

THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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CHAPTER THREE

MAN SINNING

When the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own way, and by their doings—Ezekiel 36:11.

“I HAVE dreamed a dream,” said Joseph, “and behold the Sun, moon, and eleven stars made obeisance to me.”

Our earth was once supposed to occupy a place of no less honor in creation. Turning daily on its axis, and performing also an annual revolution round the sun, our globe is in incessant motion; but it was once believed that its state was one of perfect rest, and that, like the small pivot on which some great wheel revolves, it formed a center, around which went rolling the whole machinery of heaven, those suns and planets, both fixed and wandering stars.

This dream of science met a happier fate than Joseph's; believed in the credulous ages of the world's childhood, it was obstinately clung to as an article of faith down to no very distant period. It is not so very long ago since the telescope of Galileo demonstrated that our earth, whatever the Pope might say, is a satellite of the sun, and but one of many orbs that roll around him; and he but one of many suns, which, taking millions of years to complete their circle, revolve about some greater center.

At some period preceding the philosopher's discovery, the throne of Spain is said to have been occupied by a man who was acute enough to perceive, that if all these vast systems, suns, planets, and comets, were daily turning round this earth, then, in making the greater subservient to the less, the Creator of the universe had constructed a very clumsy and cumbersome piece of mechanism. History has preserved the profane language of his dissent from the science of his own day. It was something to the effect that if God had consulted him when he made the worlds, they would have been better designed.

Far be it from us, under any perplexity felt in contemplating the mysteries either of creation or providence, to question the wisdom of God, to cherish a thought so daring, or utter an expression so profane. In his dealings with us, his way may be in the sea, and his path in the mighty waters, and his footsteps not known; **“by terrible things in righteousness,”** he may answer us.

Let him dash the cup from our hand, or fill it brimful of “**wine of astonishment,**” we shall never deem it right to think that God has done wrong. Whatever appearance of error his ways or works may present, be assured that the defect is not in the object, but in the spectator, in the eye that sees, not in the thing that is seen; not in the plans of infinite wisdom, but in the finite and fallible mind, which has the folly to condemn what it has not the understanding to comprehend.

“Manifold are thy works, Lord God Almighty; in wisdom hast thou made them all.”

Such is the judgment of the Psalmist; and from this no work of God’s so strongly tempts us to dissent as the condition and character of man himself; and I know no way of so well meeting this temptation as by receiving into our creed the doctrine of the Fall.

If with some we reject this doctrine— if we hold that the children are not in any sense implicated in their parents’ sin— then, in the providence of God, and in the government of the world, there appears to be nothing— I shall not say so deficient in wisdom, but so obscure, inscrutable, painfully and fearfully mysterious, as the position, condition, and character of man; for, on the supposition that man has never fallen—that the vessel is as pure and perfect as when it passed from the potter’s hand—these questions are ever rising, and, dismiss them as we may, are ever returning

- How could a good God make such a wicked creature?
- How could a kind God make such an unhappy creature?
- How could a wise God make such a foolish creature?
- How could a holy God make such a sinful creature?

If it is impossible for a pure stream to be born of a polluted fountain, is it not as impossible to believe that a crystal fountain can be the parent of a polluted stream? If a clean thing cannot come out of an unclean, is not the conclusion as fair, as logical, as inevitable, that an unclean thing cannot come out of a clean?

Now let us shut the Bible—exclude every ray of inspired and celestial light; we stand in darkness and yet it seems to me like the dead substance, the decaying wood, the putrid animal matter which grows luminous through its decay, and emits in death a phosphorescent light: by the help of man’s very corruption we have light enough to see his fallen, dead, degraded state. Indeed, I would a thousand times sooner believe, that man made himself what he is, than that God made him so; for in the one case I should think ill of man only; in the other I am tempted to blame his Maker.

Just think, I pray you, to what conclusion our reason would conduct us in any analogous case. You see, for example, a beautiful capital still bearing some of the flowers and foliage which the chisel of a master had carved upon the marble. It lies prostrate on the ground, half-buried among weeds and nettles; while beside it the rerises from its pedestal the headless shaft of a noble pillar. Would you not conclude at once that its present position, so base, mean, and prostrate, was not its original position? You would say the lightning must have struck it down; or an earthquake have shaken it, or some ignorant barbarian had climbed the shaft, and with rude hand had hurled it to the ground.

