NOTES OF ADDRESSES

BY THE LATE

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CHURCH TO CHINA.

EDITED BY

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XVI.

SIN CONDEMNED.

[*Preached to the congregation of the Rev. Dr. C. J. Brown, Free New North, Edinburgh, while they worshipped in the Potterrow, December 1846. Mr. Burns had then just returned from Canada. The claims of China, in connection with the resolution of the Eng­lish Presbyterian Church to start a mission in that great empire, were strongly pressed upon him. The result was his giving himself to that service, and being ordained at Sunderland on 22d April 1847.*]

“FOR WHAT THE LAW COULD NOT DO, IN THAT IT WAS WEAK THROUGH THE FLESH, GOD SENDING HIS OWN SON IN THE LIKENESS OF SINFUL FLESH, AND FOR SIN CONDEMNED SIN IN THE FLESH.”—*Romans* *VIII. 3.*

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HE word “flesh” in this verse seems to stand for the nature of fallen man, and shortly ex­presses what we might, in other words, call, man’s nature forsaken by God’s Spirit. The Lord Jehovah having left the place designed for Him in the human heart, His place is taken by another. Sin has its seat in the flesh. It reigns there un­opposed in the natural man. It has many and varied manifestations; on these we cannot enter—they are innumerable. They are as many as the man has faculties; and, in short, in all the ways in which man is now capable of thinking and acting, he is sinning. The word “flesh,” then, as here used, does not refer to the body, but rather to man’s whole nature, destitute of the Spirit of God.

This gives us a very deep view of sin, and shows us how firmly it is entrenched, and how securely lodged in the heart; and there is no form in which it appears so much *to be sin,* or so utterly vile and hideous, as that spoken of in the seventh verse, where it is said that “the carnal mind is enmity against God.” There are indeed some aspects in which sin is more easily detected, but here is a form of it which prevails universally in all who have not been made free in Christ Jesus. What an opening up is this of the state of man’s mind! “It is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” It can submit to no control, to no government, however just, and wise, and good, but must of necessity continue to rebel and to widen hourly the breach between the soul and the Lord God who made it, thus rendering it an impossibility that any natural man should, at any moment, or by any act, please God. “They that are in the flesh cannot please God.” Ah, my dear friends! if our eyes were opened, this would indeed seem a fearful statement, and one calculated to shut up every sinner present to the faith of the Son of God.

But let us now consider the means which *cannot* deliver from this awful state. The law of God, the statute-law of the kingdom, written by the Lord Himself,—unerring, perfect, holy, divine,—of this law it is said, “What the law could not do.” To what is it then declared impotent? To con­demn sin in the flesh. True, in one sense it does this; the tables of the old covenant were written for this. The law discovers sin, forbids it, passes sentence upon it, threatens eternal death upon the commission of it, pronouncing a fearful curse upon the smallest violation of the commandment, and in this way sin is condemned; but the impo­tence of the law lies in this, that it cannot con­demn sin with power to destroy; it *can* condemn the *sinner* to death, and it can hold him fast, so that no creature may deliver; and it can carry out the sentence by destroying him, and causing him to suffer forever, in the name, and by the autho­rity of God, whose minister it is; but this is all the law can do; and, ah, brethren! there is little hope for a poor sinner here. The law cannot help him against his sins, it cannot even drive the love of them from his bosom; and though it brings sin to the light, and exposes it there to all the com­mands, and the curses, and the threatenings with which the law is armed—instead of dying, *sin re­vives.* This is what is meant by these words, “the law entered that the offence might abound.” Paul tells us something of a sinner’s experience when this holy law comes in contact with him and his iniquities,—“For I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; “not *sin died,* but *I died.* There is a great difference between the sinner being con­demned, and sin being condemned. Ah! there is no view of sin that shows its dreadful Satanic power more than this, or that proves the difficulty of rooting it out of the heart more than this, that even God’s holy law cannot do it. A law, holy, just, and good, approving itself to the sinner’s conscience, armed with awful sanctions, holding in its hand life and death eternal, speaking with the voice and authority of Jehovah. What could be stronger? What more likely to influence and be obeyed by intelligent creatures? And yet, when this law comes into direct contact with sin, it is found to be “*weak* through the flesh.” There is something in sin that turns aside the weapon, something so stupefying that every warn­ing is of no avail.

Oh, fellow-sinner! are you awake to this? Do you know that your heart is so ungodly, so despe­rately bad, that it makes the most perfect instrument that God can use or devise ineffectual? Oh, it might terrify men out of their sleep, to hear that they are yielding complacently to the dominion of that which is so vile, so polluting, and yet so strong, that it can neither be transformed nor subdued, nor extinguished by any of the workings of the holy and mighty government of God. What an awful thing to be a servant of that which can only be put a stop to by shutting it up in hell for ever to die the second death! Surely, then, this view of sin might teach you many lessons of your own helplessness. Men think that sin will bow to *them!* and that *they* can tame it down by reformations, and good resolutions, and efforts of their own! It does not bow to the very law of God; so that at Mount Sinai, when just given, and before Moses had time to bring it down to them, the poor Israelites set about making a golden calf.

