

**A Sermon on 1 John 2:1-2 by Rev Donald Maclean
on 28 June 1990, a communion Thursday**

We shall turn now to consider as the Lord may enable us, words we will find in the first epistle general of John chapter 2, verse 1. “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

John tells us in this epistle that his first purpose in writing to them was that they might enjoy the fellowship that he and others had with the Father and with the Son. “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” That fellowship was fellowship in the light of the word of God, as we read in another part, “If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Now John was conscious of the fact that sin was the cause of breaking that fellowship. Breaking fellowship with the Father and the Son, breaking fellowship with the people of God. Therefore he says here, “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.” Because sin is that which offends God and causes the soul to lose the favour of God and the presence of God, therefore causes the soul to lose the joy that is in that fellowship. “These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.” There is joy in the fellowship – joy in the Holy Ghost, who is the Spirit of communion. And as the Holy Spirit is grieved away by sin, and sin that is not confessed and repented of, then the joy of the fellowship goes.

But John knew what all the people of God know. That is, that they do sin. Their life is not a life of sin, but nevertheless they do have occasions when they must say, “Iniquities, I must confess, prevail against me do.” Therefore, for their encouragement, he reminds them of the fact that “if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

So we have this Advocate, he says, in the court of heaven. This is a transaction that goes on in the court of heaven. And that because the court of heaven is the place where sin is registered. You remember when Cain slew his brother Abel, that God said that the blood of thy brother

Abel calleth unto Me in heaven. So that every sin that is committed, in thought, word or deed, is registered in heaven. The all-knowing God, the heart-searching God, He knows every sin. And all these sins cry to God in heaven.

Now, if we enquire how this takes place, while we confine ourselves just now to the murder of Abel by Cain: the blood of Abel cried to God in heaven, because the law of God, the sixth commandment, which said “thou shalt not kill,” had been broken. Therefore, this act of Cain in breaking the sixth commandment – the sixth commandment had a voice in heaven because the law of God, the moral law of God, which is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments, we must ever remember is not just a revelation of the will of God, but it is a revelation of the divine nature. The holiness, the spirituality and the good of the law is a revelation of God’s divine nature. Therefore, the nature of God – when the law is broken, there is an offence to God. And that offence, as we can see in the case of Abel, is registered in heaven. The law of God was saying, the sixth commandment was saying, “There’s a man called Cain and he’s guilty of this sin.” It was heard in heaven. God said it was heard in heaven.

Men are ready to conclude that God does not take to do with sin. Because they don’t take to do with it themselves, they are ready to conclude that God does not take to do with sin. Nevertheless, the fact remains, that the court of heaven is the place where the sins of every sinner are registered. Therefore, we know on the day of judgment that the books will be opened, where every sin, where every unforgiven sin is registered.

Now, when you consider that, then surely it is a most solemn and indeed appalling thing to think of the streams of sin that are flowing into the court of God. Streams of sin from this world. Every sin, of thought, word and deed, breaking the law of God, coming short of the law of God. They are all registered in heaven. They all have a voice in heaven. Just like the sixth commandment had a voice in heaven in the days of Cain.

Now you consider the generation in which you and I live. What a voice in heaven with regard to murder. In our day and generation, is it not a wonder that we are spared at all, when the sixth commandment is witnessing with regard to murders innumerable in our day and in our generation. And the same with regard to the seventh commandment. The sins with regard to that commandment, of fornication, adultery and sodomy, are just legion. And to think of it – to think of it! Every one of these sins is registered in heaven. Registered in heaven. God does not

overlook sin. He says, “though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not go unpunished.” The same with the other commandments; the fifth commandment: dishonour to parents.

And the fourth commandment: people say, “Oh we’ll open the shops on the Lord’s Day” – on “Sunday” as they call it. “There’s nothing in that. Most people want it. They want to do it, and nobody’s going to quarrel with it but some old-fashioned narrow-minded people.” The Sabbath day, my dear friend, the breaches of the Sabbath day, are a voice in heaven. As I remember reading a sermon of Lachlan Mackenzie of Lochcarron, one of the well-known ministers of the Highlands, he was preaching on one occasion in Aberdeen. He said: “I hear a voice behind me, and that voice is the Sabbath crying, ‘I’m murdered, I’m murdered.’ But I hear another voice arising, and that voice is saying, ‘Wait, Sabbath day, and I will avenge you of your murder.’” You see, that’s the same principle.

All our sins – thought, word and deed – they are recorded in heaven. They are in the court of heaven. They are all there – all the sins of this generation. And if Jonathan Edwards said, when he was under conviction of sin with regard to himself as one man, “I can find no words,” he said, “to explain my view of my sins, but infinitude upon infinitude.” That’s the sins of one man. What about the sins of the race? What about the sins of this generation? And they all have a voice in heaven. The voice of the law of God, witnessing against sin, and the voice of the law of God requiring that the justice of God would deal with these sins according to the terms of God’s justice, and that is, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” Now if we have any proper view of that, then this is a great thing, that in the court of heaven there’s an Advocate. We’ll come to deal with that in a moment.