Well, we look at man, and come to a similar conclusion. There is something, there is much that is wrong, both in his state and condition. His mind is carnal, and at enmity with God; the **“imagination of his heart are only evil continually,”** so says the Bible. His body is the seat of disease; his eyes are often swimming in tears; care, anticipating age, has drawn deep furrows on his brow; he possesses noble faculties, but, like people of high descent, who have sunk into a low estate and become menials, they drudge in the service of the meanest passions.

He has an immortal soul, but it is clogged by the infirmities, and imprisoned within the walls of a **“body of death.”** His life is vanity; he is ever seeking happiness, but like the child who pursues the horizon, chases the rainbow, or climbs the hills to catch the silvery moon, he never finds the object of his search.

In some respects—manifestly made for a sphere higher than he fills—he appears to us like a creature of the air which some cruel hand has stripped of its silken wings. How like he looks to this hapless object which has just fallen on the pages of a book that we read by the candle on an autumn evening! it retains the wish, but has lost the power to fly; allured by the taper’s glare, it has brushed the flame, burned its wings, and, dropping with a heavy fall, it now crawls wingless across the page, and seeks the finger of mercy to end its misery.

Compare man with any of the other creatures of God, and how directly we come to the conclusion that he is not the creature he came from his Maker’s hands!

Who has not had this borne in upon his mind when his feet carried him forth into the fields of nature? I pass out among our sylvan scenes; and here, on the spray of the tasseled broom, there sits and sings a little bird; it fills the glen with melody; from his throat and throbbing breast he rings out the sweetest music, as with keen bright eye he now looks up to God and now down on the bush where his mate sits with wings extended over their unfeathered nestlings; with songs he cheers her maternal cares, and is then away on busy wing to cater for mother and her young.

Next, I turn my steps to the open moor; and so soon as the intruder appears on her lonely domain, the lapwing comes down upon the wind; brave and venturesome she sweeps us with her wing, and shrieks out her distress as she wheels round and round our head; her brood are cowering on that naked waste; nor does she rest until our foot is off the ground, and even then, when the coast is clear, we hear her long, wild screams, like the beating of a mother’s heart when her child is saved; like the mournful dash of waves upon the shore long after the wind is down.

Next I climb the mountain, when snowdrifts thick from murky heavens, and, like Satan, taking advantage of a believer’s trials, the wily fox is out upon the hunt; every mother of the flock lies there with her tender lamb behind her; with her body she screens it from the rudeness of the storm, and with her head to the wind, and expanded nostrils snuffling the distant danger, she lies ready, the moment her eye catches the stealthy foe, to receive him on her feet, and die, like a true mother, in her lamb’s defence.

Such are God’s creatures.

The work is unmarred; the workmanship what it came from the Maker's hand; and away among these old hoary hills, remote from man, his cities, his sins, his works, his sorrows, we are out of bearing of the groans of creation; and, but for the corruption we carry with and within us, we could almost forget the Fall.

Stretched on a flowery bank, with the hum of bees, the song of birds, and the chirp of the merry grasshopper in our ear, heaven serene above us, and beneath us the placid lake, where every flower and bush and birch tree of the rock looks down into the mirror of its own beauty, the murmur of the waterfall sounds to us, like an echo from the crags of the Creator's voice, "**All is very good.**"

But let us retrace our steps along the dusty road from the broom where the little bird sings, and the moor where the lapwing screams her maternal fears, and the bill where the timid sheep faces the fox to die for her offspring; or the forest, where the bear with her cubs behind her, offers her shaggy bosom to the spear. Enter this town. Look at this mother, as we saw her when Sabbath bells rung worshipers to prayer, and God was calling sinners to the throne of mercy. Her back is against the church's wall; she has sunk on the cold pavement; her senses are steeped in drink, and on her lap— pitiful sight! lies an emaciated, half-naked infant, with the chill, cold rain soaking its scanty rags, and lashing its pallid face. Is this God's handiwork? Is this the clay as it came from the potter's wheel? Was this the shape in which woman came from her Maker's hand? When Adam woke, was our mother Eve such as this her daughter? If so, better he had never woke; it had been good for him to be alone, Nature, to say nothing of religion, revolts from the thought.

Now, it is common, enough to call such spectacles brutal; language which is a libel on creation, and a blasphemy against the Creator, Such scenes are not brutal. My very argument lies in this, that the brute beasts never present themselves in such a repulsive and revolting aspect. Under the impulse of instincts necessary for their well-being, for the due balance of races, and the general welfare of the world, they may, and indeed must prey upon each other; but did any man ever find them committing self-destruction?

