

THE PENITENT

REV. JAMES MORGAN, D.D.

THE PENITENT:

**AN EXPOSITION
OF THE
FIFTY-FIRST PSALM.**

**BY THE
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BELFAST.**

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TO
Charles Thomson, Esq.,
ONE OF THE ORIGINAL FOUNDERS,
AND
THE CONSTANT FRIEND,
OF
THE CONGREGATION OF FISHERWICK PLACE,

This Volume is Inscribed,
A TOKEN OF AFFECTION AND ESTEEM,
BY

The Author.

PREFACE.

IN the beginning of November last, a quarter of a century was completed from the commencement of my ministry in Belfast. The recurrence of such a period was fitted to awaken many serious contemplations, as well in the remembrance of the past as in the anticipation of the future. It was my anxious desire to engage in such exercises as were suitable to so solemn a time, and which might be fitted alike for my own personal improvement and the edification of my flock. In this state of mind, the 51st Psalm again and again presented itself to my consideration. It was the only portion of the Divine Word on which I could fix my attention. Its penitential strains fell in with the reflections which were called forth as I reviewed my ministry. I could not free myself from it. Indeed I did not try nor desire to do so. I felt thankful that the Spirit of God had furnished me with such a manual of devotion. It was adapted to a deep consciousness of great unworthiness and unfaithfulness. True, my ministry had been outwardly prosperous. From the beginning, our large church was filled with a crowded congregation. For twenty-five years the attendance never slackened. Our communicants, within that period, had been more than doubled, having risen from three hundred and sixty-four to more than eight hundred. Our Sabbath-schools had grown from a small class to about one thousand, including teachers and scholars. The congregation had increased amazingly in large-hearted generosity, continually laying its benefactions on the altar of God. In all that time its peace had not been once broken. All this I knew, and was ready to acknowledge. But it did not prevent my humiliation. On the contrary, it increased it. I could not help exclaiming, "Who am I, or what has been my Father's house; that thou hast brought

me hitherto?" I felt altogether unworthy of the goodness which the Lord had made to pass before me. I could only abase myself before Him. My heart reproached me with many, many shortcomings, which caused it to know its own bitterness. I turned to the 51st Psalm, and felt as if it were written for me. The more I read it the more I enjoyed it. I began to write upon it, and this deepened its impression on my soul. Its confessions, and supplications, and hopes, and joys, were sweeter to me than my necessary food. By the kindness of my congregation, I was at that time removed from them for the space of a month, that I might relax from my accustomed labours. I spent it in entire solitude, apart from my family and friends. I occupied myself exclusively in committing my meditations on this portion of the Divine Word to paper. I returned with these carefully written out. They were addressed to my congregation, in a series of discourses, during the last winter, and they now compose the volume which is presented to the public. It is my desire that they shall be contemplated, and read, and studied under the aspect in which their history has now presented them. They were intended at first mainly for my own use, they were then employed for the instruction of my congregation, and they are now offered to the public, to consider whether they may be calculated for their profit. In the circumstances in which they were prepared, mere literary ornaments were not thought of, however valuable these are allowed to be. To enter into the spirit of the penitent psalmist, and appropriate his exercises, was my aim. If others are enabled to do the same, it will add to my satisfaction. While memory endures, I will remember with thankfulness the solitary hours spent in their composition. I have learned that it is good for a minister of the Gospel occasionally to pause from his labours, and retire to some secluded retreat, where he can calmly look at his field of toil from a new stand-point, and get a fuller and more impartial view of his own position, and the manner in which he has occupied it, than it is possible for him to obtain while he is in the midst of the bustle and activities of his laborious calling.

The commander who ascends a lofty eminence, and looks down upon the contending hosts, has a clearer perception of the battle-field, and is in a position to direct its movements, far more efficiently than he who mingles in the thickest of the fight; so it is good for the Christian minister betimes to ascend the mount of contemplation, and look upon the field where he seeks to direct the sacramental host of God's elect. The commander of earth's battles, however, does not always stand aloof, but only when it is necessary to gain a clearer view of his own and the enemy's position. The rule for him is to stand at the head of his army, and lead it forward. He must encourage it by his presence, and set the example of daring and courage. No man in all the ranks is expected to do more than he. So also with every leader of the hosts of the Lord. He must fight the enemy hand to hand, and be an example to all "in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." Yet he must have seasons of repose, and reflection, and prolonged supplication, that he may be the better qualified to return to his place of toil, and carry forward the ministry entrusted to his care. In this, as in all things, Jesus Christ is the perfect pattern of His servants. His public labours were excessive, and were equalled only by His secret devotions. Daily he toiled, and taught, and healed, and fed the people; yet it is told of Him, "Early in the morning, He rose up a great while before day, and went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." He who was clothed in a perfect humanity found it necessary to do so. How much more, then, must it be so to the poor earthen vessels into which He has put the treasure of the Word? It is a prevailing fault in our Churches, that they do not provide seasons of rest and reflection for their burdened pastors. In doing so they consult their own interests. Time is short, and ought to be husbanded, that it may be the more profitably employed. If all men are exhorted, "consider your ways," how much more needful must it be for him who has the charge of souls? If there be any value in the offering now made for the edification of the Church, it is due to a season of repose secured

by the considerate sympathy of an affectionate congregation. May the Lord return into their own bosom sevenfold all the kindness they have shown to me.

