

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF PSALMS.

PSALM LI. 4.

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
And done that which is evil in thy sight:
That thou mayest be justified when thou speakest,
And be clear when thou judgest.

1. ACCORDING to the very old tradition preserved in the headings of the Psalms, these words are part of a song of heart-stricken penitence, drawn from David's soul when 'Nathan the prophet came unto him' (2 S 12^d), and said unto him, 'Thou art the man.' When the awful conviction once made its way into his inner being, it would thus appear that its prompt result was a cry of woe, shame, and repentance, addressed direct to God. It was borne in upon him with an ineffable consciousness that, while he had sinned, and sinned tremendously, against Bathsheba and against Uriah, and also against every soul that could ever be stumbled by that great crime wrought by God's servant, he had first and in the deepest respect sinned against God. So deeply, so supremely, had he aggrieved Him, that the other aspects of the offence were swallowed up, in a sense, in this: 'Against thee, thee only.'

2. Never, perhaps, were words uttered which expressed more simply, yet at the same time more fully, the entire substance of genuine contrition. Accordingly this Fifty-first Psalm has been adopted by the Christian Church as the most adequate exponent of her religious feeling in penitential seasons. And yet it is no mere liturgy for days of humiliation, not a mere penitential psalm designed to guide the devotions of sorrow-stricken sinners to the end of time, not simply a Miserere, as we call it in our technical way of speaking; certainly it is all this, but it is much more, even the real utterance, the genuine outpouring, of a broken and contrite heart. It is this that gives the Psalm its special value as an expression of penitential feeling. One feels assured that its author is thoroughly in earnest; that he is not describing the mental condition of an imaginary penitent; that he has not, so to speak, thrown himself into an attitude, for the sake of producing a hymn for the use of repentant sinners. Surely these touching words are the outgrowth of true and bitter experience. The Psalmist describes that which he has himself

felt, and that which he felt was the natural fruit of that which he had himself done.

The text falls easily into two divisions, and we shall deal with it under these headings—

I. The Sinner's Conviction of Sin.

II. God's Justification in the Punishment of Sinners.

I.

THE SINNER'S CONVICTION OF SIN.

Men may be roughly classified into three groups: those who have little sense of sin, those who think of it chiefly as an inconvenience caused to their friends and neighbours, and those who have been compelled to recognize that it is a paramount offence against God. It is not easy to say whether the first or the second class is the more numerous, for the frontier between them wavers. Those who belong to the third class often find themselves in a minority, but they, at least, stand upon the threshold of a new life. The writer of the Psalm before us is their type and spokesman.

1. In considering this text, the most salient point, among many which strike one, is that the speaker has a deep and practical sense of the reality of sin. Let us for a moment contrast the attitude of the Psalmist with that which too many of us are at times disposed to assume. See how he tears away the veil, and lays bare the truth to the eye of God and man. See, on the other hand, how easy men find it to slide into the comfortable assurance that their own case is not so bad after all, that it admits of palliation, that they are no worse than their neighbours, no worse than other men of their own age, position, or calling, or that an equitable judgment must be pronounced over them, which shall take account of their whole lives, balancing the fancied good against the real evil. Now, one of the most fertile sources of this terrible hallucination is the want of a real, true sense of the reality of sin, and the want of a clear perception of the reality of moral evil, of demerit, and of wrong-doing.

This want of a clear perception of moral evil may take various shapes and spring from various causes. For example, we sometimes encounter philosophical speculations which go to the practical denial of all moral evil. It is

argued that man is a complicated piece of mechanism, an automaton, so to speak, which, placed in given circumstances, will inevitably produce ascertained results; or again, that what we call moral evil is incidental to an imperfect creature gradually struggling onwards and upwards to perfection, the growing pains, in fact, which belong to moral progress. I will not stop to consider such theories now: it is enough to say that they are not only inconsistent with the very foundations of Christianity, but utterly subversive of common morality.¹

2. The peculiar accent put upon sin by this inspired penitent denotes a man who had hitherto possessed a keen, lifelong sense of God. If we are repelled by what we may choose to call a tone of exaggeration in this self-abasing phraseology, it is obvious that we are dominated by the apathy of an ignorant, primitive heathenism, possibly even by a temper of rank atheism. The foul, insidious leaven of an old-world superstition often secretes itself within our hearts, when the rude obsolete images of our forefathers have gone into museums. The tendency to shift the centres of obligation from the heavenly into the earthly spheres, to hustle the Divine throne into a land of oblivion, and put the expediences of modern high life upon the horizon, is a note of that unspiritual temper with which the grosser Gentile idolatries took their rise. There can be no surer mark of this bias than to say the wrong of sin begins and ends with the person against whom it is committed. Man's rights are of transcendent importance, but for the obvious reason that God is above, around, and within man; and if you eliminate God, you take all life and strength out of obligation, and make it powerless to bind.

