

The Power of the Flame

A Sermon by Rev. Melville T. Wire, preached Nov. 22, 1914, at Gresham Methodist Church

Text Isaiah 47:14 * * * They shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame.

These words were spoken by the prophet Isaiah against Babylon and Chaldea; but they may fittingly serve as a text in dealing with the subject of sin.

A contemporary writer says: "We are rather inclined to the view that what our age needs is a universal and poignant gospel of man's sinfulness and his inability to escape it except by divine help.

In the third chapter of Genesis we find the account of sin's beginning. Not merely an account of the subtlety of a serpent and the actual eating of forbidden fruit, but the great epic of man's disobedience, of his departure from the command of God, of his subjugation to the ills of mortal life, of his spiritual death, of his going forth into an altered universe of thorns and briars and cursed ground.

We see in sin an alien element in God's world; something unnatural, abnormal and fraught with disastrous consequences to the race.

"But," we are told by some theorists, "the first sin was really the awakening of man to moral consciousness, that it marked his passage from the stage of non-moral life to a clear knowledge of the difference between right and wrong, and that, consequently, so far from being a disaster, it was, in fact the breaking of a new day of larger life and freedom." We do not believe that the bible lends countenance to any such idea. In the Genesis account and in all the rest of sacred writ we find the plain teaching that sin is an interloper, that it changed the relation of God's original plan to men, that it made necessary the death of Christ for a world helpless and lost, which could not deliver itself from the "power of the flame." Sin is not a stepping stone to freedom, but to bondage. It cannot lead upward, it leads downward. Man sinned deliberately, wantonly, culpably, and willingly against the will of God and stands guilty before Him. The first sin is a type of all. We can interpret it by our experience and verify anew the evil result of it. We have no sympathy with the assumption that the knowledge of evil is necessary for high moral ends. To know that there is such a thing as evil, and that it is awful, is all the knowledge of evil man needs. All we need to know about it is that we are to keep away from it.

The possibility of the entrance of sin into the world comes through God's gift to man of freedom of choice. If this freedom was to be real and not fictitious it would certainly involve the moral choice. Man could either choose to be good or bad. In fact without this freedom man would not really be a moral being at all in the sense of good having merit and sin demerit. He would then only be a moral automaton. When God said of the tree in the midst of the garden, "ye shall not eat of it," he acknowledged man's endowment with the power of choice. This was a supreme gift and like all things of transcendent value it brought with it vast responsibility. When God said "thou shalt not" it was for man's good. Man was being warned of danger. We cannot conceive of disobedience to the command of a loving divine Father as bringing anything but disaster; for God was trying to show humanity how to wear the new mantle of freedom; He strove to guard man because He loved him, yet man's will could not be forced, for freedom of choice had been conferred upon him. If knowledge of evil had been a step upward in the moral evolution of the ages as some philosophers assert, it seems passing strange that God should have commanded man not to eat of the tree. The fact that God did so command is the best evidence that not to touch forbidden fruit is the only knowledge of forbidden fruit that is necessary.

Satan enters the garden with the false promise, "ye shall not die, ye shall be as Gods." That is the age-old temptation of the evil one; holding forth the lure of knowledge gained from excursion into the forbidden country. It is the appeal to the instinct of curiosity and thirst for knowledge based on a widening experience whether right or wrong. That is the appeal of Satan to men today, to step behind the veil; "to know all sides of life," as the man of the world phrases it. Such knowledge is of death not life. It used to be a grim Syethian custom to banquet a great man after his death. The corpse would be propped up in a chair at the place of honor and an outwardly gay throng would stand about him in forced merriment. To a chance onlooker the banquet would have all the hall-marks of joyous revelry. He might think he was look-

ing upon a happy event of life when really he would be looking on the face of death. Let no young man deceive himself. The venture into the forbidden domain, the eating of the fruit of evil knowledge has only one outcome. It means death. In sinful indulgence he may think he is "seeing life," when in reality he is seeing death. Not merely physical corruption, that strikes us with horror because of its concreteness, but the death of purity, the slaying of faith, the eclipse of hope, the descent from the spiritual to the bestial, the loss of Heaven and future abode with the spirits of just men made perfect and the descent to the abyss with all the Judases of all the ages who go to their own place.

When Adam and Eve ate and possessed the dear bought knowledge it was like the eating of the apples of Sodom, which appear fair but turn to ashes at the touch. Someone says: "There is always something blighting about the knowledge of evil. Such knowledge soils the naturalness of human relationships, * * * it harms the mind, * * * it trails over the whole scope of the thought, ideals and achievement of man. It was a fine inspiration which prompted the scripture to say that the guilty ones could not partake of the tree of life after taking of the forbidden tree."

In view of all this we emphatically deny that man's knowledge of sin was a step upward. If anyone wants this statement validated by a philosopher they can be pointed to the late William James who says: "If we admit that evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of life, we load ourselves down with a difficulty that has always proved burdensome in philosophies of religion."

In view of the fact that sin has come to man, it is important that we properly locate the seat of sin in human nature. Sin cannot be located in matter, nor in the sensuous elements of man's nature. Sense has no independent volitions. The sense of taste was appealed to in Eve but that had no power to determine choice.

Nevertheless the view that sin is lodged literally in the flesh had great currency in ancient times, that helps us to understand early monasticism. With that view of sin, salvation may logically come by fastings and scourgings and the mortification of the flesh. The next step is easy and logical if you admit the premise. Those who desired to be holy left the temptations of society and sought the wilderness. Palestine and the wilderness of Sinai is fairly honeycombed with the cells of such religionists.

