

APART

A Sermon
Intended for Reading on Lord's-day, March 28th, 1897,
delivered by

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at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington,
On Thursday Evening, July 16th, 1885.

"And the land shall mourn, every family apart; the family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart; the family of the house of Nathan apart, and their wives apart; the family of the house of Levi apart, and their wives apart; the family of Shimei apart, and their wives apart; all the families that remain, every family apart, and their wives apart."—Zechariah 12:12-14

True repentance is always accompanied by sorrow. It has been said by some of those of modern times who disparage repentance that repentance is "nothing but a change of mind." These words sound as if there was merely some superficial meaning to them; and so, indeed, they are intended by those who use them, but they are not so intended by the Spirit of God. Repentance may be and is a change of mind; but what a change it is! It is not an unimportant change of mind such as you may have concerning whether you will take your holiday this week or the next, or about some trifling matter of domestic interest; but it is a change of the whole heart, of the love, of the hate, of the judgment, and the view of things taken by the individual whose mind is thus changed. It is a deep, radical, fundamental, lasting change; and you will find that, whenever you meet with it in Scripture, it is always accompanied with sorrow for past sin. And rest you assured of this fact, that the repentance which

has no tear in its eye, and no mourning for sin in its heart, is a repentance which needs to be repented of, for there is no evidence of conversion, no sign of the existence of the grace of God. In what way has that man changed his mind who is not sorry that he has sinned? In what sense can it be said that he has undergone any change worth experiencing if he can look back upon his past life with pleasure, or look upon the prospect of returning to his sin without an inward loathing and disgust?

I say again that we have need to stand in doubt of that repentance which is not accompanied with mourning for sin; and even when Christ is clearly seen by faith, and sin is pardoned, and the man knows that it is forgiven, he does not cease to mourn for sin. Nay, brethren, his mourning becomes deeper as his knowledge of his guilt becomes greater; and his hatred of sin grows in proportion as he understands that love of Christ by which his sin is put away. In true believers, mourning for sin is chastened and sweetened, and, in one sense, the fang of bitterness is taken out; but, in another sense, the more we realize our indebtedness to God's grace, and the more we see of the sufferings of Christ in order to our redemption, the more do we hate sin, and the more do we lament that we ever fell into it. I am sure it is so, and that every Christian's experience will confirm what I say.

In the case of these people mentioned by the prophet Zechariah, one of the prominent points about their repentance was, that all in the land were to mourn. They were to look upon Christ whom their sins had put to death, and they were to mourn for him as one mourns for his only son, and to be in bitterness for him as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn. In fact, the lamentation which was to accompany this repentance is said to be as great as the mourning of the whole nation when Josiah fell in the battle with Pharaoh-nechoh at Megiddo: "In that day shall there be a great mourning in Jerusalem, as the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon."

Another special characteristic of this mourning described by Zechariah, which also distinguishes genuine repentance for sin, is that it is personal, the act of each individual, and the act of

the individual apart from any of his fellows. The watchword of true penitence is this word "apart." How it rings out in the text, "Every family apart; the family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart; the family of the house of Nathan apart, and their wives apart; the family of the house of Levi apart, and their wives apart; the family of Shimei apart, and their wives apart; all the families that remain, every family apart, and their wives apart." Sham repentance can do its work in the mass; it talks about national sin and national sorrow, which generally means the mere notion of sin and the notion of repentance. But when it comes to a true work of the Spirit of God, and men do really mourn for sin so as to obtain pardon, it is a thing in which each individual stands in a personal solitude, as much apart from everybody else as if he had been the sole man that God ever made, and was without father and without mother and without descent, and had himself alone so sinned that the whole anger of God for sin had fallen upon him. A man in this condition gets alone, he bears his sin apart, quitting the company of his fellows, and all the charms that once lured him to destruction; and his lamentation on account of sin is his own sole act and deed. It wells up from his own heart, it is not borrowed from others; but, by the effectual working of the grace of God, everything about it is of himself.