The bill of sin has not wholly been paid when reparation has been made to our injured brethren, there is still God to reckon with. Suppose as a parent you heard of some wrong to your son, and when you spoke to the one who inflicted the wrong he should retort: 'What has it to do with you, the dispute is between your son and myself, not with you?' I fancy you would reply with indignation, even if your son was partly to blame, 'He who hurts my son, hurts me.' Nay, some would more strongly affirm, 'You have struck my son—no, not my son, but me.' God is our Great Father, and every wrong against man is also a wrong inflicted upon Him. This can also be applied to national and social evils. Wrong to the weaker sections of humanity is a wrong permitted or committed against God. James Russell Lowell states it succinctly in those well-known lines:

His true to God who's true to man;
Wherever wrong is done,
To the humblest and the weakest,
'Neath the all-beholding sun.²

¹ W. B. Jones, *The Peace of God*, 34.

² Ernest F. Drew.

3. The evil of sin consists chiefly in its being committed against God. This fact is brought home to our hearts if we consider the following points.

(1) *God is our Maker.*—Here is the highest obligation of which we can form a conception. 'Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?' With equal absurdity would he say to his Creator, 'Why dost Thou command me thus?' We who are parents claim the right to command our children; and when they disobey, we place the main point of their offending in simple disobedience. We lay our prohibitions upon them in things which they already know to be wrong; and when they transgress, the burden of our indignation rests on their disregard of our mandate. But what is our boasted right to command them, compared with God's right to command us? And what is the aggravation of violating a parent's authority, compared with that of rebellion against the Eternal Father of our spirits?

(2) *God sustains us.*—In His hand our breath is, and His are all our ways. From the dawn of our existence to this hour, He has been mindful of us, with more than a parent's tender care. Amid countless dangers, He has cast His shield about us. When one has fallen on our right hand and another on our left, He has said unto us, Live. Each breath we draw thus increases our obligation to obey Him. To break His commands to-day is a greater sin than it was yesterday. To break them to-morrow will be a still deeper crime.

(3) *He has compassed us with countless blessings.*—The earth itself is made for man. For us, it is beautiful with flowers and verdure. For us, it yields its increase. To us are given the beasts of the field, the fowls of heaven, and the fish of the sea. For us, the rivers flow, the oceans roll, the clouds distil, and the seasons keep their appointed times. His sun is made to light us by day, His moon and stars by night. To shield us from cold, He has provided raiment—from heat, a shade—from storms, a shelter. He has constituted us social beings—with tongues that can speak—with ears that can discriminate—with hearts that can sympathize. Verily He hath done all things well for us. And shall we deny our obligations to keep His commandments?

(4) *He has prepared a heaven for our eternal home.*—His purposes for men's good are great and

glorious, like His own infinite goodness. He who is the angels' Lord and our Brother, hath said, 'In my Father's house are many mansions'; and He invites us to a residence where are joys which 'eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.' It is the abode of His own infinite blessedness—the palace of His glory—the home of holy angels.

II.

GOD'S JUSTIFICATION IN THE PUNISHMENT OF SINNERS.

If the Psalmist had wherewithal to accuse himself, and to excuse God, we have more. He sinned before the will of God was fully revealed, before the gospel was published, before the Holy Ghost was given, before God's terrible wrath at sin was thoroughly made known by the spectacle of His only Son dying upon the Cross to put it away, thus proving how hateful it was in His sight, before the Saviour had risen again to set the seal to the faith of His followers, before His ascension to His Father's right hand in triumph, before prophecies had been fulfilled, before the universal spread of the gospel, in spite of all opposition and every obstacle, had carried conviction to the minds of men that it was of God, before the holy influence it was found to have upon the nations who received it gave token of the holy source from which it was derived. Before all these events had come to pass it was that David sinned; in comparative darkness, therefore, in comparative weakness and frailty, in comparative lack of God's helping hand to keep him up. Yet even he felt that he could set up no sufficient defence of himself; he could not but feel that he had light enough to have lived far otherwise than he had done; and he acknowledged therefore that God would be justified in visiting him with His wrath and His vengeance, and would be clear of all blame in so doing were He to be judged. But if it were so with the Psalmist, how will it be with us, on whom the ends of the world are come, and from whom dimness hath been all removed?

