

SCARLET SINNERS PARDONED AND PURIFIED

NO. 2354

A SERMON
INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S DAY, APRIL 1, 1894.
DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON,
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON,
ON LORD'S-DAY EVENING, JANUARY 29, 1888,

“Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”
Isaiah 1:18.

THERE is a quarrel between man and his Maker. It is a sad thing that the creature should have fallen out with his Creator, it is a pitiful business that those who are dependent upon the bounty of God should have rebelled against the hand that has fed them, yet it is even so. Man has turned aside from the way of God's commandments; he will not submit to Jehovah's sway.

Under such circumstances, it is an amazing instance of divine compassion that God should be willing to hold a conference with man. Of course, the first person to ask for such a conference ought to have been the offending party; it is man who has offended, it is man who will have to suffer the consequence of his offenses. But, instead of man seeking God, and pleading with bitter tears, “Lord, pitifully hear me; graciously listen to me, and forgive me;” it is God who comes seeking man; the offended One is first in the effort to make up the quarrel. It is He who says, “Come now, and let us reason together.” He proposes to confer with man about the question in dispute. Admire much the freeness of God's mercy, that, after you have transgressed against Him, and provoked Him again and again, He still hesitates to hurl at you the thunderbolts of His justice. Instead, thereof, He invites you to talk with Him as to the cause of your quarrel, to reason with Him about your war against your Maker.

Surely, dear friends, it should be a great joy to a man to hear that God invites him to a conference; he should take heart of hope from that fact, he should say, “If God had meant to destroy me, He would not have said, ‘Come now, and let us reason together.’” When the One, who possesses all power, and who could, in a single moment, crush those who have sinned against Him, yet says, “Come, let us talk this matter over,” it must mean that He is moved by love and mercy, it must mean that there is yet hope for the guilty, an opportunity of man, the enemy, being reconciled to his offended God.

I think it will be wisdom on our part, sinful creatures that we are, to accept the conference that God proposes. Anyhow, we cannot lose anything by it. If the Lord says, “Come now, and let us reason together,” He must have some design of love in it, therefore, let us come, and return to our God, and reason with Him. I would invite any man here, who is at all desirous to be right with God, to begin to think about his God, and about his own ways. Surely, it is high time with some of you that you should turn to Him whom you have so long provoked. There is His Book, for instance; do you read it? Does not the dust upon it witness against you? You do not think it worth while to know what God has revealed in His Word. You treat your Maker and your Friend as if His letters were not worth even an hour's reading; you leave them utterly neglected. Is this as it should be? If you want to get right with God, should not the first step be to obey that command, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways”? And should not the next step be obedience to that other word, “Acquaint now yourself with Him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto you”? I cannot see how it can be wise for a man to neglect his God, and to despise what his Maker has to say to him. It must be wise for us to confer with the Lord about this matter. If, after the conference, we should come to a decision contrary to what is to be desired, yet we shall at least have given a fair consideration to the subject. Let us listen, then, to the gentle yet powerful voice of God, which says to us, “Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord.”

You all know what the quarrel is about, for you heard the chapter read. You love sin, and God cannot and will not bless you until you have parted with it. The greatest blessing that God can give you is to part you and your sins. The salvation which we so freely proclaim is not, as some suppose, salvation at

the last for those who continue in sin; it is deliverance from sin. The salvation which we continually preach, as the work of the free grace of God, is salvation from the reigning power, the raging lust of sin. Free pardon for all past offenses is presented to everyone who believes in Jesus, but the grand aim is to set you free from the love of evil, and from taking any delight in sin.

Now, evil *is* evil; that which is evil towards God is also evil towards yourself. It cannot work your happiness to do what is wrong. You may think it will, but God's judgment is clearer than yours, and His laws may be viewed as plain directions as to how you can be happy. When He forbids you anything, it is simply a warning against that which is dangerous to your soul. He has denied us no pleasure which can be called a real pleasure. He has given to us everything that is truly good for our immortal spirits; and, if we follow in the way that He maps out, it shall be not only for our eternal profit, but also for our present enjoyment.