Now I want to refer to another court, and that is a court that is in your own bosom. You needn’t go to heaven for this court. This court is in your own bosom. It is the court of your conscience. Very little is heard about that nowadays. I should say very little *reality* is heard about it nowadays. But man’s soul is so constituted that he has certain faculties. Now these faculties are not compartments in the soul. The conscience, the understanding, the memory, the affections, the will. These are the faculties of the soul. Now we are not to conceive of these faculties as though they were separate compartments in the soul, because the soul is a spirit. What they are is separate *exercises* of the soul.

So that when we speak about the understanding, we speak about the capacity of the soul to understand things, to discern things. When we

speak about the affections, we speak about the capacity of the soul to love and to hate. When we speak about the will, we speak about the capacity of the soul to choose or to refuse. When we speak about the conscience, we speak about that capacity in the human soul to pass judgment. And in particular, to pass judgment on ourselves. So that, when we sin, when we realise that we have sinned, we have pain in our conscience.

Now the word of God teaches us with regard to the conscience: we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews that the blood of bullocks and of goats could not take away sin – it can't take away sin. It didn't take away sin from the court of God. No! And it doesn't take away sin from the court of the conscience. Now he says here, "How much more shall the blood of Christ ... purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" Dead works to serve the living God – these are sins, and the guilt of sin, lying on the conscience. So, there is a court in heaven, yes, where sins are registered. There's a court in your soul where sins are registered, too: the court of conscience. When we commit sin, that sin is registered in the court of conscience.

Now, when we consider the court of conscience, we are to remember that the conscience is guided by the understanding. The judgments made by the conscience are guided by the understanding. Now, as man is by nature, his understanding is blind. His understanding is dark. Therefore his conscience at times calls good evil and evil good. It calls good evil and evil good because of the darkness of his understanding. So that, say, for instance, if you think of a Roman Catholic worshipping the virgin Mary, and doing that conscientiously. That is because of the darkness of the understanding. Nevertheless the sin is there. The sin is there, and the sin is registered on the court of conscience. "Dead works" – works that came from spiritual death, and works that deserve eternal death. They are registered in the court of conscience.

Now you may say, "Well, I don't feel that." You may say that: "I don't feel that." Well, you better ask Saul of Tarsus about that. And he'll explain to you this: "I was alive," he said, "without the law once." Alive without the law once – that is to say that he did not discern the spirituality and the holiness of the law. But here he was. And he was saying with regard to the law that he was blameless. He did not feel dead works in his conscience when he was a Pharisee, when he was entertaining the hope at the feet of Gamaliel, that whoever would be in heaven, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Saul of Tarsus would be. He was sure of that. But then – but then. "I was alive without the law once."

Dead! No thought of my sins. “The commandment came and sin revived.” Sin had a resurrection in his soul. Sin had a resurrection in his soul.

Now there’s nobody here this morning but this must happen to them, on this side of death or on the other side. But sin will have a resurrection, and these dead works, lying on a dead conscience, once the conscience is quickened by the power of the Holy Ghost, the sinner feels sins. They have a resurrection. Their eyes are opened. They have a resurrection. They were there all the time – he did not know it. What a terrible thing! If you are to journey through time, and it’s on the other side of death that your sins have a resurrection in your conscience, because, if that be the case, you will know in the twinkling of an eye, when you die, that there’s no place for you but hell. No place in the universe of God for you but hell. And therefore, we must remember that we have consciences. We have dead works in these consciences. And we need that our consciences would be purged from these dead works before we die. We need that. We need that.

Now, we are told here, that “if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father” – One who comes to our help. And he is, first of all, “Jesus Christ the righteous”. Therefore he is an Advocate who is acceptable to the Father. He is an Advocate who is acceptable to the Father. The Father’s eye rests with complacency and delight and love upon this Advocate, within the veil, when He rises to plead the cause of a sinner, when He rises to obtain forgiveness of sin for a sinner. Well, then, He is Jesus Christ the righteous, the Son of God in our nature and mine. The sinless, now glorified, Jesus Christ.

But there is something else. There is something else. That is this. He is “the propitiation for our sins.” He is the propitiation for our sins. Now, a good word to remember in connection with propitiation, is *satisfaction*. Satisfaction. Christ’s work satisfied the claims of God’s law and justice with regard to sin – with regard to the sins of His people.

And of course when he says here, “He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world,” he does not mean of course, naturally, the sins of everybody in the world. But he means our sins, who are here writing to you, are the sins of Jews and Gentiles throughout the ages. The propitiation for our sins.

