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SELF-SCRUTINY IN GOD'S PRESENCE.

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"Come, now, and let us reason together, saith 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 i. 11.

THESE words were at first addressed to the church of God. The prophet Isaiah begins his prophecy by calling upon the heavens and the earth to witness the exceeding sinfulness of God's chosen people. "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider." Such ingratitude and sin as this he naturally supposes would shock the very heavens and earth.

Then follows a most vehement and terrible rebuke. The elect people of God are called "Sodom" and "Gomorrah." "Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. Why should ye be stricken any more? Ye will revolt more and more." This outflow of holy displeasure would prepare us to expect an everlasting reprobacy of the rebellious and unfaithful church, but it is strangely followed by the most yearning and melting entreaty ever addressed by the Most High to the creatures of his footstool: "Come, now, and let us reason together; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as

white as snow ; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

These words have, however, a wider application ; and while the unfaithful children of God ought to ponder them long and well, it is of equal importance that "the aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" should reflect upon them, and see their general application to all transgressors, so long as they are under the Gospel dispensation. Let us, then, consider two of the plain lessons taught in these words of the prophet to every unpardoned man.

1. The text represents God as saying to the transgressor of his law, "Come, and let us reason together." The first lesson to be learned, consequently, is the duty of examining our moral character and conduct along with God.

When a responsible being has made a wrong use of his powers, nothing is more reasonable than that he should call himself to account for this abuse. Nothing, certainly, is more necessary. There can be no amendment for the future until the past has been cared for. But that this examination may be both thorough and profitable, it must be made in company with the Searcher of hearts.

For there are always two beings who are concerned with sin : the being who commits it, and the Being against whom it is committed. We sin, indeed, against ourselves—against our own conscience, and against our own best interest ; but we sin in a yet higher and more terrible sense against another than ourselves, compared with whose majesty all our faculties and interests, both in time and eternity, are altogether nothing and vanity. It is not enough, therefore, to refer our sin to the law written on the heart, and there stop. We must ultimately pass beyond conscience itself to God, and say, "Against *Thee* have I sinned." It is not the highest expression of the religious feeling when we say, "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against my conscience?" He alone has reached the summit of vision who looks beyond all finite limits, however wide and distant—beyond all finite faculties, however noble and

elevated, and says, "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Whenever, therefore, an examination is made into the nature of moral evil as it exists in the individual heart, both parties concerned should share in the examination. The soul, as it looks within, should invite the scrutiny of God also, and as fast as it makes discoveries of its transgression and corruption should realize that the Holy One sees also. Such a joint examination as this produces a very keen and clear sense of the evil and guilt of sin. Conscience, indeed, makes cowards of us all, but when the eye of God is felt to be upon us, it smites us to the ground. "When *Thou* with rebukes," says the Psalmist, "dost correct man for his iniquity, Thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth." One great reason why the feeling which the moralist has towards sin is so tame and languid, when compared with the holy abhorrence of the regenerate mind, lies in the fact that he has not contemplated human depravity in company with a sin-hating Jehovah. At the very utmost, he has been shut up merely with a moral sense which he has insulated from its dread ground and support—the personal character and holy emotions of God. What wonder is it, then, that this finite faculty should lose much of its temper and severity, and though still condemning sin (for it must do this, if it does anything), fails to do it with that spiritual energy which characterizes the conscience when God is felt to be co-present and co-operating. So it is in other provinces. We feel the guilt of an evil action more sharply when we know that a fellow-man saw us commit it, than when we know that no one but ourselves is cognizant of the deed. The flush of shame often rises into our face upon learning accidentally that a fellow-being was looking at us, when we did the wrong action without any blush. How much more criminal, then, do we feel, when distinctly aware that the pure and holy God knows our transgression! How much clearer is our perception of the nature of moral evil, when we investigate it along with him whose eyes are a flame of fire!

It is, consequently, a very solemn moment when the human spirit and the Eternal Mind are reasoning together about the inward sinfulness. When the soul is shut up along with the Holy One of Israel, there are great searchings of heart. Man is honest and anxious at such a time. His usual thoughtlessness and torpidity upon the subject of religion leave him, and he becomes a serious and deeply-interested creature. Would that the multitudes who listen so languidly to the statements of the pulpit, upon these themes of sin and guilt, might be closeted with the Everlasting Judge, in silence and in solemn reflection. You who have for years been told of sin, but are, perhaps, still as indifferent regarding it as if there were no stain upon the conscience, would that you might enter into an examination of yourself, alone with your Maker. Then would you become as serious, and as anxious, as you will be in that moment when you shall be informed that the last hour of your life upon earth has come.