J. M.

BELFAST, *4th November* 1854.

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THE PENITENT

THE BACKSLIDER

PSALM 11.1-19.—*“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness; according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight; that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts; and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to bear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free Spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation; and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. O LORD, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it; thou delightest not in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt-offering and whole burnt-offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.”*

It is intended, if the Lord will, to deliver a series of discourses on this solemn portion of the Divine Word, and it seems appropriate to introduce them by a few general remarks on the leading subject of the psalm.

Divine authority is not pleaded for the titles of the psalms. Some of them are probably incorrect; but the title to this psalm, though sometimes impugned, has been almost universally acknowledged to express correctly the occasion on which it was written. It is every way in character with the subject—"A psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came in to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

Assuming the correctness of this title, we are referred to the passage of David's life recorded in 2 Sam. xii. 1-14—"The Lord sent Nathan unto David." Under the parable of the ewe-lamb the prophet represented the aggravated sin of his royal master. By means of that parable he extorted from him the indignant sentence, "The man that hath done this thing shall surely die." Seizing the opportunity, he announced to him that such sin was his own—"Thou art the man"—and he proceeded to denounce the judgments which must overtake it. David admitted the justness of the application. He acknowledged himself, in God's sight, to be an adulterer and a murderer. His words are few but weighty. "I have sinned." He that knew the heart saw they were sincere, and His servant was commissioned to say to the penitent, "The Lord hath put away thy sin." In these circumstances David wrote the psalm before us, and, it must be felt by all, nothing could be more appropriate to such an occasion. It has been characterised as being eminently his penitential psalm; and as such it has furnished material and direction to every penitent soul that, in the meditation of it, has abased itself before God, from that period to the present time.

Proceeding on this view of the subject, it brings before us the fall of the believer into sin, and the exercises thence arising. It teaches us, first, that the servant of the Lord may so fall; second, that if he do, he must rise again; third, that in rising again his exercises will be those of deep humiliation; and, fourth, that the

history of David's penitence is thus recorded for both our warning and instruction. These considerations will properly occupy the present introductory discourse. May the Lord bless it abundantly, and make all our meditations on this psalm to be profitable.

I. The servant of the Lord may fall into sin. Alas! it is unnecessary to furnish any proof of this statement. The Scriptures everywhere assume it to be true. They are filled with warnings, and counsels, and directions, all proceeding upon it. Behold the parent taking leave of his beloved son, as he goes forth into the world to act the part assigned him there. He pours forth his anxiety on his account in accents of tenderness, and entreaty, and instruction. All these are delivered under the apprehension of the danger to which he knows his beloved one is exposed. And thus it is in the Word of God. As a father he speaks in it to His children. He warns them of the dangers that beset them on every hand. Look especially at the Epistles of the New Testament, which are written expressly to the members of the churches. They are a continual warning against sin, and a constant exhortation to the faithful performance of every duty. They betray a deep sense of the liability of all to fall into the one, and their indisposedness to do the other. All this is readily admitted; yet it is important to notice a few features which the Scriptures mark especially, in this liability of all believers to fall into sin.

1. They set forth its cause. It is the remaining corruption of the old man. "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit." The divine life is a contest between opposing principles in the mind. Light and darkness, good and evil, holiness and sin, the Spirit of God and the agents of Satan, are there. There is no respite to the controversy. While life lasts it must be maintained. The Christian must never forget he carries his greatest enemy in his own bosom, and that he is encompassed by foes ready to enter as soon as the traitor within will open to them.

2. They teach us that no man is exempt from temptation, and that all or any may fall before it. No station, whether of

the prince or peasant; no occupation, whether of the minister or member of the Church; no condition, whether of riches or poverty, of rest or toil, is free. Each has its own peculiar temptations, and these are so strong that it is probable every one supposes his own situation to be the most beset by danger.

3. They reveal that there is no sin into which any man may not fall. In the record of the sins of the godly, contained in the Scriptures, it is very noticeable that many have fallen into those very sins to which they seemed least liable. Moses, the "meekest man," sinned by violence of temper; Abraham, the father of the faithful, sinned by unbelief; Peter, the courageous, sinned by cowardice; and David, the devout, sinned by impurity. This is designed to show that as no man is safe, so neither is there any sin into which the most advanced Christian may not fall. Of none can it be said this is impossible. The best man may commit the most aggravated sin.

4. They show us by their records that whosoever sinneth shall not escape detection. It is most honourable to the Scriptures that they conceal no man's sin. Their own favourites and heroes are, if possible, more exposed than others. This is an indication of their origin—a proof that they come from God—and, instead of reducing their claims upon us, should be held greatly to strengthen them.

5. They remind us that just as any man supposes himself to be safe so is he exposed to danger. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." "It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." He that knew human nature well exhorted His disciples, saying, "Watch ye,"—"What I say unto you I say unto all, Watch."—"Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation."

These are the principles of the Divine Word on the liability of all men to sin. They are accordant with truth, and are confirmed by the facts which daily present themselves. They teach us how clearly Jesus saw the hearts and understood the lives of His people, when He made one petition of their daily prayer to be, "lead us not into temptation," and another, "forgive us our sins" We must acquiesce in their propriety, and proceed to observe—