In effect, God says to us, "If you would meet with Me, you must be rid of sin, and I am prepared to help you, no, I am prepared to rid you of sin. If you desire to be free from it, My Holy Spirit has put that desire within your heart, and if you yield yourself up to Him, He will rid you of sin altogether, root and branch."

So here begins the conference. The man enters into debate with God; I will suppose that he does so tonight, and that his first declaration to God is, "*My sins are as glaring as scarlet.*" "Well," replies the Lord, "I will take you on your own ground, I will admit that your sins are as scarlet; but I will so remove them that you shall be as white as snow." The man next says, "But if all my old sins were forgiven, yet *my tendency to sin is deeply ingrained.* I would sin again as I have sinned before. If I start anew with a clean book, I shall run into debt again as I did at the first." The Lord meets that statement also, and He says, "Though the evil tendencies of your nature are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. I will get the stain out, I will restore the fabric to its original cleanliness, I will make the long-dyed crimson wool to be as pure as when it first grew upon the sheep's back."

So God meets man in two ways; He meets him, first, by the perfect pardon of sin, and next, by a clean deliverance from the power of sin. Of those two things I am going to talk tonight pretty plainly.

I. And, first, I will suppose that I have before me someone who says, "MY SINS ARE AS GLARING AS SCARLET. How can I ever be the friend of God as my sins are so prominent? Some people's sins are of a drab color, you might not notice them; other people's sins are a sort of whitey-brown, you would scarcely perceive them; but my sins are scarlet, that is a color that is at once observed. There is a strikingness about my sin; nobody could miss it, the eyes are attracted and detained by it. My sins are as glaring as scarlet." Now, what sort of sins are those that may be called scarlet?

I say, first, that they are *the filthier vices*. You do not expect me to go into a description of them. At times, the ear of the public has been astounded by revelations of the vice in this great city. It was done once, till we were all sick; and we are glad that it has not been done again; I pray God that it may not be. But the sin itself is a thousand times filthier than the exposure of it, and yet there are some hypocrites in the world who say, "What a disgusting paper!" while they themselves are guilty of the very vice which is there laid bare. It is the sin that is disgusting, not the account of it, although I admit that the recital of it is harrowing and painful. If you have been guilty of those sins of the body which destroy, not only yourself, but another also; if, in the days of your youth, or in the riper years of your manhood or womanhood, you have polluted yourself by such vices, these are scarlet sins, such as will dog a man in his dying moments, and howl at him as he passes into the mystery of another world. I pray God that everyone here, who has been guilty of such sins, may listen to this text—and we need not deceive ourselves about this matter, there are plenty in our streets, there are plenty in our places of worship, who are thought to be very good and respectable people, who nevertheless indulge in gross vice—the Lord have mercy upon them! It is even to such that the text says tonight, "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." The fornicator, the adulterer, the whoremonger, and such like, these have committed sins that are of a scarlet hue. I say no more about this point, but I mean that such sinners as these are invited to come to God, and seek His mercy, for He will make them white as snow.

There is another set of sins which are scarlet, and these are the *universally condemned sins*, those sins which are offenses against the State, and against the well-being and social order of the community, such as dishonesty, theft, embezzlement in all its forms, knavery, cheating, lying. Oh, dear sirs, there are some who talk of white lies, but there are no lies that are white, they are scarlet, and they will sink a man

to hell if they are not confessed and forgiven. Every right-minded man is ready to condemn such sins as pride and over-bearing, such sins as ingratitude to parents and treachery to friends, such sins as breaking solemn covenants and sacred engagements where one ought to have been firmly held by them; all these are scarlet sins. Some of the forms of transgression, which I shall not describe in detail, are condemned by all civilized society, and therefore they may certainly be called scarlet sins. If I speak to any here present who have been guilty of such sins, let each man wear the cap that fits him, but let him also hear this gracious word, "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet," and that point is admitted, "they shall be as white as snow."