I. It is to this important matter that I now call your attention, and in doing so our first point will be, **THE INDIVIDUALIZING EFFECT OF SORROW FOR SIN.**

Let me remind you, first, that this individualizing is seen even when the mourning is universal. Read the text again: "The land shall mourn, every family apart." If there should ever come such a blessed visitation of grace to England that all men should repent of sin, and mourn over it, yet each man would repent of sin, and mourn over it as much as if he were the only penitent in the entire country. This point is worth noticing, because there are some who fancy that, if there should come a great revival, they would get converted. Perhaps some of you think that, in such a case, you would get into the swim, and be carried onward by it, as people are sometimes borne along in a great crowd. Let me tell you that, if you were thus swept along by the

stream, and had not exercised individual repentance of sin, and personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, it would be of no value to you. It would be a false religion that you would receive in that way, and it is better for you to recollect and know of a surety that you cannot enter the strait and narrow gate in a crowd, borne in by others, but you must come in separately and distinctly yourself. Why should not that be the case with you even now? When there shall be times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, the brightest days that ever shone in Christendom, yet, even then, every true conversion must be an individual one. All true faith that shall ever come to you must be a looking with your own eye; and all drawing near to God in repentance must be the act of your own spirit, under the drawings of the Holy Spirit. Whatever is done by others, even by multitudes of genuine converts, will be of no avail for you; if it is to bring blessing to you, it must be the work of the Spirit of God upon you individually.

Do notice that foundation fact, and let none of us ever forget it; but let this day of mourning for sin, throughout the whole Church of God, be as much a time of mourning for sin, for me and for you, as if you and I were the only persons in the world who were aware of that sin, or who had felt at all the evil and the wickedness of it. Otherwise, we shall lose all true repentance in the idea of a national repentance, we shall lose all sense of sin in the notion that everybody has a sense of sin, that everybody is humbled in penitence before God, and that everybody is seeking the Lord.

Notice next, that while this apartness is seen when holy mourning becomes universal, it also is manifest when there are some few households humbling themselves before God. Even then, when there are only a few repenting households, the separation of one family from another will be seen. The whole of the penitents are separate from the ungodly around them, they are distinguished as those who are mourning before God; yet even then, each individual family will be separated the one from the other. If it should come to pass that the families of this church should begin unitedly to mourn by reason of the great sin of the times,—and I heartily hope that it may be the case,—

yet even then, if it is true sorrow for sin, there will be a distinctness between one family and another family; there will be a sort of idiosyncrasy around the mourning for sin in this house, or in that house, which will distinguish the mourners there from all others. You can manufacture man-made things by the gross; but God's creations are made one by one, he puts his seal of variety upon all that he creates. Painters can make replicas of their great works, and you may see here and there copies of paintings that are, stroke for stroke, the same, but God does not repeat himself. There is a distinctness about the face of every man and every woman; you may mistake one man for another, but it is from casual observation, or from partial knowledge; but a man's own wife does not make a mistake about who is her husband; his child knows which is his father, and does not mistake another man for him. So, whatever resemblance there may be, there is a difference which is readily discernible; and if it is so in the natural face of a man, much more is it so in spiritual features. One man differs from another, and one family differs from another, and, consequently, in the mourning even when it becomes general throughout all the families of Christ, yet each family still keeps itself somewhat apart from the rest, and differs from every other.

This individualizing is further seen in the distinction between family and family when both fear the Lord. In our text, we have quite a little list of families given in order to make this truth clear. Each family has its peculiar sin, and a specialty must be made in confessing it.

There is, first, the family of the house of David, that is, the royal household; and the house of David was, as kings went in those days, a superior household. Kings' households have not often been of much account; but David's, though it was a long way off being perfect, was better than the best of the ungodly royal houses in those days. Yet there was something for the house of David, and all the kings of the house of David, to mourn over; for the sins of royalty are royal sins, and those are sins indeed which come from those who wear crowns, and are leaders among the sons of men. Hence, the family of the house of David must mourn apart.