Do they ever pursue such suicidal conduct? Range the wide fields of nature, travel from the equator to the poles, rise from the worm that crawls on earth to the eagle that cleaves the clouds, and where shall you find anything corresponding to our scenes of dissipation, or the bloody fields of war? Suppose, that on his return from Africa, some Park, or Bruce, or Campbell, were to tell how he had seen the lions of the desert leave their prey, and, meeting face to face in marshaled bands, amid roars that drowned the thunder, engage in deadly battle, he would find none so credulous as to believe him; the world would laugh the traveler and his tale to scorn. But should a thing so strange and monstrous occur—should we see the cattle, while the air shook with their bellowings, and the ground trembled beneath their hoofs, rush from their distant pastures, to form two vast, black, solid columns; and should these herds, with heads leveled to the charge, dash forward to bury their horns in each other's bodies, we would proclaim a prodigy, and ask what madness had seized creation. Well, is not sin the parent of more awful prodigies? Look here—turn to the horrors of this battlefield. This is no fancy, but a fact—a bloody, sickening fact.

The ground lies thick with the mangled brave; the air is shaken with the most horrible sounds; every countenance expresses the passions of a fiend. Humanity flies shrinking from the scene, and leaves it to rage, revenge, and agony. Fiercer than the cannon's flash shoot flames of wrath from brother's eyes; they sheathe their swords in each other's bowels: every stroke makes a widow, and every ringing volley scatters a hundred orphans on a homeless world.

I would sooner believe that there was no God at all, than that man appears in this scene as he came from the hand of a benignant Divinity. Man must have fallen; nature, society, the state of the world, are so many echoes of the voice of Revelation; they proclaim that man is fallen— that the gold has become dim— that the much fine gold has perished; and, in words to which we again turn your attention, that we have defiled the land in which we dwell, by our ways and by our doings. Now, leaving the subject of Original, to speak of Actual Sin, we remark—

I. Apart from derived sinfulness, we have personal sins to answer for,

Dispose of the doctrine of original sin as you please; suppose that you could disprove it; when that count of the indictment is canceled, what have you gained?

Enough, more than enough, remains to convict us of guilt, and condemn all within these walls. You may deny Original, but can any man deny Actual Sin? for might as well deny your existence; it sticks to you like your shadow. **“If we should say that we have no sin, we make God a liar, and the truth is not in us.”** I say with God, **“Come, let us reason together,”** Do you mean to affirm, on the one hand, that you have never been guilty of doing what you should not have done? or, on the other, never guilty of not doing what you should have done?

Lives there a man so happy as to look back on the past and feel no remorse, or forward to the future and feel no fear? What? is there no page of your history that you would obliterate— no leaf that, with God's permission you would tear from the book? Is there no action, nor word, nor wish of days gone by, that you would not, if you could, recall? To David's prayer, **“Lord, remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions,”** have you no solemn and hearty Amen?

If you could be carried back to the starting pest, and leant again against the cradle, and stood again at your mother's knee, and sat again at the old school desk, with companions that are now changed, or scattered, or dead and gone—were you to begin life anew—would you run the self-same course; would you live over the self-same life? What! is there no speech that you would unsay? is there no act that you would undo? no Sabbath that you would spend better? none yet alive, none moldering in the grave, none now in heaven or hell, to whom you would bear yourself otherwise than you have done?

Are there none among the dead whose memory stings you, and whose everlasting state tills you with anxiety? Did you never share in sins that may have proved their ruin? and never fail in faithfulness that might have saved their souls? Oh! if every thread of our web were yet to weave, what man would mate the future a faithful—I will add, fearful copy of the past?

I will venture to say that no man living would; and that the Apostle has universal conscience on his aide, when he says, **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,”** Our sins are more in number than the hairs upon our head; and I know no language nor attitude so becoming us as those of Ezra, when, rending his mantle, he fell upon his knees and cried, **“Oh, my God, I am ashamed, and blush to lift up my face to thee; for our iniquities are increased over our heads, and our trespass is gone up into the heavens.”**

II. *The guilt of these actual sins is our own.*

“Hast thou eaten of the tree?” God puts the question, and man replies, **“The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.”** Adam points an accusing finger at Eve, and turning round to the woman, God says, **“What is this that thou hast done?”** She in turn lays the blame on the serpent, saying, **“The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.”** And thus and thus they shift the sin. We have “eaten of the tree;” and—unless it be to roll the guilt on Christ—we attempt in vain to screen ourselves behind another’s back—to lay the burden on any shoulders but our own.

