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SERMON XII.

SINS REMEMBERED BY GOD.

PSALM XC. 8.—“Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.”

“THE blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.” Happy is the man who really believes this truth! then happiest of all, when he feels its power! But it never lives alone in any mind. There are other truths which must be received and remembered also, before the value of this can be known. The text is one of them. Without a heartfelt belief of it, we shall never learn a Saviour’s worth. We cannot give credit to it, and despise him.

Has it, brethren, made the Lord Jesus Christ precious to you? If not, be assured that you have never yet viewed it in its true light. Either you are ignorant of its meaning, or you are not heartily convinced of its truth, or you are strangers to its importance. To these three points then—its meaning, its truth, and its importance—let me call your attention; and may the Holy Spirit grant that it may not be called to them in vain!

I. Consider *the meaning of this declaration*. It seems to include two ideas.

1. *God sees our iniquities*. They are “before him.” When they are committed, they are committed before his face; not in his presence merely, but directly in his sight. He consequently sees them distinctly, clearly, thoroughly. None of them can escape him, none deceive him.

This truth the psalmist most forcibly expresses. He bids us look on our sins as arrayed “in the light of Jehovah’s countenance.” And who can tell us what that light is? The sun, which is shining in the heavens, throws around us day by day a glorious splendour: it discovers to us more iniquity on the earth, than we can sometimes bear the sight of without a pang: but what is the light of yonder sun, compared with the brightness of the Almighty’s face? It is utter darkness. And yet in the brightness of that face are all our sins committed, all seen.

Hence they appear to God in their true colours. A borrowed light, a candle or a lamp, seldom reflects objects as they really are. Nor can sin be viewed aright, except by God and near God. Beneath his piercing eye, it is stripped of all its poor disguises. In the holiness of his presence, its depravity comes out. Its guilt, its pollution and baseness, stand naked and exposed.

Suppose yourselves in some neglected and miserable room. It is night;—you see nothing of the wretchedness around you. But open the window; let the moon shine into the room;—you begin to perceive its mis-

ery. After a while, the sun rises, dim and in clouds;—now your eyes are offended with the objects that surround you. But at last the clouds break; a ray darts bright across the room;—all its filthiness is visible; you discern even the particles of dust that are floating in the air. And thus is it with sin. What do we see of it in this dark world? By nature, nothing. Let the glimmering light of civilization and morals reach us;—we catch some faint ideas of its character. Let the bright sun of revelation shine;—it shows us more of its evil. Bring down the Holy Spirit from above, let the God who at first commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shine into our hearts;—now the transgressor stands astonished at the exceeding sinfulness of sin. He lays himself in the dust. He says with trembling lips and a trembling heart, “Behold, I am vile.” But what is the light of civilization, or of scripture, or even of the Holy Spirit in a human breast, to the light of heaven? What does the holiest man see of sin, in comparison with God?

2. The psalmist’s language implies also that *God remembers our sins*; “Thou hast set our iniquities before thee,” placed them, fixed them there. They do not flit, as it were, before the face of the Lord, appear and vanish; they stand still in his presence, they remain for ever unmoved and unaltered in his sight. It must be so.

We say that we remember things, when they occasionally enter our minds, when we can recall them to our memories at our will. But what the great God remembers, he never forgets. What he once knows, he always knows. The sin of Adam is as present in his view now, as when that guilty man first tasted of the deadly fruit; and it is the same with all the sins of all his creatures. There never has been a moment in which any one of them has been out of his thoughts: there never can be such a moment. “The Lord,” says the prophet, “hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, ‘Surely I will never forget any of their works.’”

Such is the meaning of the declaration in the text. It is evidently a very solemn declaration. It would be so, even if it related only to the generations that are gone, or to some distant world which we have never seen. But it relates to us. The iniquities it speaks of, are ours—the open and secret sins which we ourselves have committed, and thus made our own.

And what does it testify of these? It seems to recall them from the dead. We had forgotten them. They had passed away from our memories like the dreams of the night. But here comes one of our fellow-transgressors, and assures us that they are still in existence, that these disregarded and forgotten things are now all standing in one fearful mass directly before the eyes of a holy God. How did he know this? Are his words true?

II. Let us go on to enquire what proofs we can find of *their truth*.

1. Consider the nature of God. Remember *what he is*. We are told that he is a “God of knowledge,” of boundless, infinite knowledge. And by infinite knowledge is meant knowledge which comprehends all things; which embraces, in one and the same moment, every thing that ever was, or ever will be, or ever can be, known; knowledge which cannot be increased or impaired. Low indeed is the highest idea we can form of such an understanding as this. We may however see enough of it to convince us that the awful saying of the psalmist must be true. Hide but a single sin from God, take it but for a twinkling of an eye from his remembrance, he might be told or reminded of it; a pitying angel or an accusing enemy might add to the number of his ideas; and where would his boundless knowledge be?