There is another set of sins that I would put down as scarlet, because they are *the louder defiances of God*. Some men dare to contradict Scripture, to express their disbelief in it, no, to contradict God Himself, even to express their disbelief in His existence; and, disbelieving in God, they dare to quibble at His providence, to judge His words, and to utter criticisms and sarcasms about the acts of the Most High. Now, these are scarlet sins. Let me once know that anything is of God, and I bow my head in deepest reverence. "No but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why have you made me thus?" But there are plenty, nowadays, who seem to enter into the lists against Jehovah, and begin to ask Him why He acts as He does, as if they were the very God of God and the Judge of the Most High. Now these are committing scarlet sins, yet the Lord says even to such sinners that He will make them as white as snow, and in many cases He has already done so.

I felt great joy, yesterday, when I received a letter from one who is now an earnest servant of God, but who recalled the time, (over thirty years ago, I think it was), when he was a secularist, and a very bold denouncer of all religion. At that period, I was but a very young man in preaching, and he showed special spite against me. He put my portrait in his window, with certain exceedingly biting and cutting remarks appended to it; but it happened that he came to London, and he must necessarily go to hear the man who was the object of his ridicule; and that day, in the Surrey Music Hall, God met with him. I have scarcely heard of him since then, till yesterday, when I found that he was still walking in the faith, earnestly endeavoring to serve God with all his might so as to make amends, as far as lies in his power, for the evil he had done in years gone by. Glory be to God, He can bring in those who have gone furthest in rebellion against Him, and make them to be the very noblest defenders of the faith! I remember that John Bunyan said, in his day, that he had great hope for the next generation, and he gave a very curious reason for that hope; he said that there was no age in which there were so many blasphemers and blackguards as were then living, and he reckoned that, if God saved them, they would make the finest saints in the world, and he therefore hoped that the next generation would be far ahead of any that ever had been before because that generation was so far behind in morality any that had preceded it. God does often take the raw material of a great sinner, and transforms him by His grace into a great saint. Such a man loves much because he has had much forgiven. Scarlet sinners, then, are those God-defiers who will not have Him to reign over them, and who tell Him so to His face. These are they who, when they come to Christ, shall find that He will make them as white as snow.

Scarlet sins, again, may consist in *long-continued dissipations*. I do not like drawing these terrible pictures, but I cannot help it if I am to be faithful. There are some men who, having the means, will go into sins from which the poor are happily preserved—drink and debauchery, followed up month after month, and year after year. Sin is persevered in as though the men were resolved to be ruined, going over hedge and ditch to hell; stopped, perhaps, for a moment, by an earnest address, but shaking off all good impressions with an awful determination to go on to their eternal destruction. We know some such, who do not occasionally fall into sin, but who continue in it, whose life becomes, as far as they can make it, a series of rebellions against everything that is pure, and true, and right. Do I address any such young man or any such woman tonight? If so, you are a scarlet sinner; and I commend to you this gracious text, "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

This scarlet glaringness is also seen in *repeated transgressions*. When a man sins once, and then abandons the sin, one does not think so much of it as of those who, having sinned once, sin again, and again, and again, and again, and again. Oh, that poor moth, it comes into my study, and flies at my lamp! It has burnt its wings, and it falls down. I endeavor to catch it, to put it away, but before I can reach it, up it flies again at the lamp. It has burnt itself worse this time, it is in anguish with that scorched wing, but the moment that it can summon strength enough, it flies up again. And there are some people just

like that, singed and burnt by their own iniquity, yet returning to it, as the dog returns to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire. Now, a sinner cannot act like that without coloring his sin to a very high degree of scarlet, and making it most offensive to God; yet, if it is so with any of you, the Lord still bids you come to Him and He will make you white as snow.

