

SORROW ACCORDING TO GOD

[The First Stage on the Road to Being Saved]



A sermon by Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910). He was pastor of Union Chapel in Manchester, England for 45 years; there he became known as ‘the prince of expository preachers.’

“Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation, not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death” - 2 Cor 7:10.

Very near the close of his missionary career the Apostle Paul summed up his preaching as being all directed to enforcing two points, ‘Repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.’ These two, repentance and faith, ought never to be separated in thought, as they are inseparable in fact. True repentance is impossible without faith, true faith cannot exist without repentance.

Yet the two are separated very often, even by earnest Christian teachers. The tendency of this day is to say a great deal about faith, and not nearly enough in proportion

about repentance; and the effect is to obscure the very idea of faith, and not seldom to preach 'Peace! Peace! when there is no peace.' A gospel which is always talking about faith, and scarcely ever talking about sin and repentance, is denuded, indeed, of some of its most unwelcome characteristics, but is also deprived of most of its power, and it may very easily become an ally of unrighteousness, and an indulgence to sin. The reproach that the Christian doctrine of salvation through faith is immoral in its substance derives most of its force from forgetting that 'repentance towards God' is as real a condition of salvation as is 'faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.' We have here the Apostle's deliverance about one of these twin thoughts. We have three stages – the root, the stem, the fruit; sorrow, repentance, salvation. But there is a right and a wrong kind of sorrow for sin. The right kind breeds repentance, and thence reaches salvation; the wrong kind breeds nothing, and so ends in death.

Let us then trace these stages, not forgetting that this is not a complete statement of the case, and needs to be supplemented in the spirit of the words which I have here already quoted, by the other part of the inseparable whole, 'faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ.'

I. First, then, consider the true and the false sorrow for sin.

The apostle takes it for granted that a recognition of our own evil, and a consequent penitent regretfulness, lie at the foundation of all true Christianity. Now, I do not insist upon any uniformity of experience in people, any more than I should insist that all their bodies should be of one shape or of one proportion. Human lives are infinitely different, human dispositions are subtly varied, and because

neither the one nor the other are ever reproduced exactly in any two people, therefore the religious experience of no two souls can ever be precisely alike.

We have no right to ask – and much harm has been done by asking - for an impossible uniformity of religious experience, any more than we have a right to expect that all voices shall be pitched in one key, or all plants flower in the same month, or after the same fashion. You can print off as many copies as you like, for instance, of a drawing of a flower on a printing-press, and they shall all be alike, petal for petal, leaf for leaf, shade for shade; but no two hand-drawn copies will be so precisely alike, still less will any two of the real buds that blow on the bush. Life produces resemblances with differences; it is machinery that makes facsimiles.

So we insist on no pedantic or unreal uniformity; and yet, whilst leaving the widest scope for divergences of individual character and experience, and not asking that a man all diseased and blotched with the leprosy of sin for half a lifetime, and a little child that has grown up at its mother's knee, 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,' and so has been kept 'innocent of much transgression,' shall have the same experience; yet Scripture, as it seems to me, and the nature of the case do unite in asserting that there are certain elements which, in varying proportions indeed, will be found in all true Christian experience, and of these an indispensable one – and in a very large number, if not in the majority of cases, a fundamental one – is this which my text calls 'godly sorrow.'

Dear brethren, surely a reasonable consideration of the facts of our conduct and character point to that as the attitude that becomes us. Does it not? I do not charge you with crimes in the eye of the law. I do not suppose that

many of you are living in flagrant disregard of the elementary principles of common everyday morality. Some are, no doubt. There are, no doubt, unclean men here; there are some who eat and drink more than is good for them, habitually; there are, no doubt, men and women who are living in avarice and worldliness, and doing things which the ordinary conscience of the populace points to as faults and blemishes. But I come to you respectable people that can say: 'I am not as other men are, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican': and pray you, dear friends, to look at your character all round, in the light of the righteousness and love of God, and to plead to the indictment which charges you with neglect of many a duty and with sin against Him. How do you plead, 'guilty or not guilty, sinful or not sinful?' Be honest with yourselves, and the answer will not be far to seek.