But we are not left to our own reasonings and conclusions in this matter.

2. Consider the declarations of God. Think of *what he has said*.

No language can be plainer or stronger, than that which God has employed in the confirmation of this truth. Hear him speaking of Babylon the great, of his enemies in this wicked world; “Her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities.” Hear him speaking of his friends, of his church, his beloved Israel. “I do remember,” he says by one prophet, “all their wickedness.” “Mine eyes,” he says by another, “are upon all their ways; they are not hid from my face, neither is their iniquity hid from mine eyes.” “The sin of Judah,” he adds, “is written”—how? not with a common pen on perishable materials, so written that it may be erased by accident or worn out by time. No. How did Job wish to leave on record his confidence in his living Redeemer? “O,” he says, “that my words were now written! O that they were printed in a book! that they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!” Thus the Lord declares the sin of his people to be recorded; “It is written with a pen of iron and with a point of a diamond;” with instruments which men employ to leave the most durable inscriptions on the flinty rock or imperishable glass.

And these are not vain words. The daily conduct of God is in strict agreement with them.

3. Consider his ways. Look at *what he has done*.

We all know that there is misery in the world, much misery, deep misery. We see it and feel it. While men are foolishly saying that “the Lord regardeth not iniquity,” his judgments are in all the earth; they are often in our own families and houses, perhaps in our own bosoms. Go where we may, we see marked on many a forehead, “Lamentation, mourning, and woe.” And were it laid bare, where is the breast in which we might not find concealed an aching heart, disappointed hopes or withered joys, some fountain of sorrow or root of bitterness?

Now whence comes all this suffering? Does it come forth of the dust? Is it all a casualty, an accident, the work of chance? How is it then, that the chance which has broken so many hearts, has never yet made one completely blessed? No, brethren; this misery is the work of a holy and offended God. It springs forth from those iniquities which he has set before him.

This was evidently the feeling of the psalmist. Mark where he has placed this text. It stands in the midst of a touching complaint over human vanity and human misery. "We are consumed," he says, "by thine anger; by thy wrath are we troubled." And why? "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee." And how did he know they were set there? He immediately tells us; "For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale."

Sometimes also the Lord steps out of his ordinary path, as though determined that men should see and confess his remembrance of their sins. Why were Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed? Why were the Amalekites driven out of the land of their fathers? Why did the nations of Canaan perish? One answer will serve for all—the eyes of an insulted God were fastened on their crimes.

And look into his church. How has he acted there? Let the dying Moses say. Let the weeping David declare. And what will Jacob tell us? That man was exceedingly dear to God, chosen and beloved; but while he was yet young, he sinned against him; he deceived his aged father. From that moment, the Lord never forgot his sin. He began with banishing him from his country and his home. Then for seven years all seems quiet; but at the end of these years, Jacob, in his turn, is deceived. Laban imposes on him. Instead of giving him the beloved Rachel for whom he had waited so long and toiled so

hard, he gave him Leah. Year after year passes away, and the iniquity of Jacob seems forgotten. Rachel is his own, his children rise up and call him blessed, his flocks and herds are increased, his brother Esau is reconciled to him; and where is his iniquity now? Where it was at first. Suffering has not removed it; years have not worn it out. It is before the Lord. His daughter is shamefully defiled, and his two sons, Simeon and Levi, in avenging her wrongs, act more like assassins than men. Surely now the displeasure of heaven is past. No, brethren; that which took place in the chamber of Isaac, is present as ever before the face of a jealous God. There are yet arrows in his quiver for Jacob's heart. Now Rachel dies, and now Joseph, his favourite boy, is lost. True, he finds him again, but what a pang for a father's soul mars his joy! The old patriarch learns that ten of his other sons were little better than guilty of their brother's blood.

And is it not the same in the present day? Why is the city, once the joy and dwelling place of Jehovah, trodden down of the heathen? Why are the

Jews wandering as outcasts among the nations? Nearly two thousand years ago, the Lord of glory was crucified in their streets. “His blood be on us and on our children,” was the horrid cry of their fathers. It reached the heavens. It still rings in the ears of the Lord of hosts. The blood of the Son of God is on their children.

Take an instance from common life. A man is dishonest. By overreaching his neighbours, by defrauding his country, or by some other unlawful means, he acquires property; he enriches his children. But how often does such wealth come speedily to an end! The curse of God seems on it. It wastes away. In a few years its owners are poor as the poorest, are beggars in our sight.