There are strong pleas which the poor heathen may advance in extenuation of their guilt; and, stepping forward with some confidence to judgment—may urge upon a just and merciful as well as holy God.

They may say, we knew no better; no man cared for our souls. Great God! When thy followers landed on our happy shores, they brought no olive branch or Bible, but fire, and sword, and slavery; and on the back of those who, bearing thy name, oppressed us, robbed us, enslaved us, and left us to die ignorant of thy love, we lay our guilt.

Let them answer for us; place these Christians at thy bar; ask them **“where is thy brother Abel?”** and on their heads, not on ours, let thy dread justice fall. This wretched, ragged child, the victim of cruelty and neglect, who leaves hunger and a bed of straw to stand at the bar of God, may lift up his head at that august tribunal, and stand on his defence with more certainty both of justice and pity than he has ever met here below. In cold and nakedness, in hunger and thirst, in rags and ignorance, he was left to wander our hard streets, and, among all the Christians of this city, there was not one kind hand to guide his naked feet to Sabbath church or infant school.

Poor wretch! The house of God was not for him; and now that he addresses one who will not refuse to hear him—child of misfortune!—now may he say, Merciful Lord! My mother taught me to steal, my father taught me to swear. How could I obey a Bible which I never learned to read? How could I believe in thee, whom no one taught me to know?

Saviour of sinners! Condemn me not; how was I to avoid sins against which I was never warned? I did not know what I did. Seizing thy cross, I claim the benefit of its dying prayer, **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”**

What value may be given to these pleas—what weight they may carry at a tribunal where much will be exacted of those who have got much, and little asked where little has been given—it is not for us to say.

The Judge of all the earth will do right. But this we know, that we have no such excuse to plead. No such plea to urge in extenuation of one of a thousand of our offences. Some, indeed, plead their natural proneness to sin; they excuse themselves to conscience on that ground, or on this or that the temptation before which they fell, fell on them with the suddenness and vehemence of a hurricane. The command, however, to watch and pray leaves you without excuse. You were fully warned, and should have been on the outlook for the white squall.

The sentinel is righteously shot who allows himself to sleep upon his post. Supposing, however, that the plea were accepted; I repeat, enough, and more than enough, remains to condemn us, and leaves guilt no refuge out of Christ. We talk of the strength and suddenness of temptation; but how often have we sinned designedly, deliberately, repeatedly? We talk of our bias to sin; but who has not committed sins that he could have avoided—sins which he could have abstained from, and sins which he did abstain from, when it served some present purpose to do so?

This reeling sot and slave of drunkenness keeps sober at a communion season; and the swearer, who alleges that he cannot refrain from oaths, puts a bridle on his tongue in the presence of his minister. It is useless for the sinner to say that he is swept away by temptation; **“he conceiveth mischief, and he bringeth forth falsehood;”** and if swept away, it is as the suicide who seeks the river, stands on its brink, and, leaping in, is swept off to his watery grave. I know that Satan goes about seeking whom he may devour; but, while he tempts us, how often have we tempted him? Stealing on unawares, and, like a lion crouching to the leap, with sudden and unlooked for spring he may cast himself upon us; but how often have we cast ourselves in his way?

We have gone down to Delilah, we have stood in the way of sinners, we have sinned when we knew that we were sinning; we have gone where we knew that we were to sin; and, in pursuit of its guilty pleasures—trampling conscience beneath our feet, and more than that, the body and blood of Jesus Christ—we have done what the heathen never did, what Sodom and Gomorrah never did, what Tyre and Sidon never did—we have rejected a Saviour, and madly refused eternal life. There is hope for us in the blood of his cross, but none in its prayer. We knew what we did.

Some years ago, on a great public occasion, a distinguished statesman rose up in the presence of assembled thousands, and, in reply to certain calumnious and dishonorable charges, raised his hands in the vast assembly, exclaiming, “These hands are clean.” Now, if you or I, or any of our fallen race did entertain a hope that we could act over this scene before God in judgment, I could comprehend the calm and unimpassioned indifference with which men sit in church on successive Sabbaths, eye the cross of Calvary, and listen to the overtures of mercy.