Another effect of this "reasoning together" with God respecting our character and conduct is to render our views discriminating. The action of the mind is not only intense, it is also intelligent. Strange as it may sound, it is yet a fact, that a review of our past lives conducted under the eye of God, and with a recognition of his presence and oversight, serves to deliver the mind from confusion and panic, and to fill it with a calm and rational fear. This is of great value; for when a man begins to be excited upon the subject of religion—it may be for the first time in his unreflecting and heedless life—he is oftentimes terribly excited. He is now brought suddenly into the midst of the most solemn things. That sin of his—the enormity of which he had never seen before—now reveals itself in a most frightful form, and he feels as the murderer does who wakes in the morning and begins to realize that he has killed a man. That holy Being, of whose holiness he had no proper conception, now rises dim and awful before his half-opened inward eye, and he trembles like the pagan before the unknown God whom he ignorantly worships. That eternity, which he had heard spoken of

with total indifference, now flashes penal flames in his face. Taken and held in this state of mind, the transgressor is confusedly as well as terribly awakened, and he needs first of all to have this experience clarified, and know precisely for what he is trembling, and why. This panic and consternation must depart, and a calm, intelligent anxiety must take its place. But this cannot be unless the mind turns towards God, and invites his searching scrutiny and his aid in the search after sin. So long as we shrink away from our Judge, and in upon ourselves, in these hours of conviction—so long as we deal only with the workings of our own minds, and do not look up and “reason together” with God—we take the most direct method of producing a blind, an obscure, and a selfish agony. We work ourselves, more and more, into a mere frenzy of excitement. Some of the most wretched and fanatical experience in the history of the church is traceable to a solitary self-brooding, in which, after the sense of sin had been awakened, the soul did not discuss the matter with God.

For the character and attributes of God, when clearly seen, repress all fright, and produce that peculiar species of fear which is tranquil because it is deep. Though the soul, in such an hour, is conscious that God is a fearful object of sight for a transgressor, yet it continues to gaze at him with an eager, straining eye; and, in so doing, the superficial tremor and panic of its first awakening to the subject of religion passes off, and gives place to an intenser moral feeling, the calmness of which is like the stillness of fascination. Nothing has a finer effect upon a company of awakened minds than to cause the being and attributes of God, in all their majesty and purity, to rise like an orb within their horizon; and the individual can do nothing more proper or more salutary, when once his sin begins to disquiet him, and the inward perturbation commences, than to collect and steady himself in an act of reflection upon that very Being who abhors sin. Let no man, in the hour of conviction and moral fear, attempt to run away from the divine holiness. On the contrary, let him rush forward and throw himself down

prostrate before that Dread Presence, and plead the merits of the Son of God before it. He that finds his life shall lose it, but he that loses his life shall find it. Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains a single unproductive corn of wheat; but if it die, it germinates, and brings forth much fruit. He who does not avoid a contact between the sin of his soul and the holiness of his God, but, on the contrary, seeks to have these two things come together, that each may be understood in its own intrinsic nature and quality, takes the only safe course. He finds that, as he knows God more distinctly, he knows himself more distinctly; and though as yet he can see nothing but displeasure in that holy countenance, he is possessed of a well-defined experience. He knows that he is wrong, and that his Maker is right—that he is wicked, and that God is holy. He perceives these two fundamental facts with a simplicity and a certainty that admit of no debate. The confusion and obscurity of his mind, and particularly the queryings whether these things are so, whether God is so very holy and man so very sinful, begin to disappear like a fog when dispelled and scattered by sunrise. Objects are seen in their true proportions and meanings; right and wrong, the carnal mind and the spiritual mind, heaven and hell—all the great contraries that pertain to the subject of religion—are distinctly understood, and thus the first step is taken towards a better state of things in the soul.