The use of the word "flesh" in Paul's epistles seems to give sanction to this; but a careful exegesis plainly indicates that Paul meant more by the term than simply the human body or the appetites lodged in it. The flesh may be an instrument of evil, an avenue of evil but it is certainly not the seat of it.

It may influence moral choice, but it is not the determining factor. Sin is tracked back of that to man's conscious volitional life within. The flesh is the engine, but the will is the engineer. The engine may strike something on the track, but the railroad company doesn't hold the engine responsible, it arraigns the engineer. A man's hand may be raised in violence, but the hand is not to blame, the will behind it is to blame—the will that dictated the blow. Sin's entrance into the world was not an "accident," nor a sort of swashbuckling immaturity. It was man's abuse of freedom, and his defiance of God. God said, "thou shalt not eat" and man did eat. There was no excuse for it. Let us suppose a kind-hearted man who turns a hungry boy into his orchard and says to him: "You will find here all the apples you want of every variety; help yourself but here is a tree in the center of the orchard with only a few on it, I am saving them to exhibit, the variety is rare and peculiar, please do not eat of them. The boy wanders about in the enjoyment of his freedom. He eats all the fruit he can hold and sits down to rest. But the forbidden tree attracts his notice. The fact that the fruit is forbidden makes it attractive. He thinks that he will just touch it. So he approaches the tree with fast beating heart and takes one of the apples in his hand. He presses it with his thumb to see if it is mellow—the stem breaks, it falls into his hand, he looks everywhere in guilt, and deliberately eats it, though he is already satiated with fruit. Such a hypothetical incident illumines the great epic of Eden. Human nature, happy, free and well nourished yet deliberately disobeying the author and giver of that happiness, free-

dom and well-being. When we properly locate sin we see how heinous it is, how wanton it is, how unnecessary it is. It is just as bad today as it ever was—if not a shade worse. With all the enlightenment and material progress of modern times sin still enthrones itself in the place where men's motives emanate, in the place where they really live. And because it does this, it reaches its slimy hand through all ranks of society all the way to the infernal regions and back again!

After our first parents had possessed themselves of the coveted knowledge they went forth into an altered universe. They had been on the inside of Eden, now they were on the outside. The streams flowed as of old, the palms waved their long fronds in the gentle breezes, the sylvan dells beckoned a welcome, but Eden was no more theirs to enjoy. They saw each other with new eyes, for primal innocence had departed. Thorns and briars and the curse of the ground typified the new physical disabilities which were to be theirs; and were ever after to be the lot of humanity. Sweat stood on their brows. They had defied God, now his world was to defy them. Paul's words are true, "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together till now."

But this was not all, the bible says, "Sin entered into the world and death by sin." Whenever we sin something within us dies. Doctor Hillis says in his book, "The Investment of Influence," "In the olden days, when the poisoner was in every palace, the Doge of Venice offered a reward for a crystal goblet that would break the moment a poison touched it. Perhaps the idea was suggested to the Prince because his soul already fulfilled the thought, for one drop of sin always shatters the cup of joy and wastes life's precious wine." As the warm breath destroys the delicate frost tracery on the window pane so sin dulls and deadens the fineness of the moral nature.

Dr. Cuyler once gave a description of one of the poisonous trees aptly called the Judas tree. The blossoms of it are a brilliant red. From far and near the fatal beauty of those flowers attracts insects, yet every bee wandering in search of honey that alights upon the blossoms imbibes a fatal opiate and drops to the earth. Beneath this enticing tree the earth is strewn with the victims of this fatal fascination.

If sin had not come, death would not have come. "Death has passed upon all men for that all have sinned." Just what would have been the exact condition and state of man if sin had never entered, we cannot say. Men differ widely in their opinions. But of this much we are sure, death as we know it—death the terrifying and unbearable tragedy—would never have come if our first parents had obeyed God.

Behind death and an altered universe there is an estranged God. Though this is the first effect of sin, it is the last one we realize. "But when the sinner does realize it he is at last prepared to believe that he cannot deliver himself from 'the power of the flame.'" Then he knows that he needs more than a word of wisdom or a vision of beauty; he needs Christ and His redeeming cross.

Has sin altered his universe? Is the flaming sword between him and Eden? Through Christ old things may pass away, and behold all things may become new. Has death entered His world? We hear the words: As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive."

And the exultant apostle with resurrection faith cries out, "O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Oregon State militia is having a little war scare of its own, according to unofficial reports from Portland. Forty members of the guard have been engaged in making full preparations for a quick move, but they don't know where they are going, if anywhere.

Sick Headache.

Sick headache is nearly always caused by disorders of the stomach. Correct them and the periodic attacks of sick headache will disappear. Mrs. John Bishop of Roseville, Ohio, writes: "About a year ago I was troubled with indigestion and had sick headache that lasted for two or three days at a time. I doctored and tried a number of remedies but nothing helped me until one of those sick spells a friend advised me to take Chamberlain's Tablets. This medicine relieved me in a short time." For sale by all Dealers.



Madonna and Child
—sichel—

Christ Born Anew

By Cora H. Matson Dolson
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Above the cradle bends a woman's head,
And lips say holy grace.
The halo that a Star of Bethlehem shed
Encircles her young face.

Thoughts of world quests
those wee feet may pursue,
Set heart to beating wild,
for Christ unto the earth is
born anew
With each new little child.

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