Next, we are told that the family of the house of Nathan shall mourn apart. Take that to be the family of a prophet; the family down at the Manse, if you like. There is some particular sin in the minister's household which makes it proper that his family should mourn apart. Or, it may refer to the family of that good man in the church who is distinguished for his walk with God; yet, even in his family, there is a something which, when God the Holy Spirit visits it as a Spirit of intercession and of mourning for sin, will cause it to mourn apart.

There will be something about each household which it does not like to tell to others; and even in the house of Levi, which is so near to that of Nathan,—for the prophet and the priest often go hand in hand,—yet, when their families are gathered together to confess sin, Nathan prefers that the family of Levi should not be at his house, and Levi is anxious that there should be a closed door when he and his household are mourning before the Lord. You will be right if you let the family of Levi represent the household of a gracious people; for now that the priesthood is the common property of all the elect of God, I do not care to distinguish Levi otherwise than as a believing man in whose house there is a church of God, and all whose family are of priestly rank. Still, even there, among the holiest and best of saints, among those devoted to the service of God, among those whose very lives are spent in work for God, there will be some sin that shall make the house of Levi wish to mourn apart from all others.

Then there was to be the mourning of the family of Shimei. We do not know who this Shimei may have been; some commonplace person, perhaps; possibly, his was a household in which there had not been the fear of God. But when the grace of God comes to it, then the house of Shimei begins to mourn apart for its own special sin.

You see, dear friends, that the one blow I have kept striking upon the anvil is this, "apart, apart, APART." All this mourning, however similar it might be in the one case to the other, is presented to God separately by each family; and if ever

families were marked off the one from the other by a most manifest line of demarcation, it was in the night of weeping when, as at Bochim, they drew near unto God in prayer apart.

Notice, next, that this separateness is carried very far by the fact that, in each case, it put the family apart, and their wives apart. These people were one flesh; but when their hearts were made flesh, they had to offer separate supplications. The common sin of husbands and wives should be confessed unitedly, and there is nothing more natural, more beautiful, and more edifying, than for husbands and wives to pray together, to confess sin together, and to offer thanksgiving together. In all these they may be most fittingly one; yet there is and there must be some sin which the man shall bring before God, and before God alone, feeling that even his dearest one would be an intruder in that act of personal mourning for sin; and when the Spirit of God is in the woman's heart, she feels that, though she has no earthly secret from her husband, yet there is something between God and her soul into which even her husband cannot enter. Her mourning for her sin, when she first seeks the Saviour, would be hindered by her husband's interposition, so she gets alone; and his mourning for sin, when he first seeks the Saviour, or when afterwards he is conscious of some backsliding, and longs to return to his Lord, must be apart and alone. No, ye dearest ones, when we enter into the closet, and shut to the door, you must enter your closet, and shut to the door; for, in the dealing of a soul with God, it must be One and one, the one Mediator standing between them twain, but no other individual interposing. This family or that family was to mourn apart as a family; but then the individuals composing each family were also to be separate in their confession before the Most High: "every family apart, and their wives apart."

II. Now, secondly, HOW DOES THE INDIVIDUALITY GENERALLY SHOW ITSELF?

Well, in many ways. So truly is mourning for sin a personal thing, that each individual sees most his own sin, and feels himself to be alone as to character. That man who has truly repented of sin believes that, under some aspects, he is the

greatest of all sinners. He is not so absurd as to charge himself with certain sins which he never committed, which probably he never had the opportunity to commit; but he is wise enough to see that our guiltiness before God not only depends upon the act committed, but upon the will to commit it, and upon the spirit, and very much upon the light against which a man has sinned, and upon the peculiar circumstances of favour and mercy which the man himself may have forgotten, but which prove him to have been most ungrateful in the commission of sin. I do not know about your sin, dear brother; you may be worse than I am, but I do know my own sin so far as to feel that I hope you are not worse than I am, and to believe that I myself must take no other place than among the guiltiest, and cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Hence, each man's confession is necessary apart, because there is a different character in it.