Let no man, then, fear to invite the scrutiny of God in connection with his own scrutiny of himself. He who deals only with the sense of duty and the operations of his own mind will find that these themselves become more dim and indistinct so long as the process of examination is not conducted in this joint manner—so long as the mind refuses to accept the divine proposition: “Come, now, and let us reason together.” He, on the other hand, who endeavours to obtain a clear view of the Being against whom he has sinned, and to feel the full power of his holy eye, as well as of his holy law, will find that his sensations and experiences are gaining a wonderful distinctness

and intensity that will speedily bring the entire matter to an issue.

2. For then, by the blessing of God, he learns the second lesson taught in the text—viz., that there is forgiveness with God. Though, in this process of joint examination, our sins be found to be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be discovered to be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

If there were no forgiveness of sins, if mercy were not a manifested attribute of God, all self-examination, and, especially, all this conjoint divine scrutiny, would be a pure torment and a pure gratuity. It is wretchedness to know that we are guilty sinners, but it is the endless torment to know that there is no forgiveness, either here or hereafter. Convince a man that he will never be pardoned, and you shut him up with the spirits in prison. Compel him to examine himself under the eye of his God, while at the same time he has no hope of mercy—and there would be nothing unjust in this—and you distress him with the keenest and most living torment of which a rational spirit is capable. Well and natural was it that the earliest creed of the Christian church emphasised the doctrine of the divine pity; and in all ages the Apostolic Symbol has called upon the guilt-stricken human soul to cry, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

We have the amplest assurance in the whole written Revelation of God, but nowhere else, that “there is forgiveness with him, that he may be feared.” “Whoso confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall find mercy;” and only with such an assurance as this from his own lips could we summon courage to look into our character and conduct, and invite God to do the same. But the text is an exceedingly explicit assertion of this great truth. The very same Being who invites us to reason with him, and canvass the subject of our criminality in the very same breath, if we may so speak, assures us that he will forgive all that is found in this examination. And upon such terms cannot the criminal well afford to examine into his crime? He

has a promise beforehand, that if he will but scrutinize and confess his sin, it shall be forgiven. God would have been simply and strictly just had he said to him, "Go down into the depths of thy transgressing spirit, see how wicked thou hast been and still art, and know that in my righteous severity I will never pardon thee, world without end." But, instead of this, he says, "Go down into the depths of thy heart, see the transgression and the corruption all along the line of the examination, confess it into my ear, and I will make the scarlet and crimson guilt white in the blood of my own Son." These declarations of Holy Writ, which are a direct verbal statement from the lips of God, and which specify distinctly what he will do and will not do in the matter of sin, teach us that however deeply our souls shall be found to be stained, the Divine pity outruns and exceeds the crime. "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy towards them that fear him. He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Here, upon earth, there is no wickedness that surpasses the pardoning love of God in Christ. The words which Shakespeare puts into the mouth of the remorseful but impenitent Danish king, are strictly true:—

"What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood?
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy,
But to confront the visage of offence?"

Anywhere this side of the other world, and at any moment this side of the grave, a sinner, if penitent (but penitence is not always at his control), may obtain forgiveness for all his sins, through Christ's blood of atonement. He must not hope for mercy in the future world, if he neglects it here. There are no acts of pardon passed in the day of judgment. The utterance of Christ in that day is not the utterance, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," but "Come ye blessed," or, "Depart ye cursed."

So long, and only so long, as there is life, there is hope; and however great may be the conscious criminality of a man while he is under the economy of Redemption, and before he is summoned to render up his last account, let him not despair, but hope in Divine grace.

Now, he who has seriously "reasoned together" with God respecting his own character is far better prepared to find God in the forgiveness of sins than he who has merely brooded over his own unhappiness, without any reference to the qualities and claims of his Judge. It has been a plain and personal matter throughout, and having now come to a clear and settled conviction that he is a guilty sinner, he turns directly to the great and good Being who stands immediately before him, and prays to be forgiven, and is forgiven. One reason why the soul so often gropes days and months without finding a sin-pardoning God, lies in the fact that its thoughts and feelings respecting religious subjects, and particularly respecting the state of the heart, have been too vague and indistinct. They have not had an immediate and close reference to that one single Being who is most directly concerned, and who alone can minister to a mind diseased. The soul is wretched, and there may be some sense of sin, but there is no one to go to—no one to address with an appealing cry. "Oh, that I knew where I might find him!" is its language. "Oh, that I might come even to his seat! Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him." But this groping would cease were there a clear view of God. There might not be peace and a sense of reconciliation immediately; but there would be a distinct conception of the one thing needful in order to salvation. This would banish all other subjects and objects. The eye would be fixed upon the single fact of sin, and the simple fact that none but God can forgive it. The whole inward experience would thus be narrowed down to a focus. Simplicity and intensity would be introduced into the mental state, instead of the previous confusion and vagueness. Soliloquy would end, and

