

SERMON OF THE MONTH.

The Sorrows of Sin.

BY THE REV. J. E. GIBBERD.

Num. xvi. 38 : "These sinners against their own souls."

Job xx. 11 : "His bones are full of the sin of his youth."

Lam. v. 16 : "Woe unto us, for we have sinned."

THE rise of sin into consciousness, the change of an action and feeling from an unseemly into a sinful state by the word and works of the Divine Lord, brought into comparison with us and focussing on us the Divine idea of life, is an inward revelation. The true Light has shined, and nothing remains the same as before. In the light everybody and everything is in judgment.

Our subject is the action of sin in our own spirits. We ask what workings it sets up in our own thought, feeling, will.

For a sign Moses was directed to take up censers out of the fire and scatter the fire—for a sign before "these sinners against their own souls." The sin that goes forth from one returns into him like a fume which he scattered and that enveloped him. In every sin a heart commits there is distinct loss of power. Nor is there much remedy till the loss of peace equals the loss of power.

Sin is a fall. Something in the soul goes over when evil is wrought. "The heathen are sunk down in the net that they made; in the net which they hid is their own foot taken" (Ps. ix. 15). Honour falls; kindness falls; fidelity falls; purity falls; "wickedness overthroweth the sinner" (Prov. xiii. 6).

This is not speculation; it is experience. Whoever lends himself to the lower impulses of his nature strengthens the lower at the expense of the higher. He takes the oil from the useful vessel and puts it in a sieve. By expending his power on carnal propensities, on insincerities of mind, on evil affections, he loses power he will need faster than it leaks

away. The fall is deep ; it is like a traveller over a glacier, whose sight is not trained enough to notice the slight depression in the snow, who rashly steps on it and falls into a crevasse. Sin is worse than a stumble. It may be a mistake, but it works out at a perilous price. A man may mistake his path, and the wrong one may lead through fields as pleasant as the right one ; but he may mistake his way and walk into a slough. It is dangerous to miss the right path on Dartmoor, and it is dangerous to take the wrong path by the steps of the soul. The whole type of the man descends by sin : sin lowers him gravely.

But the worst side of sin as a fall is that it reverses the soul's opportunity to do well. If we had no capacity to do the will of God, we should have no power to disobey. If we had no liberty, we could have neither obedience nor disobedience. We could be creatures, but not children of the Father in heaven. So the fall into sin is a falling out with the Holy Father. Sin rejects His law ; breaks up the smooth working of His reign ; violates the order He has established. It depraves our own hearts, despoils our powers, creates havoc in our feelings. Where there ought to be the union of all faculties in one act of service to one Eternal Throne, there, instead, there is disturbance and distraction ; the law that would have promoted order and good fruits remains to rebuke disorder and put corrupt fruits to shame.

Moreover, the fall by sin is on hard ground. The world is no bed of moss for breakers of law. God's laws are in our bodies and minds, in the world of stone and vegetation : not least of all in our social relationships. All around us the tares grow together with the wheat, and the wheat is the worse for the tares. The wrongs of one enter into the lives of several. The excesses of one cause trouble to many. The neglects of one overtax many. The veins of social life run the poison of social sins through the whole body. Let anyone ask what life might have been had the laws ingrained in it been observed. Or let the question be, What life may yet be if the power of sin in it might be destroyed ? Above all, what may it be if a stronger

man took possession and ousted the old power? The pool might be clear if the scum were taken off the surface; but it would certainly be clearer still if the formation of scum were stopped.

“His bones are full of the sin of his youth,” said one of Job’s callers, who was more clever in detecting the work of sin in a man than in comforting the distressed. His words read as if his own bones had ached, and he had felt in himself the miserable legacy of a reckless youth. For sins of youth score themselves into the flesh, and often set up actual decay in the bones. Premature old age comes of misspent early years. A creeping misery overtakes the one whose youthful habits were contrary to mental, moral, and physical health. Sin is the most prolific cause of disease, and disease is the most prolific cause of mental depression. The fall which sin represents is a fall in the whole condition and character—the man is less of a man for it; he is less capable, less spirited, less intelligent, less reliable in judgment, less in moral force and moral influence. He falls below a moderate standard. His history is the tale of a falling-off. Often the very things he does to arrest his own descent quicken it; for when it comes he feels hardly used. He adds his consent to the thousand times ten thousand cries that “the way of transgressors is hard.” Whether he ascribes his hard lot to his transgressions or not, he feels it hard. When his eyes are opened and he knows that his bodily frailty and suffering, his mental feebleness and spiritual ineptitude, are due to the sins he has left to grow unchecked, his misery is not lightened; for now he has himself to reproach. “I felt self-condemnation,” says one who had come to see himself in the light of Christ.