Are these matters with which you have nothing to do? If, indeed, you have no sins to answer for—if before this world’s great assize you are prepared not only to plead, but to prove your innocence—if conscience accuses you in nothing, and excuses you in everything—then sleep on, in God’s name sleep on, and take your rest. But when the heavens over men are clothed in thunders, and hell yawns beneath their feet, and both God’s law and their own conscience condemn them, such indifference is madness!

Beware! Play with no fire; least of all, with fire unquenchable. Play with no edged sword; least of all, with that which Justice sheathed in a Saviour's bosom. Delay by the mouth of no pit; least of all, on the brink of a bottomless one, the smoke of whose torment goeth up forever and ever. Think of those things. Incalculable issues are at stake; your everlasting destiny may turn upon this hour.

Do you feel under condemnation? Are you really anxious to be saved? Be not turned from your purpose by the jeers and taunts of the ungodly. It is a very common thing with scoffers, and with those whose religion as a cloak always worn loosely, nor ever drawn closely round, save, so to speak, in inclement weather, when distress troubles, or death alarms them; it is no uncommon thing to eye all men of zealous duty with cold suspicion, and represent them as either rogues or fools, fanatics or hypocrites.

In answer to the charge of weakness or folly, I think I could produce an array of brilliant and immortal names—names of men in whom duty has been associated with the highest intellect, the loftiest genius, the most profound and statesman-like sagacity—men besides whom most of your scoffers, skeptics, and worldlings were as dwarfs in the company of giants.

Folly! if Christians really such are chargeable with any folly, it is with that of not being zealous enough—with that of being, not too much, but too little religious. In the name both of common sense and religion, I ask, is it possible, if there be a hell, to be too anxious to escape it? If men are perishing, how can I, with my children, brothers, sisters, friends in the burning, be too anxious to save them? The man who rises at mirk midnight to quench the flames in a neighbor's house, is no fool surely; but he who can coolly eat his meals beside the sea or go singing about his common avocations along the shore, when the wreck is in his eye, and the roar of the surf and the shrieks of the drowning are in his ear, he is a fool, or something worse.

As to the insinuation of general hypocrisy, the wretched charge got up against all religion, when some specious professor stands unmasked before the world, how absurd it is! Is there no grain in our barnyards, because there is so much chaff? Are all patriots—Wallace and the Bruce, Tell, Kussel, and Washington—deceivers and liars, because some men have villainously betrayed their country? Is there no honor in the British army, because some soldiers, the sweepings probably of our city streets, have left the lines, and leaped the trenches, and deserted to the enemy?

Is there no integrity among British merchants, because now and then we hear of a fraudulent bankruptcy? Because some religious professors prove hypocrites, is therefore all ardent piety hollow hypocrisy? To reason so, argues either a disordered intellect or a very depraved heart—is a conclusion, indeed, as contrary to logic as to love. When were hypocrites ever known to suffer for their principles? Yet is there a country in Christendom that has not been strewed thick with the ashes and dyed red with the blood of martyrs? Have not their heads in ghastly rows stood on our city gates? Two hundred years ago, and the windows of the very houses still standing round this church were crowded with eager faces, taking their last look of men who went with firm step and lofty carriage to die for principle—loving Christ more than their lives, and ready, as one said before they threw him off—had they as many lives as they had hairs on their head, to lay them all down for Christ.

Religion is an honest thing, and true wisdom. God working in you, work out therefore your salvation. The way to the refuge lies open; with the feet of Azazel haste to Jesus.

Once in him, you can turn on the avenger, saying, I fear thee not; here thou comest, but no farther; this blood-red line thou canst not pass— **“There is therefore now no condemnation for them who are in Christ Jesus.”**

Do you see that sin stains your holiest services, defiling head, heart, hands, feet—the whole man? Haste to the fountain where sins are lost and souls are cleansed. With its base ingratitude to your heavenly Father—with the wounds it has inflicted on a most loving Saviour—with the grief it has caused, and the resistance it has made, to a most gentle and Holy Spirit—with the deep injuries it has done to your own soul, and souls which, loving, you should have sought to save— Oh, let sin be your deepest sorrow, your heaviest grief, the spring of many tears, the burden of many sighs, the occasion of daily visits to the cross of Calvary.

“Weep not for broad lands lost;
Weep not for fair hopes crossed;
Weep not when limbs wax old;
Weep not when friends grow cold;
Weep not, that death must part
Thine and the best-loved heart;
Weep, weep—weep all thou can—
Weep, weep, because thou art
A sin-defiled man.”

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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