Notice how my text draws a broad distinction between the right and the wrong kind of sorrow for sin. 'Godly sorrow' is, literally rendered, 'sorrow according to God,' which may either mean sorrow which has reference to God, or sorrow which is in accordance to His will; that is to say, which is pleasing to Him. If it is the former, it will be the later. I prefer to suppose that it is the former – that is, sorrow which has reference to God. And then, there is another kind of sorrow, which the Apostle calls the 'sorrow of the world,' which is devoid of that reference to God. Here we have the characteristic difference between the Christian way of looking at our own faults and shortcomings, and the sorrow of the world, which has got no blessing in it, and will never lead to anything like righteousness and peace. It is just this – one has reference to God, puts its sin by His side, sees its blackness relieved against the 'fierce light' of the Great White Throne, and the other has not that reference.

To expand that for a moment, - there are plenty of us who, when our sin is behind us, and its bitter fruits are in our hands, are sorry enough for our faults. A man that is lying in the hospital a wreck, with the sins of his youth gnawing the flesh off his bones, is often enough sorrow that he did not live more soberly and chastely and temperately in the past days. That fraudulent bankrupt who has not got his discharge and has lost his reputation, and can get nobody to lend him money enough to start him in business again, as he hangs about the streets, slouching in his rags, is sorry enough that he did not keep the straight road. The 'sorrow of the world' has no thought about God in it at all. The consequences of sin set many a man's teeth on edge who does not feel any compunction for the wrong that he did. My brethren, is that the position of any that are listening to me now?

Again, men are very often sorry for their conduct without thinking of it as sin against God. Crime means the transgression of man's law, wrong means the transgression of conscience's law, sin is the transgression of God's law. Some of us would perhaps have to say - 'I have done crime.' We are all of us quite ready to say: 'I have done wrong many a time'; but there are some of us who hesitate to take the other step, and say: 'I have done sin.' Sin has, for its correlative, God. If there is no God there is no sin. There may be faults, there may be failures, there may be transgressions, breaches of the moral law, things done inconsistent with man's nature and constitution, and so on; but if there be a God, then we have personal relations to that Person and His law; and when we break His law it is more than crime; it is more than fault; it is more than transgression; it is more than wrong; it is sin. It is when you lift the shutter off conscience, and let the light of God rush in upon your hearts and consciences, that you have

the wholesome sorrow that worketh repentance and salvation and life.

Oh, dear friends, I do beseech you to lay these simple thoughts to heart. Remember, I urge no rigid uniformity of experience or character, but I do say that unless a man has learned to see his sin in the light of God, and in the light to weep over it, he has yet to know 'the straight gate that leadeth unto life.'

I believe that a very large amount of the superficiality and easy-goingness of the Christianity of today comes just from this, that so many who call themselves Christians have never once got a glimpse of themselves as they really are. I remember once peering over the edge of the crater of Vesuvius, and looking down into the pit, all swirling with sulphurous fumes. Have you ever looked into your hearts, in that fashion, and seen the wreathing smoke and the flashing fire there? If you have, you will cleave to that Christ, who is your sole deliverance from sin.

But, remember, there is no prescription about depth or amount or length of time during which this sorrow shall be felt. If, on the one hand, it is essential, on the other hand there are a great many people who ought to be walking in the light and the liberty of God's Gospel who bring darkness and clouds over themselves by the anxious scrutinizing question: 'Is my sorrow deep enough?' Deep enough! What for? What is the use of sorrow for sin? To lead a man to repentance and to faith. If you have as much sorrow as leads you to penitence and trust you have enough. It is not your sorrow that is going to wash away your sin, it is Christ's blood. So let no man trouble himself about the question, Have I sorrow enough? The one question is: 'Has my sorrow led me to cast myself on Christ?'