That the apostle, in writing to the Hebrews of this particular point, as I mentioned already, says this: “the blood of bullocks and of goats could

not take away sin.” They could not take away sin. The great day of atonement in Israel, for the sins of that year – the bullock slain, the animal slain, the blood taken into the most holy place, sprinkled seven times before the throne – did not take away one sin. Did not take away one sin. They were merely shadows of what was to come. And they were types of the blood that was to take away sin. So, why was that? God prescribed these ordinances, and they were intended to be kept, and it was sinful not to keep them during the time they were in force. But the reason why the blood of bullocks and of goats could not take away sin, was because of the nature of the animals who died. The law is spiritual. Justice requires death of a spiritual person. The blood of bullocks and of goats could not satisfy the claims of God’s nature. And therefore they did not take away sin.

But there was a Person, and we were singing about Him in Psalm 40. When He was coming into the world – the Holy Spirit takes aside the veil and gives us a peep into eternity. Are you doing that? Are you finding that at times? The Holy Spirit taking the veil aside and giving you a peep into eternity. Surely you should be wanting that! That’s where you’re going – into eternity!

And here is the Son of God coming into the world. And He is in communion with the Father, and what is He saying? “A body hast thou prepared me.” “Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldest not.” All these sacrifices, they were types and shadows. They did not take away one sin. They were set aside when this Person came into the world, the Son of God. And in communion with His Father, He said, “A body thou hast prepared for Me.” A body Thou hast prepared for Me. And that is the body in which He was to atone for sin. That is the body from which blood was to be shed – so that sin could be taken away in the court of heaven, and taken away in the court of conscience. There’s no other way! No other way.

Although you would weep tears over your sins until you are blind like Muckle Kate of Lochcarron, these tears will not take away one sin. But this Person, who came in the fulness of the times, well, He had a body, and that body was to die. The blood was to be shed, for without the shedding of blood there is no remission for sin. Therefore when this Person came to die, we read that the Lord laid upon Him the iniquities of us all. Now, that means this: that God the Father took the guilt of the sins of all His people that were registered in the court of heaven, the guilt of all these sins and all that would be committed afterwards. They were laid upon Christ. So that He would die in the room and place of the guilty. So

that His blood would be shed for the remission of the sins of many.

Now, dealing with this matter, the apostle says, “How much more shall the blood of Christ, Who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your consciences from dead works?” Why? Because they purged heaven, purged away the sins that were before the throne of God! Now, among some commentators, there is some difference in opinion about the phrase “the eternal spirit.” There are some, like Dr. Owen and Smeaton and others, who say that “the eternal spirit” here means the Holy Ghost. That it’s through the eternal Spirit – and that is the Holy Spirit – upholding the human nature by communications of divine strength, and so on.

Well, with all due respect to them, I do not accept that view. I’ll tell you why. And that’s why I have been laying emphasis on it. This is all a question of nature. It’s all a question of nature. The bullocks, the goats, they were animals. There was nothing spiritual. There was nothing spiritual in their nature. There was no love in their nature; there was nothing spiritual in their nature. But when you come to this Person, when you come to the Son of Man, who is the Son of God, and therefore I believe the eternal spirit here refers to the divine nature. To the divine nature.

Now it is in the human nature that Christ suffered, we know that. The divine nature cannot suffer because it is unchangeable. But the point of this is that when Christ died, it was the Lord of glory that died. It was Jesus of Nazareth, yes, He died. But it was the Lord of glory that died. And all the virtue and all the merit of His divine nature was behind His death on the cross of Calvary. And that means this. That the blood that was shed, is of infinite value, is of eternal value, is of unchangeable value.

The sinner whose sins are forgiven through the blood, it does not matter how great the multitude of them may be. It does not matter how vile they are. They are forgiven, and they are forgiven forever. “Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more forever.” Therefore the sacrifice of Christ is a spiritual sacrifice. It was a soul that died; there was a body, yes, but it was the soul; the old divines used to say that the soul of Christ’s sufferings were the sufferings of His soul. “My soul,” He said, “is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.” So He propitiated God in His death that He died, He propitiated God, He satisfied the claims of divine justice when He atoned for all the sins, before the court of heaven. And when the time comes, and I’m going to come to that in a moment, there’s

enough in this blood to cleanse the conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Now, He died and rose again and ascended up on high. He is now on the right hand of the Majesty on high. He's introduced here as an Advocate. To help. To take up the case of one who has sinned. Of one who was saying, "After thy lovingkindness, Lord, have mercy upon me." The Saviour as the Advocate within the veil, is there in His person as the Son of God, and the Father rests with infinite complacency and love upon Him, but also, He is the propitiation. He is the Lamb. He is the Lamb. He is the Advocate, yes, but He is the Advocate whose blood cleanseth from all sin. And therefore, when He pleads for the soul at God's right hand, He pleads on the ground, not just of His person, not just of His office, but He pleads on the ground of the merit of His blood that cleanseth from all sin.