Once more, I think that the scarlet hue will be discovered in *any act of sin which is distinctly deliberate*. There are sins into which men are hurried by strong passions in a moment, and these are grievous enough, but when a man will take a week, a month, or even longer, to concoct some evil scheme, arranging all the details, laying traps, setting snares, spinning webs, to effect an evil purpose, this is a scarlet sin. When the element of deliberation enters into sin, it becomes a crime of malice aforethought, for which it is hard to find mercy. Yet I venture to say that, if anyone here has been guilty of such a sin, and it comes to his mind just now, I would urge him to confess it, and come to the Lord for forgiveness, for He says, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." This is the top and bottom of the whole matter. O you scarlet sinners, the greatness of your guilt need not keep you back from God! O you who have transgressed beyond all bearing, and past all bounds, you may yet be forgiven! God is able to blot all your sin out in a moment, so that there shall be nothing in His book against you, and the scarlet shall become as white as snow!

Do you want to know how this can be done? It is through the great atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, His Son, who, on Calvary's mountain, bore the wrath of God in our place and stead that God might be able with justice to forgive the sins of all men who trust in Christ's atonement. Understand, then, that is the method of making scarlet sinners as white as snow; the bleeding Savior, and He alone, performs this miracle of mercy. This is true; and if you will come, and seek your God, confessing your sin, and accepting the great sacrifice of Christ, your scarlet sin shall cease to be, and you shall become as white as snow.

Oh, this is the best news that ever tongue had to tell, but when I get home tonight, I shall lie abusing myself to think that I did not tell it better! I never tell out the story of free grace and dying love to my heart's content; the thought comes to me afterwards, "Why did you not put it better? Why did you let those people come and go, and not speak more to their hearts?" Ah, dear friends, I would do so if I knew how, but I have scarcely begun to learn to preach yet as I want to! Still, I do tell this old, old story to you great sinners, you crimson sinners; if you trust Jesus, your sins shall not damn you; if you come to Christ, your sins shall be all put away forever. It is your unbelief, your staying away from God, your continuance in sin, that will destroy you; but not the greatness of your guilt hitherto, for the Lord is willing to blot out your sins like a cloud, and to do it now, if you will only trust His dear Son.

II. But I must not forget that there is a second difficulty. The man of whom I first spoke also says, "ANY TENDENCY TO SIN IS DEEPLY INGRAINED."

He says, "If all my scarlet sins were forgiven, yet I am afraid I should not be all right even then." Why not? "Because," he says, "I feel impulses within me towards evil which, I think, are stronger than in anybody else." Well, friend, I will take you on your own ground; I do believe that there are some persons who have a greater *hereditary tendency to some sins* than others have. It is unquestionably true that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation. Anybody who studies human nature cannot help discovering that the child of the drunk has a greater tendency to drink than the child of the sober man; and children born as the result of lust are more inclined to that vice than others, who are the offspring of virtuous, godly people. It is no doubt so, but what I have to say to you is that, if you have sprung from an ancestry of drunks, if right straight up you cannot find a good man in all your pedigree, still, though your sins be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. God knows how to effect this transformation by the working of the Holy Spirit. Is that a new word to you? Well, then, let me remind you that the Holy Spirit is the third glorious Person of the blessed Trinity in Unity; and the Holy Spirit can come and remove from you the taint of heredity, so that you shall be able to overcome this special tendency of yours, and shall be preserved from those sins which run in your blood, which are in your constitution through your birth. God can help you. He that made the watch can mend it. He that made you can set you right again; you are still within the reach of divine omnipotence, whoever your father or your mother may have been. I take you on your own ground, not discussing the question with you for a moment.