II. **Still further, look now for a moment at the next stage here, ‘Godly sorrow worketh repentance.’**

What is repentance? No doubt many of you would answer that it is ‘sorrow for sin,’ but clearly this text of ours draws a distinction between the two. There are very few of the great key-words of Christianity that have suffered more violent and unkind treatment, and have been more obscured by misunderstandings, than this great word. It has been weakened down into penitence, which in the ordinary acceptance, means simply this emotion that I have already been speaking about, viz., a regretful sense of my own evil. And it has been still further docked and degraded, both in its syllables and in its substance, into *penance*. But the ‘repentance’ of the New Testament and of the Old Testament – one of the twin conditions of salvation – is neither sorrow for sin nor works of restitution and satisfaction, but it is, as the word distinctly expresses, a change of purpose in regard to the sin for which a man mourns. I cannot now expand and elaborate this idea as I should like, but let me remind you of one or two passages in Scripture which may show that the right notion of the word is not sorrow but changed attitude and purpose in regard to my sin.

We find passages, some of which ascribe and some deny repentance to the Divine nature. But if there be a repentance which is possible for the Divine nature, it obviously cannot mean sorrow for sin, but must signify a change of purpose. In the Epistle to the Romans we read, ‘The gifts and calling of God are without repentance,’ which clearly means without change of purpose on His part. And I read in the story of the mission of the Prophet Jonah, that ‘the Lord repented of the evil which He had said He would do unto them, and He did it not.’ Here,

again, the idea of repentance is clearly and distinctly that of a change of purpose. So fix this on your minds, and lay it on your hearts, dear friends, that the repentance of the New Testament is not idle tears nor the twitchings of a vain regret, but the resolute turning away of the sinful heart from its sins. It is 'repentance toward God,' the turning from the sin to the Father, and that is what leads to salvation. The sorrow is separated from the repentance in idea, however closely they may be intertwined in fact. The sorrow is one thing, and the repentance which it works is another.

Then notice that this change of purpose and breaking off of sin is produced by the sorrow for sin, of which I have been speaking; and that the production of this repentance is the main characteristic difference between the godly sorrow and the sorrow of the world. A man may have his paroxysms of regret, but the question is: Does it make any difference in his attitude? Is he standing, after the tempest of sorrow has swept over him, with his face in the same direction as before; or has it whirled him clean round, and set him in the other direction? The one kind of sorrow, which measures my sin by the side of the brightness and purity of God, vindicates itself as true, because it makes me hate my evil and turn away from it. The other, which is of the world, passes over me like the empty wind through an archway, it whistles for a moment and is gone, and there is nothing left to show that it was ever there. [It] comes like one of those brooks in tropical countries, dry and white for half the year, and then there is a rush of muddy waters, fierce but transient, and leaving no results behind. My brother! when your conscience pricks, which of these two things does it do? After the prick, is the word of command that your Will issues 'Right about face!' or is it 'As you were'? Godly sorrow worketh a change of attitude, pur-

pose, mind; the sorrow of the world leaves a man standing where he was. Ask yourselves the question: Which of the two are you familiar with?

Again, the true means of evoking true repentance is the contemplation of the Cross. Law and the fear of hell may startle into sorrow, and even lead to some kind of repentance. But it is the great power of Christ's love and sacrifice which will really melt the heart into true repentance. You may hammer ice to pieces, but it is ice still. You may bray a fool in a mortar, and his folly will not depart from him. Dread of punishment may pulverize the heart, but not change it; and each fragment, like the smallest bits of a magnet, will have the same characteristics as the whole mass. But 'the goodness of God leads to repentance,' as the prodigal is conquered and sees the true hideousness of the swine's trough, when he bethinks himself of the father's love. I beseech you to put yourselves under the influence of that great love, and look on that Cross till your hearts melt.

III. We come to the last stage here. Salvation is the issue of repentance. 'Godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation not to be repented of.'