1. In the first place, here we are alive this day, after having offered God provocations to cut us down many a time, for many a year. Surely if God had smitten us down long ago, none amongst us could have said He was hasty, none amongst us could have accused Him of a want of forbearance

in so dealing with us. Ask your consciences to bear witness against you for the wilful ways in which you had set God's wrath at nought, in divers manners, in times past, and see whether you have not reason to wonder that you are alive to call those sins to remembrance to-day. We are living under the government of the same God whose heavy wrath fell upon the sinners in the wilderness, and slew them whilst the meat was *yet in their mouth*—that is, not tarrying at all. And yet, here we are, after having tempted God to strike over and over again, here we are alive and well this day, spared after all. No man amongst us, therefore, can pretend to set up this defence for himself at the judgment of God, if God should one of these days *suddenly* call him to it, that he had not time given him. God had given him time, till He was tired of giving him more, when He saw it wasted and abused. And as he would not redeem *time*, He would make him rue the *eternity*; and in this, surely, is God justified, and clear when He is judged.

We have known Him under sublime epithets, but they have not moved us. Everlasting, infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent—all these great words have been applied to God, but they do not move us. They touch our admiration; sometimes they kindle our fancy, and send us poetizing and speculating without profit. But when we come to forbearance—power to strike, yet unwillingness to do so; when we come to questions that are full of agony; when we see God disappointed, grieved with us, and yet withholding judgment—we cannot but feel that the book which reveals such a God is a good book.¹

2. In the next place, we dwell in a land where a great light shines. No man whose birthplace is England can plead against God that He is exacting of him a Christian course without giving him opportunities of Christian knowledge—that He is demanding bricks without giving straw. God has provided the people with churches to go to, and promised His special blessing on the two or three that shall be gathered together in them. God has provided ministers to preach the Word and to lead the prayers of the people in those churches. God has provided Bibles in abundance, printed in our mother tongue. God has provided Sacraments—the one the covenanted mode of the spiritual birth, the other the covenanted mode of spiritual food and sustenance after that birth. Opportunities of receiving knowledge and grace, and growing in knowledge and grace, God has afforded to all

¹ Joseph Parker, *Studies in Texts*, 95.

whose lot it is to be born in this land; and if any at doom's-day perish by reason of their lack of knowledge, it is not God that is to blame but themselves. He will still be justified in His saying, and clear when He is judged.

Sin is contradiction, not misinformation. Not merely lack of knowledge, but, as we see every day, it is committed in defiance of knowledge, the act of sheer wilfulness. It is a deliberate assertion of ourselves as against the supreme law which we perfectly understand.¹

There is a great truth underlying that Persian allegory which tells of two youths who at death found themselves in the eternal world. One of them was met by a fearsome hag from whom he recoiled with horror, the other by a beautiful maiden who led him through the gates of paradise to the fairest scenes and sweetest enjoyment. Who were these? each youth asked, and to each the answer came: 'I am your *self* as you have formed it and sent it on before you.' The 'true thing' which we need most of all to 'think on' in this relation is that we are each one forming ourselves as we shall find ourselves in the hereafter, and as we shall be able to act in the life thereof. The 'true hereafter' is that which we make for ourselves.

Sculptors of life we are as we stand
With our souls uncarved before us,
Waiting the hour when at God's command
Our life-dream passes o'er us.

If we carve it then on the yielding stone,
With many a sharp incision,
Its heavenly beauties shall be our own,
Our lives that angel-vision.²

3. In the third place, we have not only time given us to turn to God *in*, and opportunities of knowledge given us to turn to God *by*, but, as if God would not be hindered in serving and saving us if it were possible, He has put a *conscience* in every one of us—a conscience which must make itself felt sometimes, even by the man who thinks least about the value of his time and neglects every opportunity of knowledge. No one who has a conscience can justly say God has abandoned him and left him to himself, and that his ruin (if ruined he is) is not of his own seeking. His conscience is, in fact, God within him, telling him what to do and what to forbear doing. It is true a man may persevere in resisting the warnings of conscience from within till its voice will be lifted up no more, conscience being dead; but it must be a long and desperate course of sin that will effect this. And still, in such a case, it is not God that must be blamed for such a man's hardness of

¹ W. L. Watkinson, *The Ashes of Roses*, 10.

² W. L. Walker, *The True Christ*, 221.

heart and deadness to all spiritual concerns and consequent everlasting perdition, but a man's self. God will be justified in His saying, and clear when He is judged.

