Dick is now; he is your little cousin; his name is Dicky Bradford, and his mamma lives in the second house from this one. I have just called on her.'"

"Oh, yes, Trixie, and did you stay a very long time?'

"Oh, no, only a little while."

"Is your going to stay a long time here?'

"I don't know. Do you want me to stay, Trixie?'

"Because my mamma does not want you. When Nina told her you were coming, she said (puckering up her small face, and looking so, so cross) 'Bones! she always stays so long; and then she said something about dinner.' Trixie looked puzzled by a minute, and then she said: 'I think I'll guess it was that you had better not try to stay to dinner. Oh, here's my mamma! Mamma—running to meet her—Mrs. Roberts isn't going to stay to dinner, and she isn't going to stay a long time either. Trixie was quite right. Mrs. Roberts did not stay a long time; but it was a very long time before she came to see mamma again.'—Advance.

The World's Verdict. Vice in rags is one thing in this world, and vice in diamonds another. One who, if he were but poor and unknown, would be considered with contempt, has his name cordially forgiven him by society; if he is the possessor of millions.

The world's verdict is generally a favorable one for the sinner, if from that sinner there is something to be got—if he has the power, to give, or to throw money into the hands of the poor, or to give great dinners, parties and drown his guests in champagne.

This is the secret of it all; the rich and powerful people are useful. Society does not love them more. Society loves no one; but it uses to love a man who is rich. It will say "black is white; rather than do that, and cry out that it is 'only her way' when the woman in power commits a folly for which they would banish a helpless sinner from their ranks.

Heaven forbid that we should not all be merciful, but it is not a man who is really tender to the poor and helpless, and very severe to the rich and powerful. But this is what society is.