What is the connection between repentance and salvation? Two sentences will answer the question. You cannot get salvation without repentance. You do not get salvation by repentance.

You cannot get the salvation of God unless you shake off your sin. It is no use preaching to a man, 'Faith, Faith, Faith!' unless you preach along with it, 'Break off your iniquities.' 'Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him turn unto the Lord.'

The nature of the case forbids it. It is a clear contradiction in terms, and an absolute impossibility in fact, that God should save a man with the salvation which consists in the deliverance from sin, whilst that man is holding to his sin. Unless, therefore, you have not merely sorrow, but repentance, which is turning away from sin with resolute purpose, as a man would turn from a serpent, you cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

But you do not get salvation for your repentance. It is no case of barter, it is no case of salvation by works, that work being repentance:

‘Could my zeal no respite know,
Could by tears for ever flow,
All for sin could not atone,
Thou must save, and Thou alone.’

Not my penitence, but Christ’s death, is the ground of the salvation of every one that is saved at all. Yet repentance is an indispensable condition of salvation.

What is the connection between repentance and faith? There can be no true repentance without trust in Christ. There can be no true trust in Christ without the forsaking of my sin. Repentance without faith, in so far as it is possible, is one long misery; like the pains of those poor Hindoo devotees that will go all the way from Cape Comorin to the shrine of Juggernaut, and measure every foot of the road with the length of their own bodies in the dust. Men will do anything, and willingly make any sacrifice, rather than open their eyes to see this – that repentance clasped hand in hand with Faith, leads the guiltiest soul into the forgiving presence of the crucified Christ, from whom peace flows into the darkest heart.

On the other hand, faith without repentance is not possible, in any deep sense. But in so far as it is possible, it produces a superficial Christianity which vaguely trusts to Christ without knowing exactly what it is trusting Him for, or why it needs Him; and which has a great deal to say about what I may call the less important parts of the Christian system, and nothing to say about its vital centre; which preaches a morality which is not a living power to create; which practices a religion which is neither joy nor security. The old word of the Master has a deep truth in it: 'These are they which heard the word, and anon with joy received it.' Having no sorrow, no penitence, no deep consciousness of sin, 'they have no root in themselves, and in time of temptation they fall away.' If there is to be a ... life transforming, sin and devil-conquering faith, it must be a faith rooted deep in penitence and sorrow for sin.

Dear brethren, if by God's grace, my poor words have touched your consciences at all, I beseech you, do not trifle with the budding conviction! Do not seek to have the wound skinned over. Take care that you do not let it all pass in idle sorrow or impotent regret. If you do, you will be hardened, and the worse for it, and come nearer to that condition which the sorrow of the world worketh, the awful death of the soul. Do not wince from the knife before the roots of the cancer are cut out. The pain is merciful. Better the wound than the malignant growth. Yield yourselves to the Spirit that would convince you of sin, and listen to the voice that calls you to forsake your unrighteous ways and thoughts. But do not trust to any tears, do not trust to any resolves, do not trust to any reformation. Trust only to the Lord who died on the Cross for you, whose death for you, whose life in you, will be deliverance from your sin. Then you will have a salvation which, in the striking language of my text, 'is not to be repented of,' which will leave no re-

grets in your hearts in the day when all else shall have faded, and the sinful sweets of this world shall have turned to ashes and bitterness on the lips of men that feed on them.

‘The sorrow of the world worketh death.’ There are men and women listening to me now who are half-conscious of their sin, and are resisting the pleading voice that comes to them, who at the last will open their eyes upon the realities of their lives, and in a wild passion of remorse, exclaim: ‘I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.’ Better to make thorough work of the sorrow, and by it to be led to repentance toward God and faith in Christ, and so secure for our own that salvation which no man will ever regret having given even the whole world, since he gains his own soul.

from Expositions of Holy Scripture
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Reprinted 2022 by Glorious Light
S2210
(Image added)