"Oh!" says another, "I would not mind about hereditary tendencies, but my difficulty is that I have been *habitually committing sin*." And oh, I do admit my dear brother or sister, that it is an awful thing to

get caught in the meshes of an evil habit! When you first sin, or after you have sinned a few times, it is like a cobweb all around you, and you cannot easily get clear of it; but that cobweb soon comes to be a cord net, and it is not easy to cut your way out of it; but, after a time, the cords become bands of iron and steel, and what are you to do then? How can you break loose from such chains? The habitual drunk, how shall he tear himself away from the cup that is ruining him? The man who has fallen into vicious habits, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” If so, then he that is accustomed to do evil may learn to do well. But the Holy Spirit will help you to break off every sinful habit at once. I have known Him do it with many. I have especially noticed this, that swearers—and it is somewhat curious to note this fact—men who had for years never spoken without an oath, when they have been converted, from that moment they have never been tempted to utter an oath during the rest of life, such clean riddance can the Holy Spirit make of that habit. Some other sins cleave to a man, and make their presence felt at times, but when the Holy Spirit comes in, He drives out these old habits, and forms new ones. “The expulsive power of a new affection” is very great, and when the Spirit of God puts the love of Christ into the soul in the place of the love of sin, that new affection drives out the old habits, and the man is set free even from sins in which he has long indulged.

You know that scarlet and crimson are colors very hard to get out of any fabric. Neither the dew, nor the rain, nor any ordinary processes of bleaching will get out the scarlet. I have heard that certain old rags cannot be used for anything except making red blotting paper, because you cannot get out the color which the material takes in; and as to anything crimson, you might destroy the fabric before you could possibly extract the dye. But God knows how, without destroying the fabric, to take out a fifty years’ crimson habit, and not leave a stain behind. He can make you perfectly pure and clean. He can make you a new man; your flesh shall be as the flesh of a little child; I mean that your whole conduct will prove that you have been born again.

I heard a third person say, “But, my dear sir, the trouble with me is that I have such *feeble mental resistance to evil*, I am so weak, such a poor fool.” Well, you are not much of a fool if you know you are; the biggest fools are those who never know that they are fools. Still, there are people of this kind. I will try to describe you. You really are not altogether a bad sort of fellow, and when you are convinced that a thing is wrong, you feel very sorry, and you say to yourself, “I will give that up.” But there is a certain individual who has a kind of key that fits you, and whenever he comes this way, he winds you up just as he likes. I do not know who the individual is; perhaps it is a “she,” not a “he,” but, whoever it is can turn you any way. You are such a silly sort of person that if two or three people come round you, and try to get you to do what is wrong, you cannot say, “No,” to them. You have not learned that little word yet; your mother did not teach it to you, and your schoolmaster did not teach it to you, and I am afraid that I cannot teach you to say, “No.” It is a very difficult word for some people to utter. They say, “N-n-n,” and it ends in—“Yes.” The power to say, “No,” is a mighty power, and it is an awful thing when a man has fallen into ways of sin, when he is weak and irresolute, and somebody twists him whichever way he pleases. Now, dear friend, if you will come and reason with God, and yield yourself to the power of the Holy Spirit, as I pray you may, He will put a backbone into you, He will make you resolute and firm. I have known some young men, who at first quite pained me with their lack of resolution, but who, by the grace of God, have become almost doggedly obstinate. Oh, what grand old Puritans some men have made who once had no will of their own! We want the Lord, nowadays, to make a lot of people with backbones; very few of that kind have appeared lately, but He can make them, by His grace. Oh, you molluscous young fellow, you who have no more strength in you than a snail out of its shell, God’s grace can make a real man of you, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free, and you shall be able to stand up and say, “No,” and you will even—

“Dare to be a Daniel!

Dare to stand alone!

Dare to have a purpose firm!

Dare to make it known!”

God will help you to do even that if you yield yourself to Him.