Take yet one instance more. Look on a graceless son. In the days of his youth, he plants many a sting in his father’s soul, and breaks his mother’s heart. He goes on quietly for a while, and prospers. But he himself becomes a father, and then the Lord reveals himself as a sin-remembering and sin-avenging God. His own children fly in his face. Their conduct forces his mind back to the long forgotten scenes of his own early wickedness. He remembers a father and a mother whom his own vices stung, and then, like them, he goes down with sorrow to the grave.

O brethren, who can tell what judgments are hanging over some of us, for iniquities which we long since thought forgotten for ever? Who can tell how many hours of future bitterness some secret sin of the last week or month may have stored up for us? Who, as he thinks on these things, will not fly to a Saviour’s cross, and say there, with the trembling psalmist, “O remember not the sins of my youth! O remember not against us our former iniquities!”

Now putting together what the great God is, what he has said, and what he has done, there is no escaping from this conclusion—our sins are seen, they are remembered—the declaration in this text is true.

But what if it is true? Is it important? Or if important, is it so to us? It is. There is no truth that ever reached our ears, which can concern us more closely, or affect our best interests more deeply.

III. Let us now endeavour to discover *its importance*.

Of this we can know but little. It is not fully understood even in the regions beyond the grave, those worlds of discovery and knowledge. Nothing but eternity can unfold it all. We may however obtain a faint idea of its greatness, by recollecting the purposes for which God thus holds our sins in his remembrance.

1. He keeps them there, that *he may eventually set them before us*.

We are all conscious that many things live in our memories, of which we seldom or never think. When told of them, we recollect them, and per-

haps a long train of circumstances connected with them. This common operation of the memory may discover to us, that at present we know but little of its powers. It was designed to hold fast every idea that has ever past through our minds. It once probably had this power; sooner or later it will have it again. And then where will our sins be? They will rise, like ghosts, from the dead. They will be where the guilt of David was, when he said, "My sin is ever before me." They will be where the transgressions of the people of Jerusalem were, when, pricked in their heart, they cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" They will be where Cain's foul offence was, when he said, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." They will be where the sin of Judas was, when "he went and hanged himself." They will be before our eyes; they will be rankling in our hearts. And it is God who will place them there. He touches the guilty conscience; he sets tormenting memory to work; and then our iniquities array themselves in terror before us. They lie, heavy as a mountain of lead, upon the conscience; they stick, like arrows, in the soul.

The anguish which they give, even when we are partially reminded of them in this life, is almost intolerable. It forced Paul, who complained of nothing else, to complain of his wretchedness. In the world to come, it will be ten-fold worse—terrifying, maddening, an ever-gnawing worm, a devouring fire, an everlasting burning.

2. Others also will know our sins. The Lord remembers them *to expose them*. He generally lays some of them bare before we die. Others often come to the light after we are dead. But what is this? No more, when compared with the exposure of the great day, than the gleam of a taper to the blaze of a meridian sun; no more than a whisper to the thunder of the clouds. There is reason to believe that not a soul in the universe will be left ignorant of any one of our sins. Those of the ungodly will be revealed, that the justice of God may be magnified in their condemnation. Those of the pardoned will be proclaimed, that assembled worlds may adore the riches of Jehovah's grace.

Who can conceive aright of the dark mountains of iniquity which we shall then see arise? Were the secret sins that we ourselves have committed, now exposed, what a scene of wonder would this church become! And O what a loathsome world would the earth appear, if all that is now going on in secret, were brought out before the light! But when we are standing before the Son of man, no secrets will be hidden; all the sins of all the world will rise up, in all their dreadful magnitude, before us; they will astonish and dismay us.

3. But God remembers our sins for a purpose yet more awful still—that *he may call us to a strict account for them*. This Jeremiah teaches us. "Thine eyes," he says, "are open upon all the ways of the sons of men;" and

for this purpose, “to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”

God, it is often said, “will judge the world in righteousness.” “He will reward every man according to his works.” Now how can he do this, unless he sets before him all our sins? A loose and general estimate of them, must not guide the sentence which will affect an immortal soul throughout eternity. The account must be strict and minute. We are accordingly told that God “shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing.” “Every idle word,” says Christ, “that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” “The Lord,” says Paul, “will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the heart.” He will force from our own lips a faithful record of every crime we have committed; he himself will display a register of every sin. And then, unless we can say of a Redeemer’s blood, “It has cleansed me and of a holy Saviour’s justifying righteousness, “It is mine;” every iniquity shall add to our condemnation, every transgression shall have its sting.

And now, brethren, judge for yourselves—are these things matters of importance, or are they trifles? If there be any thing hard to bear in the workings of an awakened conscience, if public exposure and shame be worthy of a thought, if we apprehend any serious consequences from the judgment of the living God, then the declaration in the text is not a light and trifling saying; it is of tremendous importance to us all.

