

BRUISED FOR OUR INIQUITIES

By Horatius Bonar

We were one day conversing with an unbeliever who lay on a bed of suffering and was murmuring against the God that made him. He put the question in an angry tone,

“Where did this pain come from?”

“From sin,” we answered.

“But why should pain follow sin?”

“Because God is a righteous God.”

“How does that prove that where there is pain there must have been sin?”

“Because a righteous God must punish what is wrong.”

“Why must He?”

“Because if He did not the universe would go to pieces.”

“How so?”

“Just as a kingdom would go to wreck if the ruler did not punish evil doers, so the whole universe would go into disorder if God did not attach punishment to sin.”

The sufferer thought a little, and then admitted that this was right, and that pain ought to be the consequent of sin, for the sake of preserving the universe in order and happiness.

Again he asked,

“What do you mean by sacrifice, and why was it necessary?”

“Because sin must be punished.”

“What has that to do with sacrifice?”

“Much every way; chiefly this, that sacrifice is punishment—the punishment of one instead of another—for it is impossible that there can be sin without punishment.”

“But is that just?”

“Quite just, if he who is to bear the punishment undertakes it of his own free will, and is not compelled.”

“How so?”

“In this way: If you were in debt and I were compelled to pay your debts, there would be great injustice; but if I came forward and did it willingly, there would be no injustice to any one, and the law would be maintained.”

He thought a little, and then said calmly and distinctly,

“Yes, I see that; there would be no injustice then.”

“Just so is it,” we said, “with the payment of our debts by the Son of God. He came forward and presented His sufferings to God instead of ours, His life instead of ours, His death instead of ours.”

The sufferer was greatly interested, and the light seemed to break into his dark soul, as we then spoke to him of Christ “bearing our sins in His own body on the tree,” “suffering, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.”

It is on this great truth of substitution that the Gospel rests, for without this work of sin-bearing by the Son of God there could be no Gospel to the sinner. The proclamation of God’s love without the expiation on the Cross would be mockery. It would bring no satisfaction, no relief, no peace. Sin must be borne and its penalty exhausted before the guilty can draw nigh to God. And thus a German poet sings:—

“I and my heavy load of guilt,
My sins of crimson dye,

As countless as the grains of sand
That on the sea-shore lie—
These brought on Thee, dear suffering Lord,
The woes which were on Thee out-poured.

“I, I it is, who should atone
Bound hand and foot in hell;
I, I it is should bear the bonds,
The scourge which on Thee fell:
Yea, all that was endured by Thee
Hath been deserved, dear Lord, by me.”

Among many in our day the Bible idea of sin is little understood, perhaps denied. “It is an evil,” men say, “a misfortune, a moral disease; but the *curative power of nature* will ere long expel all this, and deliver the race of man from a plague which has swept away its millions, and which still holds sway among the sons of men.”

In Scripture, sin is spoken of not merely as a terrible evil; but, much more than this, as *legal guilt*, which the Great Judge must punish; as something so abhorrent to His holy nature that He cannot allow Himself to be approached by any one on whom that guilt still rests; that He cannot meet with any one from whom that guilt has not been removed by sacrifice. Looked at in the light of law or love, in the light of righteousness or mercy, in the light of Heaven or hell, it is an infinite evil, bringing *condemnation* on the soul, as it is written, “the soul that sinneth it shall die.”

To show how even the natural conscience of man responds to this legal demand for the punishment of sin, we would relate a singular incident given in a missionary journal not long ago. It is no embellished story, but a simple narrative. It brings out in somewhat of a peculiar light the idea of sin—sin borne by another—sin laid upon another man’s conscience, and thus laying hold of him as if it were his own. The transaction referred to began in mockery, but it ended in deep agony. It occurred at Warsaw, on an occasion when several Jews were gathered together, and among them a young unbeliever who tried to make a mock at sin. In the pride of his unbelief he affirmed that there was no such thing as sin, and that that word “sin” had long since disappeared from the vocabulary of the enlightened. In a Jew this was somewhat remarkable, inasmuch as their Bible from beginning to end speaks of sin as an infinite and terrible reality.

An old Jew standing by and hearing the bold words of the scoffer, offered him twenty-five roubles if he would agree to take his sin upon him. The youth gave his hand, and accepted the profane bargain in the presence of witnesses to attest the transaction. The old Jew seemed to think he had done an excellent stroke of business, and expressed his satisfaction at having thus got quit of sin. The youth rejoiced at the opportunity thus given of displaying his unbelief; and, to show that it was not the money that he wanted, gave it to the poor. Soon after this the young unbeliever took ill. The physician was called, but could find no cause of illness. It seemed as if it proceeded from the mind, not from the body. On making inquiry, he heard of the bargain between the two, and the young man confessed that it was this that was weighing upon him.

The old man was appealed to, and pressed to cancel the bargain, and thus relieve the other. He refused. A thousand roubles were offered, but he still declined. There the matter stood: the young man in the agonies of conscience because of the sin which he had taken upon him, and the old man resolute in his determination. Very soon the youth sunk under his mental sufferings, and died with the awful burden upon him.