And now let us inquire, how it is that the law has no strength to condemn sin. The first reason is, that it can provide no *remission* for sin. It comes seeking obedience, and when it finds not that, it goes no further—it pronounces a curse. It is this that makes it so worthy of God; it never makes a compromise, nor lowers its demands, and yet all the while pursues the sinner for payment, his conscience being on the side of the law, and witness against himself. You see, then, that un­less a way could be found in which sin could be remitted, man must continue to flee farther and farther from God, and to increase in enmity to Him. But, secondly, the law is weak in respect to this, that it possesses no *sanctifying power;* although it *commands* obedience, it provides no gracious power to *create* obedience. The law was suited to man in a state of holiness, but it can have nothing to do with any works that are not perfect,—it turns away from all such. If only men knew and realized this, how differently would they listen to the Gospel! In most people’s expe­rience, I believe, the Gospel is virtually regarded as unnecessary; spoken about, it is true, but merely spoken about, because there is so much of it in the Bible, and not from any deep heartfelt need of it in the sinner’s bosom. This arises from their ignorance of the law; they do not believe in its stern, uncompromising character; they do not believe that it gives no help to an awakened sin­ner, and that no provision is in it to enable him to return to God. Viewed at a distance, the law looks as if it might destroy sin, but when it comes near, and shows the sinner a true picture of him­self, sin rises and rebels, and becomes exceeding sinful indeed; every convinced soul is brought to acknowledge this, and to say that the law is “weak through the flesh,” and can do nothing to bring him nigh to God.

Let us now contemplate for a little *the means which do accomplish* the final destruction of sin. It would seem that none could be more mighty than the law, which holds death and life, bless­ing and curse, in its righteous hand; but the Lord appears, and the simple, glorious means is this, that God sent His own Son. This is the beginning of a sinner’s hope. *God sent His own Son!* What an awful thing is sin proved to be—how fearful its power—how wondrous the work of condemning it, when Jehovah took a way to do it so altogether without example or parallel in the universe; *not* by the curse of the law, *not* by any works on man’s part, but by His own Son, sent in the reality of human nature, but only in the likeness of sinful flesh and of fallen man. Mystery of love! Great without contro­versy: and yet this is the only means sufficiently powerful to condemn sin. Do you ask how this in­tervention of the Son of God condemns sin? By exposing its vile, unalterable, malignant nature, when it can neither be weakened, condemned, nor destroyed, but by so unheard-of a means as this, even the sending forth of Immanuel in the like­ness of the rebellious creature, to be marred, and bruised, and slain in his room. Surely sin is con­demned thus, and sentence passed on it as evil, when Heaven must give up the Only Begotten Son, before it can be destroyed. Think of this.

Not only does the sending forth of God’s Son show in a clearer light than the law can do, that sin is an evil and bitter thing—it passes a sentence of death on it, and slays it by satisfying the law: “The strength of sin is the law.” We think by nature that the law is the death of sin, whereas the law is so much the strength of sin, that it not only provides no sanctifying power in itself for the sinner, but it stands by, as it were, to see that he gets no relief from any other quarter. The very grace of God cannot reach him, because of this offended, dishonoured law. Even had the Lord, to speak with reverence, desired to give man His Holy Spirit, He could not give any of His glorious blessings to one lying under the sentence of death, for the law stands in the way.

Suppose a destroying serpent were in your house, and you took a sword to slay it, but a be­loved child was in the way between the serpent and you, so that you could not strike the one, without piercing the other—you dare not destroy the object of your love in order to slay the reptile. Thus the Lord cannot give His Holy Spirit to sub­due your sins, without first satisfying the law; *that* were to give life at the expense of his own holiness; and so the law stands at the sinner’s side, crying, “Pay me that thou owest!” But oh! when the Son of God came down, and ap­peared to take the sinner’s place, there was no longer any obstacle to God’s giving the Spirit to destroy sin in his heart. The evil of sin was held up, and the law, which is its strength, was taken out of the way, while the gift of the Spirit was provided for the sanctification of the very vilest. He endured the curse of a broken covenant, and then the way was opened for the descending Spirit. *A way opened!* Oh how wondrous is this new and living way! The lost sinner beholds it, and begins to commit himself, soul, body, and spirit, to Jesus, and to rest his hope of a free, full, final pardon, *not* on anything he can ever do, but on the Surety of the covenant; and then the Spirit of Jehovah comes freely forth to glorify Jesus and renew the heart, and to nail sin to the cross, not dead, but under sentence; and every time the Spirit puts Himself forth in the believer’s soul, is a fresh inti­mation given to sin of coming death; and then the law is loved, and gloriously set up in the soul; and now it is that the believer, who flies to Christ, and finds that there is no condemnation, can tes­tify that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made him free from the law of sin and death. True, there is a constant fight; but then he will be more than conqueror soon, and mean­while he walks after the Spirit, he makes delibe­rate choice of all that the Spirit suggests; and though the flesh trouble him, it is not he that is running after the flesh, but the flesh that is walk­ing after him; it will continue to oppress and pursue him, so that he is ever crying for deliver­ance, but he will be freed from its very presence when he is gone to be present with Immanuel.