But beside being a fall, sin contains the power of death. Sin in dominion is only conceivable with a lifeless spirit—lifeless, that is, for moral and spiritual functions. In all matters of Christian character, Christian faith, Christian zeal, a mind unawakened to the misery of sin’s sway is dead while it lives. It is an organ that will not play a tune. This soul lives in the playground, in the kitchen, in the market; it is lifeless in the sphere of Divine fellowship, heavenly apprehension, eternal hope.

Men must discern the evidences of their own hearts. It is such a mere truism to say that the everlasting interests are the most interesting; that the elevating and sunshiny gifts are the most captivating; that the pencil of God on the canvas of humanity is the most capable and beautiful: yet the mind of sin finds no interest, delight, or glory. Some common trifle whose use and joy flickers for an hour and goes out is held in higher esteem than the heavenly treasure. What though those who have believed have found in Christ the pearl of great price, and in His service an occupation that is a way to the holiest? The mind of sin remains stolid and insensible. What though those who have believed have felt the power of an endless life thrilling them with new joy, new sense of worth, new energy, and giving a new and supernal direction to all their faculties and powers? The mind of sin remains unfeeling and lifeless about it all. Can a soul have a graver warning than its own apathy towards all that makes the purest, most generous, and noblest life? Can a soul discover its own dead state more than by finding its own indifference to the best in character? "When we were in the flesh, the motions of sin did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death" (Rom. vii. 5). To be dead towards God is death at its worst. One brings away from a place one wishes to remember a sprig of rosemary and plants it in his garden. It dies. Something does not suit it. Whether it be the packing, the atmosphere, the soil, or ignorant treatment, one thing is plain: it dies. The living thing shrivels and withers and droops. Its green leaves go brown and dead. The fibre that should be flexible is brittle. For a power has seized it that makes it perish. Something like sin has come to it, come in it. This dread power has expelled the better power by which it was fresh and sweet. And when the Divine impulses of a soul are extinct, when the spirit of love and goodness in it is paralyzed, when it never warms to the love of God in Jesus Christ, never grieves at the cost of the world's evil at Calvary, never aspires towards the open heaven of the resurrection unto eternal glory, something like death has come into it.

Sin is a fall—it carries a fallen nature, a death, a fall even

unto death. No one, therefore, should ever feel ashamed to have sorrow and to show sorrow for sin. There are occasions when a broken heart is more admirable than a cold, unfeeling heart. The woman who bathed Christ's feet in her tears came nearer the childlike spirit towards God than the Pharisee who disdained to countenance her presence. The youth or maiden who has never found a tear for the deadening spell of indifference, or the unruly imagination of carnal passion, or the wild unseemliness of ungoverned temper, or some subtler sin that destroys the sense of Divine kinship and suppresses the intuition of the Divine Presence, would find in the melting of the soul a place at the feet of Christ. For sin is something to be sorry for with a great sorrow. A heart for bubbles and business, for worldly bustle and boasting, for rivalries and quarrels, for vain show and showy attainments, for polite manners and polished appearance, and no place for serving God and honouring the Saviour who gave Himself for us, no place for helping and blessing one's fellows and neighbours, no place for kindling the love of God in children, is a heart that may well break. Alas for it if it go to death in so lifeless a condition, and have no better than a barren life to present at last to Him who loves righteousness and called His offspring to enter into the fulness and joy, the honour and power, of their childhood towards Himself! Peter's tears for his downfall are a better example than unconcern in lordly apparel. The grief of a penitent heart is a joy to the angels of God. Never be ashamed to mourn for sin; never be ashamed to show and confess sorrow for sin; never forget the sin of being unfeeling towards God; never forget the low condition of living for low aims. Sinners against their own souls had need bestir themselves before the shadows of condemnation envelop them. Give heed to the call of Christ. Rise out of lethargy; flee from procrastination; shake off unworthy reserve. Shun sin; shun a state that is itself sinful; shun a life given over to the action of sin—to its fall and its death; hate being a slave to its power, and, above all, a slave without a yearning for ransom. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?"