Have you any sense of its importance? There is perhaps hardly one among you, who is not ready to answer, Yes. You say, “We are sure that we have never made light of this truth. We never speak of it but with the greatest seriousness. Sometimes when we have heard it read at the funeral of a friend, it has almost made us tremble.” And is this all it has done within you and for you? Then may the living God complain of you, as he did of Israel of old, “They consider not in their hearts, that I do remember all their wickedness.” He does not say that they disbelieved it, or despised it, or even forgot it. All he complains of is, that it had no fixed place in their hearts. And what place has it in yours? None. You have never even wished it to have any; amid a crowd of other things, you have lost sight of it. Perhaps throughout your whole life, you have never spent a single hour, no nor a single minute, with your thoughts taken up with this truth, “The great God sees and remembers my sins.”

This in consideration cannot end well. It may seem a very harmless thing, but, all this while, it is hardening your hearts, and bringing on your ruin. What is it that has made many a death-bed so wretched, and filled eternity with so much woe? It is nothing more than this inconsideration of which you are guilty, this thoughtlessness, this deadly unconcern. It never lasts longer than life. When eternity begins, reflection begins; and such re-

flection! so bitter, so harrowing, that existence becomes an intolerable curse. O brethren, what will you do, when you ask of a God of mercy only one drop of water to cool your tongue, and all you gain by your prayer is this piercing answer, "Son, remember, remember?"

Does this prospect alarm you? Then let this scripture show you *your great need of Christ*.

Give an angel all that the universe contains, he would not consent to have one sin before the eyes of God. Nay, offer to the poorest Christian all the collected riches of the earth to have one unpardoned iniquity there, the man would shudder at the thought. But how many unpardoned sins have some of you in that holy place? Ten thousand times ten thousand. How can you bear to think of them? How can you sit here in peace? How can you lie down at night in peace? The recollection is fearful now, but what will it be when conscience begins to sting, and shame begins to cover us, and judgment is at hand? O shall we not need a Helper and a Saviour then? Do we not need one now?

Learn then, from this truth, *to admire the riches of Jehovah's mercy*. When we hear of the pardon of sin, we often think of it as the pardon of our late transgressions only. We forget our earlier sins. But God never offers us forgiveness without having in his mind every one of our iniquities. They are all before him. They are all as fresh in his memory and as hateful in his sight, as the sins of yesterday, or the transgressions of the present hour.

Try then to view your sins in a mass as God views them. Suppose all of them to have been crowded into one day; suppose this very sabbath to be that guilty day;—what think you of yourselves? Do you not say, "We are more sinful, more abominable, than tongue can tell?" What then must God think of you? At this very moment, the long and dark catalogue of your offences is before his face, and he looks on the first and last of them alike, just as though neither of them were an hour old. And yet how does he act towards you? Instead of sending you quick into hell, he opens wide for you the gate

of heaven. He holds out before you the dreadful scroll of your sins, and while you are trembling at the sight, and his violated law is thundering vengeance, he points to the cross of his dear Son, and says, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." And what is the language of that bleeding Lamb? "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all ye ends of the earth." Nay, so complete and lasting is the pardon he offers you, that he speaks of it as though in conferring it he had laid aside one of his own perfections. He says to every sinner whom he finds washed in the blood and clothed in the righteousness of his Son, and says it of the very sins which are ever in his sight, "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins."

Have you through grace sought and found this mercy? Let this declaration teach you *to live in a constant remembrance of your sins*. You see, brethren, the character which the author of this psalm assumes—it is the character which you yourselves long bore—that of a transgressor, a sinner. And do you not bear it now? One look within shows you that it is still your own. And can you forget the sins which so holy an eye beholds, and such amazing grace pardons? Ought you to forget them? Never. The instant you lose sight of them, or of the divine remembrance of them, you sin against God and wrong your own souls; you throw a veil over the glory of Jehovah's mercy; you place yourselves on ground whereon no child of the dust can ever stand; you close your hearts against the sweetest joys that a sinner can ever know. Who is the happiest being on the earth? Not the man who says he is in Christ, and will think of his sins no more. It is he who looks on all his manifold and great transgressions, and while he loathes himself on account of them, can lay himself in the dust and say, "I am pardoned." This recollection melts him. It fills his heart with unutterable love for his dying Lord; it makes his very name precious to his soul. It abases him so low, that when he is taken up into heaven, angels can scarcely bend down to his humility. It lifts him so high, that they cannot reach his blessedness. Whether in heaven or in earth, this is the character and this the happiness of the Christian—he is a pardoned sinner—he feels and acts as a pardoned sinner—he is a man "who loveth much," because he sees that "much has been forgiven him."