Generally, mourning for sin is separate as to place. When a man is under a sense of sin, he likes to get quite alone. I knew one who, in his soul-trouble, resorted to a saw-pit; many have hidden behind a haystack, some have gone into the barn. Into all manner of queer nooks and corners we go when we are mourning for sin, but solitude has wonderful charms to a bleeding heart. You feel above all things that, even if it be the open street, you must get into some sort of solitude,—if necessary, even the awful solitude of being lost in a crowd. Thus, man recognizes the individuality of his sin by wishing to get apart even as to place.

And I am sure that it is so as to time. True mourning for sin is not a matter of hours and days. You cannot say, "Now it is time for me to mourn over my sin, and I must keep on so many minutes, and then have done." Ah, no, dear friends! When a man is ill, when he is consumptive, or has a bad cough, if he comes to chapel, you think to yourself that you would like him to cough during the pauses in the service, and not at other times; but, poor soul, he cannot help himself, he must cough when he must cough. And when a man has a groan in his soul, he cannot groan according to the position of the sun. He cannot take down a book of prayers, and say, "Now is the time for the confession of sin; and now is the time for this, and now is the

time for that." He cannot follow the rules that may have been best in somebody else's case. All the time some are praising God, he will be still mourning; and when others are lamenting with broken hearts, he is smiting his heart to think that it will not lament, and will not break. The things of eternal life cannot be set according to carnal time; they will come according to their own way; and thus, every man and every woman must mourn for sin apart, and there is no regulating them by the movements of the clock.

Not only are they separate as to place and time, but they get apart as to manner. Some can weep over their sin; but others could not shed a tear if they were offered the world for it. Some are silent in their agony; others cry aloud. One man feels that his heart is broken; another envies him, and wishes that his hard heart would break. One person is full of misery on account of sin, another says,—

"If aught is felt, 'tis only pain,
To find I cannot feel."

There is a separate form of mourning about each true penitent, and let no one say of himself, "I have not mourned for sin because I have not mourned as somebody else has done." Perhaps, if you had been exactly like somebody else, there might be a suspicion that you were a mere copyist, and not an original work of the grace of God. So, true mourning differs in its manner.

Do you not also know, dear friends, that each person who mourns for sin has his own secret,—a secret which he must not tell to anyone but the Lord? It were a pity that he should tell it to human ears. There is something in each individual case into which a stranger cannot enter. You may have read John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, and you may have noticed that most of his biographers say that Bunyan's account of himself was generally blackened by a morbid consciousness,—which also shows how little they know about the matter, for the man who has led the purest life, when he is brought before God by the humbling influence of the Holy Spirit, is the man who

almost invariably considers himself to have been viler than anybody else. It is possible that John Bunyan was not worse than any other gipsy tinker, he may have been a great deal better, that is to say, in the judgment of the blind bats that try to see what he was like; but he knew himself better than they knew him, for he had seen himself in the strong light of the Holy Spirit. God had turned the bull's-eye of the great lantern of the law full into the man's face, and so he had a better idea of his own character than you and I have; and what he did tell us is not all he knew, he would not have dared to tell it all, it would have been wrong that he should. As there are words in heaven so high that it were not lawful for a man to utter them, so are there words down here in the deep corruption of our fallen spirits that it were not lawful for a man to utter save in the ear of the Most High. Therefore, each individual must mourn apart.

III. Our time is running so fast, that I must go on to notice, thirdly, **HOW WE ACCOUNT FOR THIS INDIVIDUALITY.** Why is it that each man thus mourns apart?

Well, in part, it is to be accounted for by that natural and justifiable shame which prevents our confessing all our sins before others. I take it to be an awful violation of the natural delicacy of the human mind when any person is invited to make oral confession to a priest. I can myself scarcely conceive of anything that could be more degrading to the heart, and more injurious to the conscience, than the infernal brazenness of heart that permits anybody to attempt such a thing. As the inspired prophet would have said, they must have "a whore's forehead" before they can dare to unmask their hearts before their fellow-men. No, no, brethren, such a thing must not be so much as named among us; what shame remains in us, ought to prevent such a shameful or shameless thing as that. Hence, our mourning must be apart.