prayer—importunate, agonizing prayer—would begin. That morbid and useless self-brooding would cease, and those strong cryings and wrestlings till day-break would commence, and the kingdom of heaven would suffer this violence, and the violent would take it by force. “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old, through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture was turned into the drouth of summer. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity I no longer hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. For this”—because this is thy method of salvation—“shall every one that is godly pray unto thee, in a time when thou mayest be found.” (Psa. xxxii. 3—6.)

Self-examination, then, when joined with a distinct recognition of the Divine character, and a conscious sense of God’s scrutiny, paradoxical as it may appear, is the surest means of producing a firm conviction in a guilty mind that God is merciful, and is the swiftest way of finding him to be so. Opposed as the Divine nature is to sin, abhorrent as iniquity is to the pure mind of God, it is nevertheless a fact, that that sinner who goes directly into this Dread Presence with all his sins upon his head, in order to know them, to be condemned and crushed by them, and to confess them, is the one who soonest returns with peace and hope in his soul. For he discovers that God is as cordial and sincere in his offer to forgive, as he is in his threat to punish; and having, to his sorrow, felt the reality and power of the Divine anger, he now, to his joy, feels the equal reality and power of the Divine love.

And this is the one great lesson which every man must learn, or perish for ever. The truthfulness of God, in every respect, and in all relations—his strict fidelity to his word, both under the law and under the gospel—is a quality of which every one must have a vivid knowledge and certainty in order to salvation. Men perish through unbelief. He that doubteth is damned. To illustrate. Men pass through this life doubting and denying God’s abhorrence of sin, and his determination to

punish it for ever and ever. Under the narcotic and stupefying influence of this doubt and denial they remain in sin, and, at death, go over into the immediate presence of God, only to discover that all his statements respecting his determination upon this subject are true—awfully and hopelessly true. They then spend an eternity in bewailing their infatuation in dreaming, while here upon earth, that the great and holy God did not mean what he said.

Unbelief, again, tends to death in the other direction, though it is far less liable to result in it. The convicted and guilt-smitten man sometimes doubts the truthfulness of the Divine promise in Christ. He spends days of darkness and nights of woe, because he is unbelieving in regard to God's compassion and readiness to forgive a penitent; and when at length the light of the Divine countenance breaks upon him, he wonders that he was so foolish and slow of heart to believe all that God himself had said concerning the "multitude" of his tender mercies. Christian and Hopeful lay long and needlessly in the dungeon of Doubting Castle, until the former remembered that the key to all the locks was in his bosom, and had been all the while. They needed only to take God at his word. The anxious and fearful soul must believe the Eternal Judge implicitly when he says, "I will justify thee through the blood of Christ." God is truthful under the gospel and under the law; in his promise of mercy and in his threatening of eternal woe. And "if we believe not, yet he abideth faithful; he cannot deny himself." He hath promised, and he hath threatened; and, though heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle of that promise shall not fail in the case of those who confidently trust it, nor shall one iota or scintilla of the threatening fail in the instance of those who have recklessly and rashly disbelieved it.

In respect, then, to both sides of the revelation of the Divine character—in respect to the threatening and the promise—men need to have a clear perception, and an unwavering belief. He that doubteth in either direction is damned. He who does not

believe that God is truthful when he declares that he will "punish iniquity, transgression, and sin," and that those upon the left hand shall "go away into everlasting punishment," will persist in sin until he passes the line of probation and be lost. And he who does not believe that God is truthful when he declares that he will forgive scarlet and crimson sins through the blood of Christ will be overcome by despair, and be also lost. But he who believes both divine statements with equal certainty, and perceives both facts with distinct vision, will be saved.