Still, perhaps, I have not quite hit the nail on the head with all of you. Some are *entangled by their circumstances*. A man says, “You do not know me, sir, or else you would not think that the grace of God could save me. In my trade, my business, my position in life, I am dreadfully entangled; I do not know how I am to get out of it, I am in such a position that I must earn my bread. You know, sir, we must

live.” I never was very clear about that statement, but this person says, “We must live, and I am in such a predicament that I do not know what to do. I know I ought not to be in such a position, but I cannot get free from it.” No, my friend, but God’s grace can deliver you. Oh, I have seen, in this house of prayer, some glorious instances that I hardly dare to tell! I know one, whom the Lord saved, and he was engaged in a business which I could not but regard as altogether destructive to the souls of men and women; but he said that he could not see how to get out of it, yet he did get out of it. He suffered bravely, and at this moment I should say that he is in a very much better position than he was in then; and if he had kept on with the other business, I believe he would have been ruined body and soul, and that he would also have ruined thousands of others. There is nothing like making up your mind that you are coming right straight out from everything that is wrong, let it cost whatever it may. “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? The ship is going down, and if your little boat is tied to it, you will go down, too. Up with the axe, and cut the rope! When God, by His grace, helps you to act thus, as He can and will do, the entanglement of your circumstances will be over. I do not know the particular case to which I am alluding just now; I often speak of things which God knows more about than I do, and somebody is here to whom this is a message from Him. Come out; come out, at all costs. Flee from Sodom, leave everything, look not behind you, stay not in all the plain, escape to the mountain, lest you are consumed!

I think that I hear another say, “But I am a man of such *strong passions*.” Yes, there are wild beasts about in the form of men, and every now and then we come across a man with a terrible temper. He means well, dear soul; he is always very sorry after he has had an outburst. Sometimes he says, “Well, I boil over, you know, sir, but it is all over in a minute.” Yes, but if you scald somebody, the effect of that scalding will not be all over in a minute. “Ah!” said a certain Scotch lord to his servant, “You see, Sandy, I am never in a bad temper but what I am soon right again.” “Yes!” said the servant, “and you are never right again but you are soon in another bad temper.” Well, that is an evil thing which has to be conquered. You cannot carry such a temper as that into heaven. What would they do with you there with such fiery passions? They must be gotten rid of, and I do not know of any surgical operation that can do it; you will have to be born again, that is the only real cure.

Then there are some other individuals who appear to be going on all right for months, when an awful wind seems to blow through their souls, and off they go into drinking, or into some other dreadful sin, and they say that it is all owing to their strong passions. Well, you cannot take those passions to heaven, can you? You will have to get rid of them if you are ever to enter there; and I know of no remedy for this evil but being born again. Remember this text, “As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

“Do you believe in the doctrine of *original sin*?” asks one. Yes, I do; it is about the only original thing some people have, and they have a large quantity of that. Yes, yes, it is so, alas! There is in us all the tendency to sin, the bias towards evil, and though I have been drawing distinctions, I must come back to this point—

*“Like sheep we went astray,
And broke the fold of God;
Each wandering in a different way,
But all the downward road.”*

Now, there is no help against original sin but almighty grace, and there is no way of having almighty grace except through the free gift of God. This He may give as He pleases, for He has a right to bestow it or to withhold it; but He promises to give it to all who come humbly confessing their sin, and casting themselves, by faith, upon Jesus Christ, His Son.

Thus, you see, I have shown you that the guilt of sin can be put away by the blood of Jesus, and the power of sin can be subdued by the Holy Spirit. Every provision is made for the salvation of the man who desires to be saved. Come then, and hear how God has met your difficulties: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” God bless you all, for Jesus Christ’s sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON:
Isaiah 1:1-20.

May we be instructed of the Holy Spirit while we read this inspired Scripture!

Verse 1. *The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw—*

Prophets were called seers, they saw what they were called to say; and every true preacher of Christ must first be a seer of Christ. He must see, that is, realize for himself, and then he must tell to others what he has seen. This Book is about “the vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw”—

1, 2. *Concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD has spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me.*

It is an appeal of God to inanimate creation to bear witness to the ingratitude that He had received, as if it were of no use any longer to speak to men. The appeal is stated very solemnly and impressively, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. I have nourished and brought up children,” cared for them, loved them, fed them, “and they have rebelled against Me.” The ingratitude of a child is something shocking; and the ingratitude of man to God is of that character.