Secondly, in such a case, the heart desires to go to God himself, and the presence of anybody else seems like an intrusion between our soul and our God. The man looks around the room, he is afraid that somebody may come in and disturb his devotion, so he turns the key in the door. "Now," he says, "my

God, it is to thee that I would speak. I should not like a dog to hear what I have to say to thee, now that I come, and honestly and openly lay bare my heart for thine inspection, hating the very garment spotted by the flesh, and desiring to be washed thoroughly from mine inequities."

Further, the man is conscious that his guilt has been all his own. He dissociates himself, when he truly repents, from everybody else. He does not think of laying the blame on those who tempted him, or on ungodly parents who neglected his education. He looks for nobody to be his scapegoat except the appointed Scapegoat. He says, "I have sinned and done this evil in thy sight, O my God, and I stand before thee alone to confess it"; and therefore he gets the pardon of his guilt.

This, indeed, is a sure sign of sincerity. If thou canst only pray in public, thou dost not pray at all. If thou canst only join in the general confession, thou hast uttered a public lie. Thou art only right before God when it is thine own sin, felt in thine own heart, confessed by thyself before thine own God, unknown to anybody else, and altogether known to him.

Dear hearers, have you all done this? Have you all repented of sin? I am glad that so many are willing to spend a week-evening in listening to the gospel, and I always have hope that there is some religious sense about you that leads you to this mid-week service; but still, permit this personal question,—Has religion been to you only a family matter? Are you what you are because your mother was so or your father was so? Are you of this religion or that because it is the national faith,—because your pedigree has brought down with it your creed? This will not do. Remember, you have to be born alone, you will have to die alone, you will have to be judged alone, and you must be born again alone; and therefore, there must be for yourself a personal sense of sin, a personal seeking to Christ, a personal acceptance of pardon through the precious blood. Is it so with you all? Our days are running swiftly away; we are all getting older, and coming nearer to the end of life. If you have never confessed sin, I entreat you to do it now. If you have never been delivered from its terrible curse, seek to be delivered now; ere

you close your eyes in what may be the last sleep you shall ever know, confess your sin, and trust in Jesus. O God, help us each one separately thus to come to thee! It is with this plea that I close my discourse, let us make personal, complete, and searching investigation into our own case before God; let us go before him with our own personal acknowledgments, with nothing borrowed from others; let us not make a masquerade of religion, but let us go before God as we are, and confess our sinful state, and seek pardon for the sake of him who died, the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

And then, dear friend, if you have really made this confession, and have found peace with God, then go forth, and try to bring others. Having lighted your own torch, let it not burn in your private chamber only, but go through the street with it; go into the darkest place, and let that light flame forth; but take care that it is not dimmed by any repetition of the sin you acknowledge. It is no use pretending to mourn for sin, and then to keep on in it.

"Repentance is to leave
The sin we loved before,
And show that we in earnest grieve
By doing so no more."

May true holiness spring out of your repentance, and may this go side by side with an earnest endeavour, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring others to repent apart as we have done, through him whose cross is the sole hope of sinners, who himself, living and pleading for sinners at the Father's right hand, is the one lone star that makes glad the midnight of our guilt. Oh, look ye away from self to Christ! If your confession of sin is offered without thought of him, away with your confession of sin. Repentance is nothing apart from Christ. Look to him through your tears, through your depression of spirit, and say, "Just as I am, I cast myself at those dear feet that bled out life for me, and look up to the riven side which is the one cleft of the rock where the sinner may hide himself away from the tempests of eternal wrath."

God bless you, beloved! May we meet in heaven to sing together, though on earth we must mourn apart, for Christ's sake! Amen.