

National Sins and Miseries

By John Wesley

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Sermon Scripture "Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: But these sheep, what have they done?" 2 Sam. 24:17.

INTRO

1. The chapter begins, "And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah." "Again;" -- it had been kindled against them but a few years before; in consequence of which "there had been a famine in the land three years, year after year," (2 Sam. 21:1,) till David inquired of the Lord, and was taught the way of appeasing it. We are not informed, in what particular manner Israel had now offended God; by what particular cause his anger was kindled, but barely with the effect. "He moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah." "He," -- not God! Beware how you impute this to the fountain of love and holiness! It was not God, but Satan, who thus moved David. So the parallel Scripture expressly declares: "And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel." (1 Chron. 21:1.) Satan stood before God, to accuse David and Israel, and to beg God's permission to tempt David. Standing is properly the accuser's posture before the tribunals of men; and therefore the Scripture, which uses to speak of the things of God after the manner of men, represents Satan as

appearing in this posture before the tribunal of God. "And David said to Joab, and to the rulers of the people, Go, number Israel, from Beersheba even to Dan; and bring the number of them to me, that I may know it." (2 Sam. 23:2.)

2. It does not clearly appear wherein the sin of thus numbering the people consisted. There is no express prohibition of it in any of the Scriptures which were then extant. Yet we read, "The king's word was abominable to Joab," (2 Sam. 23:6,) who was not a man of the tenderest conscience, so that he expostulated with David before he obeyed. "Joab answered, Why doth my lord require this thing?" "Why will he be a cause of trespass" -- of punishment or calamity, -- "to Israel?" God frequently punishes a people for the sins of their rulers, because they are generally partakers of their sins, in one kind or other. And the righteous Judge takes this occasion of punishing them for all their sins. In this, Joab was right; for after they were numbered, it is said, "And God was displeased with this thing." Yea, "David's heart smote him, and he said unto the Lord, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O Lord, take away the iniquity of thy servant." (2 Sam. 24:10). Did not the sin lie in the motive on which the thing was done? Did he not do it in the pride of his heart? Probably out of a principle of vanity and ostentation; glorying not in God, but in the number of his people.

3. In the sequel we find that even Joab was for once a true prophet: David was a cause of trespass, of punishment, to Israel. His sin, added to all the sins of the people, filled up the measure of their iniquities. So "the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel, from the morning," wherein Gad the prophet gave David his choice of war, famine, or pestilence, "unto the evening of the third day. And there died of the people from Dan unto Beersheba, seventy thousand men." (2 Sam. 24:15.) "And when David saw the angel that smote the people," -- who appeared in the form of a man with a drawn sword in his hand, to convince him the more fully, that this plague was immediately from God, -- "he said, Lo, I have sinned, I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done?"

4. Is there not in several respects, a remarkable resemblance between the case of Israel and our own? General wickedness then occasioned a

general visitation; and does not the same cause now produce the same effect? We likewise have sinned, and we are punished; and perhaps these are only the beginning of sorrows. Perhaps the angel is now stretching out his hand over England to destroy it. O that the Lord would at length say to him that destroyeth, "It is enough; stay now thine hand!"

5. That vice is the parent of misery, few deny; it is confirmed by the general suffrage of all ages. But we seldom bring this home to ourselves; when we speak of sin as the cause of misery, we usually mean, the sin of other people, and suppose we suffer, because they sin. But need we go so far? Are not our own vices sufficient to account for all our sufferings? Let us fairly and impartially consider this; let us examine our own hearts and lives. We all suffer: and we have all sinned. But will it not be most profitable for us, to consider every one his own sins, as bringing sufferings both on himself and others; to say, "Lo, I have sinned, I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done?"