3. *The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.*

Men are more brutish than the beasts that perish. The lower animals, as men contemptuously call them, acknowledge the hand that feeds them; but men receive the bounty of God through long years, and yet live as if there were no God at all, and feel no gratitude to Him whatsoever. Israel was God’s peculiar people, highly favored, and greatly indulged, and this made it all the worse for the Lord to be able to contrast them and the brute creation: “The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.”

4. *Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.*

Thus the prophet spoke to the people of his day, and we may say much the same to the people of our own time. The professing church of God has gone away backward, forsaken the doctrines of the truth, and turned aside from the purity of its life. God have mercy upon the world when the church itself becomes thus defiled!

5. *Why should you be stricken any more?*

What is the use of chastisement to such people? It is supposed that punishment is always healthful, and that we grow the better for it, but God says, “Why should you be stricken any more?”

5, 6. *You will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment.*

The nation had been so beaten that it was covered all over with bruises and sores. It seemed to be of no use to afflict Israel any more; and there are some persons in the world who have been chastened in every conceivable way, and yet they are none the better. There are graves in the cemetery where lie asleep those they love; the house that was their joy has long ago been sold, and they have not a roof to call their own; they have been themselves at death’s door by fever and by other diseases; and yet all that God’s rod has done for them has come to nothing. The old Roman lictors carried an axe bound up in a bundle of rods; and, when the rods had been tried, and had failed, then came the axe. And if the milder forms of chastisement do not bring men to repentance, sooner or later will come the axe of destruction.

Thus the prophet says it was with sinful Israel—

7, 8. *Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city.*

The land had been so harried and worried by invaders that it was little better than a poor shanty; the nation was comparable to a poor hut which the Arabs put up in the vineyard to sleep in: “As a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city.”

9. *Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.*

And this is true of London as well as of Jerusalem. If there had not been a remnant of godly ones still left, “we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.”

10, 11. *Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? says the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.*

These people were a very religious people, although a very wicked people; and it is a strange thing that, when nations have become demoralized, and injustice reigns supreme at the same time, Ritualism and outward pomp and external religion come to the front. This is a wretched business, to give God the husks when the kernel has long ago gone. What cares the Lord for “burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts. . .the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats,” when men have left off doing that which is right in His sight? The Lord may well say to those who bring offerings to Him under such circumstances, “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me?”

12. *When you come to appear before Me, who has required this at your hand, to tread My courts?*

“Who invited you to come to My courts?” says God. “Who asked you to pretend to worship Me, when you are living in sin, and your hearts are not reconciled to Me?”

13. *Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto Me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.*

If you are hypocrites, if your hearts are not right with God, you may multiply your church goings, and your chapel goings, and your sacraments, but all these are only a provoking of God to anger. There is nothing in it all that He could possibly accept; He cannot endure it. He says, “It is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.”

14, 15. *Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates: they are a trouble unto Me; I am weary to bear them. And when you spread forth your hands, I will hide My eyes from you: yes, when you make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.*

This is plain speaking; but God never sends velvet-tongued men as His messengers. They who are called to testify for God speak out boldly, and faithfully denounce the sins of the day in which they live. Blessed be God for Isaiah and for men like him!

When men are committing crimes, when they are oppressing the poor, when they are living in the daily practice of injustice, when they indulge in secret drunkenness, when their whole life is a lie, they may do what they will, but God will not hear their prayers. While we keep sin in our hearts, it is in vain for us to stretch out our hands unto God. He is a holy God, and He seeks holy hearts and holy lives; and nothing short of these can be acceptable to Him.

16, 17. *Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.*

This is what God asks for: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless, and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world”

18-20. *Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land: but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.*

May the Holy Spirit make us willing and obedient, that we may “eat the good of the land”; and may none of us be found refusing God’s gracious invitation, and rebelling against His authority, lest we perish in our sins!

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—555, 567, 591.

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