

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF SIN

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The Biblical doctrine of sin by James S. Candlish

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JAMES S. CANDLISH

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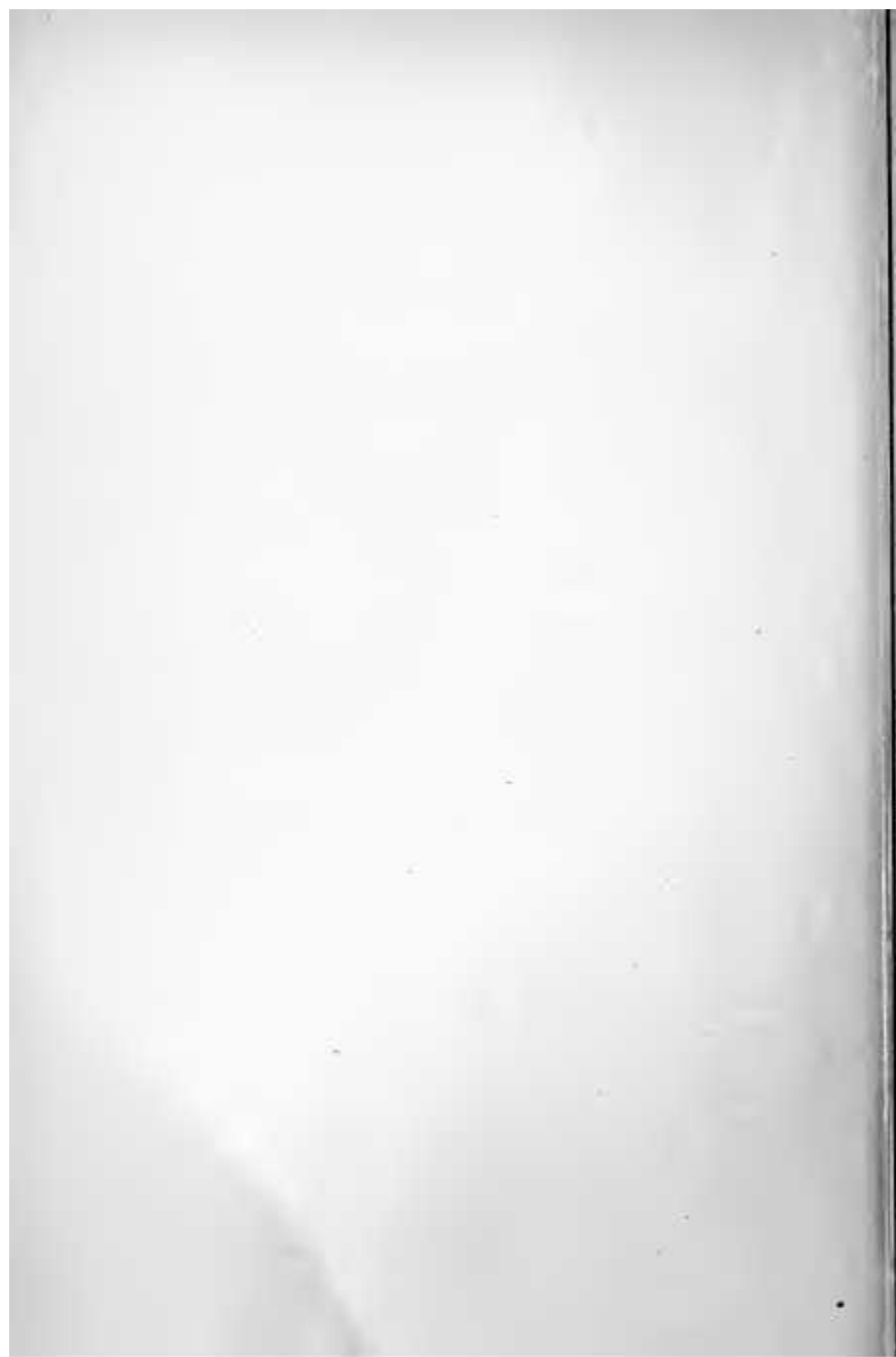
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THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF SIN.



CHAPTER I.

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPTION OF SIN.