I

I. 1. Let us inquire, First, what they suffer; and, afterwards, What is the cause of these sufferings? That the people suffer, none can deny; -- that they are afflicted in a more than ordinary manner. Thousands and tens of thousands are at this day deeply afflicted through want of business. It is true that this want is in some measure removed in some large and opulent towns. But it is also true, that this is far, very far, from being the general case of the kingdom. Nothing is more sure than that thousands of people in the west of England, throughout Cornwall in particular, in the north, and even in the midland counties, are totally unemployed. Hence those who formerly wanted nothing, are now in want of all things. They are so far from the plenty they once enjoyed that they are in the most deplorable distress, deprived not only of the conveniences, but most of the necessities of life. I have seen not a few of these wretched creatures, within little more than an hundred miles of London, standing in the streets with pale looks, hollow eyes, and meager limbs; or creeping up and down like walking shadows. I have known families, who a few years ago lived in an easy, genteel manner, reduced to just as much raiment as they had on, and as much food as

they could gather in the field. To this one or other of them repaired once a day, to pick up the turnips which the cattle had left; which they boiled, if they could get a few sticks, or otherwise ate them raw. Such is the want of food to which many of our countrymen are at this day reduced by want of business!

2. Grievous enough is this calamity, which multitudes every day suffer. But I do not know whether many more do not labour under a still more grievous calamity. It is a great affliction to be deprived of bread; but it is a still greater to be deprived of our senses. And this is the case with thousands upon thousands of our countrymen at this day. Wide-spread poverty (though not in so high a degree) I have seen several years ago. But so widespread a lunacy I never saw, nor, I believe the oldest man alive. Thousands of plain, honest people throughout the land are driven utterly out of their senses, by means of the poison which is so diligently spread through every city and town in the kingdom. They are screaming out for liberty while they have it in their hands, while they actually possess it; and to so great an extent, that the like is not known in any other nation under heaven; whether we mean civil liberty, a liberty of enjoying all our legal property, -- or religious liberty, a liberty of worshipping God according to the dictates of our own conscience. Therefore all those who are either passionately or dolefully crying out, "Bondage! Slavery!" while there is no more danger of any such thing, than there is of the sky falling upon their head, are utterly distracted; their reason is gone; their intellects are quite confounded. Indeed, many of these have lately recovered their senses; yet are there multitudes still remaining, who are in this respect as perfectly mad as any of the inhabitants of Bedlam.

3. Let not anyone think, this is but a small calamity which has fallen upon our land. If you saw, as I have seen, in every county, city, town, men who were once of a calm, mild, friendly temper, mad with party-zeal, foaming with rage against their quiet neighbours, ready to tear out one another's throats, and to plunge their swords into each other's bowels; if you had heard men who once feared God and honoured the king, now breathing out the bitterest invectives against him, and just ripe, should any occasion offer, for treason and rebellion; you would not then judge this to be a little evil, a matter of small

moment, but one of the heaviest judgments which God can permit to fall upon a guilty land.

4. Such is the condition of Englishmen at home. And is it any better abroad? I fear not. From those who are now upon the spot, I learn that in our colonies also many are causing the people to drink largely of the same deadly wine; thousands of whom are thereby inflamed more and more, till their heads are utterly turned, and they are mad to all intents and purposes. Reason is lost in rage; its small still voice is drowned by popular clamour. Wisdom is fallen in the streets. And where is the place of understanding? It is hardly to be found in these provinces. Here is slavery, real slavery indeed, most properly so called. For the regular, legal, constitutional form of government is no more. Here is real, not imaginary, bondage: Not the shadow of English liberty is left. Not only no liberty of the press is allowed, -- none dare print a page, or a line, unless it be exactly conformable to the sentiments of our lords, the people, -- but no liberty of speech. Their tongue is not their own. None must dare to utter one word, either in favour of King George, or in disfavour of the idol they have set up, -- the new, illegal, unconstitutional government, utterly unknown to us and to our forefathers. Here is no religious liberty; no liberty of conscience for them that "honour the king," and whom, consequently, a sense of duty prompts them to defend from the vile calumnies continually vented against him. Here is no civil liberty; no enjoying the fruit of their labour, any further than the populace pleases. A man has no security for his trade, his house, his property, unless he will swim with the stream. Nay, he has no security for his life, if his popular neighbour has a mind to cut his throat: For there is no law; and no legal magistrate to take cognizance of offences. There is the gulf of tyranny, -- of arbitrary power on one hand, and of anarchy on the other. And, as if all this were not misery enough, see likewise the fell monster, war! But who can describe the complicated misery which is contained in this? Hark! the cannons roar! A pitchy cloud covers the face of the sky. Noise, confusion, terror, reign over all! Dying groans are on every side. The bodies of men are pierced, torn, hewed in pieces; their blood is poured on the earth like water! Their souls take their flight into the eternal world; perhaps into everlasting misery. The ministers of grace turn away from the horrid scene; the ministers of vengeance triumph. Such