The greatest treasure a man can have is a good conscience. Whether our lives be crowned with material success does not depend upon our souls, and is beyond our foreseeing; but the crown of life, which is the crown of righteousness, is within every man's winning. It may go with riches or it may not, it may go with pain or it may not, it may go with power or it may not; but it is more precious than all those together, and will last when they have all faded away. No man need fear to look his fellows in the face, no man need shrink from the hardest duty, if he has so lived as to possess a good conscience. No man need be afraid of persecution or desertion at the hands of his fellows, nor need he quail for sorrow and affliction, if conscience be on his side. He need not fear to die, or to stand at God's Judgment Bar with this fast and weighty ally. Happy is the man who, like Bunyan's Pilgrim, has made a tryst with conscience to meet him at the river and to accompany him across, for, when in this life, or in that which is to come, a good conscience says, 'Well done,' it is the voice of the Judge Himself.³

4. In the last place, we have all had *warnings* enough in the circumstances about us and the events of our lives, which preach to us in a manner that must make a deaf man hear—warnings enough to acquit God of taking us by surprise if He should cast us off. Our friends have died, we ourselves have been sick, and our fortunes have been shaken, our hopes have been frustrated, our views blasted, our dependence upon man, whose breath is in his nostrils, has been found a vain thing; God has tried in every way to weaken our confidence in earth and all that belongs to it, and to convince us that the fashion thereof passeth away, and to lead us by the hand to other and higher hopes—to mansions not made with hands, to the Kingdom that Christ hath purchased for us by His blood, which endureth throughout all ages. And if these warnings are still of no avail, and we regard them without laying them to heart, still the fault is our own, not God's: He is justified in His saying by providing such warnings, and clear when He is judged.

In all human judgments there are things we can dispute, elements of misconception on which we can fasten for our relief, a lack of fine equitable balance which becomes the raw material of our makeshift consolations. But in the judgment of Divine love there is nothing to be challenged, not the least oversight on which a man can fasten and think himself something midway between a martyr and a male-

³ John Watson, *Respectable Sins*, 183.

factor. The verdict upon which it rests is inevitable, and the sentence which follows is stamped with hopeless, indisputable finality.¹

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Recent Biblical and Oriental Archaeology.

BY THE REV. A. H. SAYCE, D.D., LL.D., PROFESSOR OF ASSYRIOLOGY
 IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD.

DR. LANGDON is indefatigable. We have hardly finished digesting his book on *Tammuz and Istar* when a new and elaborate work of his on the early Sumerian texts of Babylonia makes its appearance. This forms the thirty-first volume of the records of the 'Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania,' and contains some interesting and important historical and religious texts from the library of Nippur, which was destroyed in the Abrahamitic age (*Historical and Religious Texts from the Temple Library of Nippur*, Munich, 1914). They have been copied by Dr. Langdon partly in America and partly in Constantinople.

The place of honour is naturally given to a Sumerian poem from which we learn that the reign of the famous Naram-Sin lasted only seven years, and that it ended in misfortune, perhaps at the hands of a usurper. As two reigns at least intervened between those of Sargon (3800 B.C.) and of Naram-Sin the statement of Nabonidos that he was the 'son' of Sargon must be understood in the sense of 'descendant.' It would seem that he was the last of Sargon's race. The poem is followed by two 'Lamentations'—the prototype of the Lamentations of Jeremiah—over the destruction of the cities of Kesh and Nippur at the hands of the Kurdish tribes, and at a much later day of Ur by the Elamites. Dr. Langdon is doubtless right in concluding that the first event ushered in the rule of the dynasty of Gutium or Kurdistan, though in giving a list of the kings of the dynasty he has included a prince who lived about a century before its commencement. The Lamentation over the

fall of Ur alludes to the capture by the Elamites of the last king of the dynasty of Ur.

Among the other texts edited and translated by Dr. Langdon is an interesting ode on the coronation of King Dungi of Ur (about 2500 B.C.), an early model of what such effusions ought to be. Another interesting text, which is unfortunately only a mere fragment, is the 'Lament of a Sumerian Job,' of which the burden is that 'a man of desolation am I.' It is the earliest prototype of the Biblical book of Job yet discovered, and exemplifies once more how dependent Semitic literature was upon the older culture of Sumer. The Assyriologist may be pardoned if at times he wonders whether there was anything really original in it.

Dr. Langdon concludes his work with translations of some Semitic texts. One of these is a tablet containing part of the Code of Khammurabi specially made for the law-courts of Nippur, and possibly anterior to the standard edition of the Code. Two others are medical texts which, as might be expected, contain more magic than medicine. They are full of curious terms and names of plants and stones which Dr. Langdon has made valorous efforts to identify. The signification of the plant-names, however, must be settled rather by botany than by philology. Personally I am very sceptical as to the success of the attempts made by German scholars in this direction.

Dr. Langdon is one of the best living Sumerian scholars, and his translations of these difficult texts represent the high-water mark of what can be done