One might say that the whole matter here was a delusion; and so in one sense it was, for no man can

lay his burden upon another, and no man can accept that burden from his fellow. But the conscience had been awakened, and the derided idea of sin had become a reality. Sin thus mocked at had started up like a spectre before the conscience of the scoffer and filled him with alarm. He had begun to feel that sin was a real thing, and that awful reality took hold of him. True, it was the sin of another that he had taken upon him; but not the less did the profane transaction, the impious exchange, terrify him, prostrating both body and soul. The thought of the transfer was too oppressive to be borne, and he had learned at a terrible cost what the sin was at which he had been mocking.

But Scripture, while revealing to us the exceeding sinfulness of sin, does not leave us to die under its crushing weight. It shows us how sin lies on us, but it also shows how the load may be lifted off. It shows us how “the covenant with death may be disannuled” (Isa 28:18), and how our “agreement with hell shall not stand.” It shows us how the great Looser of Bonds has provided for the loosing of our bonds, so that the connection between us and guilt shall not be perpetual or eternal. It shows us how there may be a legal transfer of our sin to another, even to One who shall not sink under the weight, but be able to bear it, and to bear it away.

The transfer of guilt is the great “burden” of the Old Testament, beginning with the prediction of the “bruised heel,” and widening out into the various sacrifices age after age. If this truth be lost sight of the whole Bible becomes obscure: the “sure Word of prophecy” is no longer light, but darkness; the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is a series of idle Oriental figures. The Divine method of removing sin from the sinner to the Substitute, and of conveying the righteousness of the Substitute to the sinner, is the essence of Bible teaching; and the variety of ways in which this is illustrated and enforced shows us the importance which God attaches to it. Man may make light of guilt, God does not. Man may lay little stress on the Divine way of cancelling it by transference or exchange, God does not.

The Gospel is good news. But of what? Not simply, as some say, of the love of God and the grace of Christ. It contains these, no doubt, otherwise it would not be good news at all. If, however, it had proclaimed nothing more, its tidings could have brought no relief to the burdened conscience; for in the sinner’s ears the irrevocable sentence rings, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” How then is the sinner to be delivered, so long as this sentence stands in force? How is he both to die and to live? How is the penalty to be both cancelled and paid?

These are the questions which the Gospel answers when announcing God’s free love. “The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Thus the problem is solved; “The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” Thus the light breaks in, and the dayspring from on high visits us. The announcement of transfer or exchange clears up the whole mystery, and shows us “God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing unto men their trespasses.”

The only true settlement of the question between the sinner and God is at the altar of burnt-offering—the Cross of Christ. It is this Cross that lights up the Gospel, and shows us how thoroughly it is “good news.” The proclamation from the Cross is, “It is finished.” This concluded transaction is that which adjusts the relationship between Heaven and earth, and reveals to us the open door into the Father’s House for the farthest off wanderer upon earth. The completion of the transfer eighteen hundred years ago by the Son of God is that to which the eye of the inquirer is to be turned. In this he finds all that meets his perplexities, and answers his questions, and removes his burdens.

The real sources of all his difficulties are in his attempts to add to or to take from that which has been absolutely and for ever finished. For if it be seen to be completed, then what remains for him but to accept it; and, in accepting it, to receive into his bosom all the treasures of grace and pardon and eternal life?

Where is boasting, then? It is excluded. Where is working, then? It is excluded. And where is doubting, then? It is also excluded. By what law? By that which excludes both boasting and working. For the root of the doubting is the attempt to work for pardon, and then to trust in that working. The

simple reception of that which is freely presented to us for immediate acceptance is that which terminates doubt and leads into glorious liberty.

But how am I to accept? Foolish man to put such a question! What? do you not know what it is to accept a gift from the hand of a friend? Are earthly gifts encumbered with these perplexities, or do they suggest such questions, or are they attended with such long delays? When a friend presents a purse of gold to you, do you look at it, lay it down, turn it over, wonder if it is really meant for you, and, if so, by what process you are to accept it? Or do you not read the letter which accompanies it, and put an end to all such hesitations? The loving letter assures you of everything. Why go on distrusting and vexing your soul, weaving round about you a web of unbelief, which will grow stronger and thicker every day? Do justice to the promise and the Promise-Maker. Do justice to the testimony and the Witness. He is honoured by your trust. He is dishonoured by your distrust.

“Let us come boldly.” Are not these His words? And do they not take in *you*? “Let us draw near.” Did He not mean *you* when He pointed out to men the rent vail, and the sprinkled blood, and the new and living way, and the mercy seat beyond, accessible to the unfittest and unworthiest?

One wonders how, with such free access into such a temple, any should remain without. Yet so it is. See the multitude on the outside refusing to enter, or saying, I will enter at a more convenient time? Is there not something profoundly sad in this? What must angels think of it? What must God think of it? And what must He think of it, who, when He beheld the city, wept over it, and said, “Oh that thou hadst known, even thou, in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.”

Outside such a temple! Outside such a fortress, within which all is safety! Outside such a home, where all is blessedness! Outside, in the waste howling wilderness, where all is desolation, and peril, and famine! Do the unhappy multitudes not look around them and see where they are—in a land without a hope? Do they not look in at the open gate and see what peace and plenty and security might be theirs, without labour or payment or delay? Do they not hear the voices that call on them to enter? Do they not see the hands that beckon them in? Have they shut their ears against the warm entreaties of love that beseeches them to be reconciled to God? They may be satisfied with the discomforts and desolations of this earthly wilderness, but are they prepared to brave all the horrors of the eternal wilderness into which, if they turn not, they must so soon pass? Is the wrath to come better than the gladness of a home with the God who made them?