And now, what should the unconverted learn from all this? The unconverted—who are they? how may they be known? They are those who are “after the flesh,” and unlike the believer, who flees from sin, and escapes as for his life, they walk after it, and seek its gratification all the day long, in some form or other. True, you will not allow this; you consider yourselves above yielding to the lusts of the flesh; you do not like to hear men thus divided into two classes; you would rather not be troubled with hearing so much about conversion and a new heart. But, oh! brethren, the line would need to be put very plainly down in these days, when men do not know their own faces in the glass of God’s Word. You are running on in sin with the world—pursuing it, devouring it—though God is warning you, and sounding His awful threatenings in your ears. If this be true of you, you are not converted; your own consciences tell you so. The man who is walking after the Spirit does the opposite from this,—hating the body of death which drags him down, and mourning when he is overtaken by it, he groans for relief, longing after God, crying for grace, seeking the extermi­nation of sin. Who among *you* are doing this? Who among *you* are resisting sin unto the death? *As many only in this house* as are led by the Spirit *now.* Ah! dear fellow-sinner, sin is no trifle. Its guilt is no trifle. Its power is such, that none but the Spirit of Jehovah can kill it, and emancipate the soul. Your resolutions will not do this, friends cannot do it for you, your own will cannot do it, knowledge cannot do it; and your refuge is, there­fore in the crucified Lamb! *There is no other refuge—none.* Yet, don’t be deceived here, fellow-sinners! Some think they are hidden there, who are only *sleeping* on a *notion* about grace and the blood of Jesus. They are cleaving to the covenant by flatteries, and there is too much of that in these professing days. Oh! but is there in this house a poor sinner, lying burdened and groaning, under the load and power of sin? Look, then, here! Lift up your eyes, and see what a provision! Look to that great, glorious Redeemer! Hear Him! What is He saying? “*Come unto me.*”And you will come, you will value Him, and you shall find salvation.

All God’s people know what it is to be convinced of sin, and to flee to the hiding-place; but I would ask you, believers, is this your *present experience?* If you are not realising it, go to Jesus now—go as for the first time. Ah! do not go back to walk after the flesh. Are you resting in the warfare? Are you looking with more toleration upon sin, and with less alarm upon that vile, God-dishonour­ing unbelief that makes you doubt His word? are you fainting, beloved, and saying you need rest? Ah! but this is *not* your rest. This is the time for pursuing the enemy, and for disputing every inch of ground with Satan,—for wrestling, and fighting, and watching, and it will be so *to the end;* and your rest will come yet,—a long, long, eternal Sabbath rest above. Oh, is there any soul here who is becoming *slothful?* I fear there are many, many such,—many who are lazy and idle in fight­ing against sin. “Be not slothful,” up and be do­ing; the day is coming when the battle will end, and you shall have rest. Sin is yet to be de­stroyed. It is now a criminal in confinement, waiting for execution. The hour of final victory is nigh at hand; and when it comes, there will be no wandering thought, no vile affection, no body of death.

And what does all this teach us with regard to contributing for Christ’s cause on the earth?—how does it bear on the object of this day’s collection for raising means to send the Gospel to the poor heathen in distant lands and dark corners of the earth? You know well, that “without holiness no man shall see the Lord;” so that it is utterly impossible for one single soul among these perish­ing millions to enter glory. If it *were* possible, the law must leave heaven when such an one entered; or rather, brethren, it would follow the sinner into heaven, and pluck him from the very presence of Jehovah, down to the pit of destruction. And if this be true of every man in a Christian land,—of the most amiable, virtuous, generous man, who knows not Gospel holiness,—WHAT’S TO COME OF THE HEATHEN? Who ever heard of a holy heathen? True, the men of the world are pleased with many of them, and would almost rather see them remain heathens still. But ah! the servants of Christ feel very differently; and you who are believers, belie your profession, if you would not give all you had, yea, and your own selves also, if others were not ready to aid, and to carry forth the Gospel among them. Look abroad —look not at tens of thousands merely in this land, but look yonder and see MILLIONS—millions perishing—rushing on, in darkness, down to the pit.