CHRISTIANITY is in its essential nature remedial ; it is not a mere benefit bestowed to increase the wellbeing of men ; it is a deliverance, and indeed the only deliverance, from a most terrible and deadly evil ; and that evil is, throughout the pages of Revelation, described as having its root and chief part in sin. The founder of Christianity was called Jesus, because He should save His people from their sin ; He was hailed as "the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world" ; He declared that He came to call sinners to the kingdom of God ; and it is proclaimed as a faithful saying among His disciples "that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." Entirely consistent with this are the anticipations and promises of the Old Testament. In the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, sin is recognised as the radical and greatest evil from which man needs to be saved.

Yet the Bible gives no didactic explanation of what sin is, but from the very outset of its teaching assumes that to be known. Just as the inspired writers do not think it needful to begin with a definition of God or a proof of His existence, as little do they count this necessary in regard to sin. For the practical purpose, which is the immediate object of revelation,

neither was required ; and the Word of God has met with a response in the consciences and hearts of men, when it addresses them as sinners, and calls them to return to God. Sin is a reality, and is felt as such, even though its nature be not explained to the intellect.

But in a systematic study of Bible teaching we need to have a clear and definite view of what sin is ; and for that purpose we must inquire, How do we get that knowledge of it which the Bible assumes that we have ? In seeking an answer to this question, we may begin with its most general conception, and advance from that to its specific character.

In its most general conception, sin is unquestionably an evil, and we get the notion of evil in general from our feeling. As capable of enjoyment and suffering, of happiness and misery, of desire and aversion, we have the notion of evil, including all that we dislike and fear, all that affects disagreeably our bodily, mental, or spiritual feelings ; and as our experience enlarges, we include in the notion of evil all that leads, or may lead, to such disagreeable feelings. This general conception we have, simply as sentient beings.

But more specifically, as possessing conscience, or moral judgment, we have the notion of moral evil ; and sin undoubtedly comes under this more specific conception. We know and judge our own actions, desires, and emotions, as right or wrong ; we have an apprehension of what we ought to do and to be, and whatever deviates from that we pronounce to be morally evil and blameworthy. This constitutes a distinct kind of evil, different from other things that come under the general notion. Its difference, or special characteristic, lies in its being what ought not to be, what is wrong, what deserves blame and condemnation. What is the ground and origin of this moral judgment is a question disputed by philosophers ; but it suffices us in the meantime to know that it is a real fact, and that it serves to define more precisely the notion of sin.

Man has, however, also a religious faculty, by which he comes

into conscious relation to God; and this gives to moral evil the distinctive character of sin, under which it is always viewed in the Bible. Sin is moral evil viewed as an offence against God.

That the Bible uniformly recognises the notion of moral evil as sin against God hardly needs to be proved by citation of particular passages; but for the sake of distinctness reference may be made to some outstanding points in the evidence by which this is made plain. In the narratives of the times before Moses, the wickedness of man is represented as grieving God, and calling down His judgment (Gen. vi. 5-7); blood murderously shed cries to God (*ib.* iv. 10); the fear of God is thought by Abraham to be the only restraint upon injustice (*ib.* xxii. 11); and Joseph resists temptation to vice by the thought that it is a sin against God (*ib.* xxxix. 9). In the earliest part of the laws of Israel, the Book of the Covenant (Ex. xxi.-xxiii.), oppression and wrong are denounced as offences against God (*ib.* xxii. 23, 24), and the whole code is sanctioned by His authority. In the Levitical legislation, the prescriptions about sin and guilt offerings (Lev. iv., v.) imply the same idea; and especially in the laws of holiness, vice and crime are described as provoking God's wrath (Lev. xviii., xix.). The great work of the prophets was to proclaim that moral evil estranged men from God, and provoked His anger, in spite of the most costly and careful outward service (see *e.g.* Amos v., Hos. vi., Micah vi., Isa. i. etc.); and we have the response to that teaching in the utterances of penitent devotion in Ps. xxxii., l., li., cxxx., cxliii. With all this teaching before Christ's advent, the notion of moral evil as an offence against God was indelibly impressed on the Jewish mind; and our Lord and His apostles did not need to enforce it, but assumed it as an admitted and certain truth, and based on it the proclamation of forgiveness, peace with God, the enjoyment of His favour, and the hope of His glory, as a message of glad tidings to men who had all sinned and come short of the glory of God.