already has been the face of things in that once happy land where peace and plenty, even while banished from great part of Europe, smiled for near an hundred years.

5. And what is it which drags on these poor victims into the field of blood? It is a great phantom, which stalks before them, which they are taught to call, liberty! It is this Which breathes into their hearts stern love of war, And thirst of vengeance, and contempt of death. Real liberty, meantime, is trampled underfoot, and is lost in anarchy and confusion.

6. But which of these warriors all the while considered the wife of his youth, that is now left a disconsolate widow, -- perhaps with none that careth for her; perhaps deprived of her only comfort and support, and not having where to lay her head? Who considered his helpless children, now desolate orphans, -- it may be, crying for bread, while their mother has nothing left to give them but her sorrows and her tears?

II

II. 1. And yet "these sheep, what have they done," although all this is come upon them? "Suppose ye that they are sinners above other men, because they suffer such things? I tell you, Nay; but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." It therefore behoves us to consider our own sins; -- the cause of all our sufferings. It behoves each of us to say, "Lo, I have sinned; I have done wickedly."

2. The time would fail, should I attempt to enumerate all the ways wherein we have sinned; but in general, this is certain: -- The rich, the poor, the high, the low, Have wander'd from his mild command; The floods of wickedness o'erflow, And deluge all the guilty land: People and Priest lie drown'd in sin, And Tophet yawns to take them in. How innumerable are the violations of justice among us! Who does not adopt the old maxim, Si possis, recte; si non, quocunque modo rem: "If you can get money honestly, do; but, however, get money?" Where is mercy to be found, if it would stand in opposition to interest? How few will scruple, for a valuable consideration, to oppress the widow or fatherless? And where shall we find truth? Deceit and fraud go not out of our

streets. Who is it that speaks the truth from his heart? Whose words are the picture of his thoughts? Where is he that has "put away all lying," that never speaks what he does not mean? Who is ashamed of this? Indeed it was once said, and even by a statesman, "All other vices have had their patrons; but lying is so base, so abominable a vice, that never was anyone found yet who dared openly to plead for it." Would one imagine this writer lived in a Court? yea, and that in the present century? Did not he himself, then, as well as all his brother-statesmen, plead for a trade of deliberate lying? Did he not plead for the innocence, yea, and the necessity, of employing spies? -- the vilest race of liars under the sun? Yet who ever scrupled using them, but Lord Clarendon?

3. O truth, whither art thou fled? How few have any acquaintance with thee! Do not we continually tell lies for the nonce, without gaining thereby either profit or pleasure? Is not even our common language replete with falsehood? Above a hundred years ago the poet complained, It never was good day Since lowly fawning was called compliment. What would he have said had he lived a century later, when that art was brought to perfection?

4. Perhaps there is one palpable evidence of this which is not usually attended to. If you blame a man in many other respects, he is not much affronted. But if you say he is a liar, he will not bear it; he takes fire at once. Why is this? Because a man can bear to be blamed when he is conscious of his own innocence. But if you say he is a liar, you touch a sore spot: he is guilty, and therefore cannot bear it.

5. Is there a character more despicable than even that of a liar? Perhaps there is; even that of an epicure. And are we not a generation of epicures? Is not our belly our god? Are not eating and drinking our chief delight, our highest happiness? Is it not the main study (I fear, the only study) of many honourable men to enlarge the pleasure of tasting? When was luxury (not in food only, but in dress, furniture, equipage) carried to such an height in Great Britain ever since it was a nation? We have lately extended the British empire almost over the globe. We have carried our laurels into Africa, into Asia, into the burning and the frozen climes of America. And what have we brought thence? All the elegance of vice which either the eastern or western world could afford.