From these two lessons of the text we deduce the following practical directions:—

1. In all states of religious anxiety, we should betake ourselves instantly and directly to God. There is no other refuge for the human soul but God in Christ, and if this fail us, we must renounce all hope here and hereafter.

"If this fail,
The pillared firmament is rottenness,
And earth's base built on stubble."

We are, therefore, from the nature of the case, shut up to this course. Suppose the religious anxiety arise from a sense of sin and the fear of retribution. God is the only Being that can forgive sins. To whom, then, can such an one go but unto him? Suppose the religious anxiety arises from a sense of the perishing nature of earthly objects, and the soul feels as if all the foundation and fabric of its hope and comfort were rocking into irretrievable ruin. God is the only Being who can help in this crisis. In either or in any case—be it the anxiety of the unforgiven, or of the child of God—whatever be the species of mental sorrow, the human soul is, by its very circumstances, driven to its Maker, or else driven to destruction.

What more reasonable course, therefore, than to conform to the necessities of our condition? The principal part of wisdom is to take things as they are, and act accordingly. Are we, then, sinners, and in fear for the final result of our life?

Though it may seem to us like running into fire, we must, nevertheless, betake ourselves first and immediately to that Being who hates and punishes sin. Though we see nothing but condemnation and displeasure in those holy eyes, we must nevertheless approach them just and simply as we are. We must say, with King David in a similar case, when he had incurred the displeasure of God, "I am in a great strait; [yet] let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for very great are his mercies" (1 Chron. xx. 13). We must suffer the intolerable brightness to blind and blast us in our guiltiness, and let there be an actual contact between the sin of our soul and the holiness of our God. If we thus proceed, in accordance with the facts of our case and our position, we shall meet with a great and joyful surprise. Flinging ourselves helpless, and despairing of all other help—rashly, as it will seem to us, flinging ourselves off from the position where we now are, and upon which we must inevitably perish—we shall find ourselves, to our surprise and unspeakable joy, caught in everlasting, paternal arms. He who loses his life—he who dares to lose his life—shall find it.

2. In all our religious anxiety, we should make a full and plain statement of everything to God. God loves to hear the details of our sin and our woe. The soul that pours itself out as water will find that it is not like water spilt upon the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. Even when the story is one of shame and remorse, we find it to be mental relief, patiently, and without any reservation or palliation, to expose the whole, not only to our own eye, but to that of our Judge. For to this very thing have we been invited. This is precisely the "reasoning together" which God proposes to us. God has not offered clemency to a sinful world with the expectation or desire that there be, on the part of those to whom it is offered, such a stinted and meagre confession, such a glozing over and diminution of sin, as to make that clemency appear a very small matter. He well knows the depth and the immensity of the sin which he proposes to pardon, and has made provision accordingly. In the phrase of Luther, it is no painted sinner

who is to be forgiven, and it is no painted Saviour who is offered. The transgression is deep and real, and the atonement is deep and real. The crime cannot be exaggerated, neither can the expiation. He, therefore, who makes the plainest and most child-like statement of himself to God, acts most in accordance with the mind, and will, and gospel of God. If man only be hearty, full, and unreserved in confession, he will find God to be hearty, full, and unreserved in absolution.

Man is not straitened upon the side of the divine mercy. The obstacle in the way of his salvation is in himself; and the particular, fatal obstacle consists in the fact that he does not feel that he needs mercy. God in Christ stands ready to pardon, but man the sinner stands up before him, like the besotted criminal in our courts of law, with no feeling upon the subject. The Judge assures him that he has a boundless grace and clemency to bestow, but the stolid, hardened man is not even aware that he has committed a dreadful crime, and needs grace and clemency. There is food in infinite abundance, but no hunger upon the part of man. The water of life is flowing by in torrents, but men have no thirst. In this state of things nothing can be done but to pass a sentence of condemnation. God cannot forgive a being who does not even know that he needs to be forgiven. Knowledge, then, self-knowledge, is the great requisite; and the want of it is the cause of perdition. This "reasoning together" with God, respecting our past and present character and conduct, is the first step to be taken by any one who would make preparation for eternity. As soon as we come to a right understanding of our lost and guilty condition, we shall cry, "Be merciful to me, a sinner; create within me a clean heart, O God." Without such an understanding—such an intelligent perception of our sin and guilt—we never shall, and we never can.