6. Luxury is constantly the parent of sloth. Every glutton will, in due time, be a drone. The more of meat and drink he devours, the less taste will he have for labour. This degeneracy of the Britons from their temperate, active forefathers, was taken notice of in the last century. But if Mr. Herbert then said, O England, full of sin, but most of sloth! what would he have said now? Observe the difference between the last and the present century, only in a single instance: In the last, the Parliament used to meet *hora quinta, ante meridiem*, "at five in the morning!" Could these Britons look out of their graves, what would they think of the present generation?

7. Permit me to touch on one article more, wherein, indeed, we excel all the nations upon earth. Not one nation under the canopy of heaven can vie with the English in profaneness. Such a total neglect, such an utter contempt of God, is nowhere else to be found. In no other streets, except in Ireland, can you hear on every side, The horrid oath, the direful curse, That latest weapon of the wretch's war, And blasphemy, sad comrade of despair!

8. Now let each of us lay his hand upon his heart and say, "Lord, is it I?" Have I added to this flood of unrighteousness and ungodliness, and thereby to the misery of my countrymen? Am not I guilty in any of the preceding respects? And do not they suffer because I have sinned?" If we have any tenderness of heart, any bowels of mercies, any sympathy with the afflicted, let us pursue this thought till we are deeply sensible of our sins, as one great cause of their sufferings.

9. But now the plague is begun, and has already made such ravages both in England and America, what can we do, in order that it may be stayed? How shall we stand "between the living and the dead?" Is there any better way to turn aside the anger of God, than that prescribed by St. James: "Purge your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double-minded?" First. "Purge your hands." Immediately put away the evil of your doings. Instantly flee from sin, from every evil word and work, as from the face of a serpent. "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth;" no uncharitable, no unprofitable, conversation. Let no guile be found in your mouth: Speak to every man

the truth from your heart. Renounce every way of acting, however gainful, which is contrary either to justice or mercy. Do to everyone as, in parallel circumstances, you would wish he should do unto you. Be sober, temperate, active; and in every word and work, labour to have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward man. Next, through the almighty grace of Him that loved you, and gave himself for you, "purify your hearts by faith." Be no longer double-minded, halting between earth and heaven, striving to serve God and mammon. Purify your hearts from pride, -- humbling yourselves under the mighty hand of God; from all party-zeal, anger, resentment, bitterness, which now, especially, will easily beset you; from all prejudice, bigotry, narrowness of spirit; from impetuosity, and impatience of contradiction; from love of dispute, and from every degree of an unmerciful or implacable temper. Instead of this earthly, devilish wisdom, let "the wisdom from above" sink deep into your hearts; that "wisdom" which "is first pure," then "peaceable, easy to be entreated," -- convinced, persuaded, or appeased, -- "full of mercy and good fruits; without partiality," -- embracing all men; "without hypocrisy," genuine and unfeigned. Now, if ever, "putting away with all malice, all clamour," (railing,) "and evil-speaking: Be ye kind one to another," to all your brethren and countrymen, -- "tender-hearted" to all that are in distress; "forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

10. And "now let my counsel be acceptable to" you, to every one of you present before God. "Break off thy sins by repentance, and thy iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquility," --of what degree of it still remains among us. Show mercy more especially to the poor widows, to the helpless orphans, of your countrymen who are now numbered among the dead, who fell among the slain in a distant land. Who knoweth but the Lord will yet be entreated, will calm the madness of the people, will quench the flames of contention, and breathe into all the spirit of love, unity, and concord? Then brother shall not lift up sword against brother, neither shall they know war any more. Then shall plenty and peace flourish in our land, and all the inhabitants of it be thankful for the innumerable blessings which they enjoy, and shall "fear God, and honour the king."

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