And He takes the cry of the soul, and he perfumes it with His own merit and puts it before the throne: "God be merciful to me a sinner." Now it is interesting and instructive too that the publican, the word that he uses is this: "God be propitiated." That's actually the word he uses in the Greek language. "Be propitiated to me a sinner." And by that we are to understand that the cry that came from the heart of the publican was this, "God be merciful to me through the blood of the sacrifice." Through the blood of the sacrifice. Through the blood of the sacrifice.

Now the Saviour is the Advocate at God's right hand. Now, the word used in the Greek language for Advocate (I'm not speaking about the Greek for any other purpose but just to illustrate particular points – we have a perfectly adequate translation in the King James Version) but the word Advocate is called *paraclete*. Now, the Saviour told His disciples, I will pray the Father, and He will send you another *paraclete*. He will send you *another* Advocate. And this is the Advocate in the court of conscience. Think of the wonder of that! The Advocate of the court of heaven! The Son of God! But who is to be the Advocate in the court of conscience? Well, here, it is, the Holy Spirit. And he is an advocate for Christ in the court of conscience.

So that, when in the mercy of God the sinner comes to realise what Paul mentions with regard to himself: "I was alive without the law once." I was alive without the law once. Very strange, was it not? He was a man, he was a rabbi, he was studying at the feet of Gamaliel, and as we would agree, he was reading all the interpretations of the Old Testament Scriptures, and he says he "was alive without the law once!" And the

same thing is true of you too. If you are here today with a dead conscience; you have been hearing the word of God all your days, but you are alive without experimental knowledge of the law of God. And “by the law,” we read, “is the knowledge of sin.” By the law is the knowledge of sin.

Now if you can think for a moment about the cities of refuge which were set up in Israel, so that a man who inadvertently killed his neighbour could flee to that city of refuge from the sword of the avenger, and be there until the death of the high priest, when his case would be tried. Now you can imagine this man, in Israel, here he is. He’s working in the fields, he’s going home, he’s coming out, he’s going in or out among his friends, and then one day he inadvertently kills a man. Suddenly, suddenly, he realises that day that he is exposed to the sword of the avenger. What a change comes over him at the very thought that he is now exposed to the sword of the avenger and that he will perish unless he gets to the city of refuge.

And so it is, when the Holy Spirit with awakening grace blesses the word of God to a sinner. “When the commandment came,” he said, “sin revived.” Sins begin to rise up before the conscience that were lying there. See, they were lying there. They were lying there. And every one of these sins, Paul says, “When the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.” I died. That is to say, first of all, I saw clearly that I was gone, that I was a dead soul, that I was under the sentence of death. That I was under the sentence of death.

Now, one can think of the man that I referred to already, who inadvertently killed another man, and all of a sudden he discovered himself exposed to the avenger of blood. Then he needed to make post-haste to one of the cities in the land of promise which had been set up. And this was his great concern now. He wasn’t concerned about his fields now. He wasn’t concerned about what people thought about him. He wasn’t concerned about anything, but one thing, and that to get into the city of refuge, before the avenging sword of the avenger of blood would lay hold on him. So it is with regard to the sinner who realises that he has a conscience. He realises now what it means to have conscience speaking. To have sin rising up and condemning him. And knowing now that he must flee to Christ. Well, that is his supreme concern. His supreme concern.

Now it is here that the Holy Spirit comes in as the Advocate for Christ. He is the sinner, and he knows now that he cannot atone for his own sins.

He has discovered that. He has discovered that all his righteousnesses are as filthy rags. He has discovered that he cannot atone for any sin. It cannot be done. God's law and God's justice will not accept any sermons, any desires, any prayers of his. But he must have Christ. As you remember in the well-known poem of Murray M'Cheyne:

When free grace awoke me with light from on high,
then legal fears shook me; I trembled to die.
No refuge, no safety, from self did I see.
Jehovah Tsidkenu my Saviour must be.

And you see, the Holy Spirit is now the Advocate for Christ in the soul. That's what Christ says: "He shall take of Mine and reveal it unto you." He is the Advocate for Christ in the soul; in the court of conscience. Revealing to the soul the merit of the blood. Revealing to the soul that the blood cleanses and makes whiter than the snow. Revealing to the soul that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses not just from one sin, two or three, but all sin. And He is an Advocate for Christ in calling upon the soul to receive Him, to depend upon Him.

Now if I go back once more, since I was speaking about it, to the man who was fleeing to the city of refuge. Thomas Boston had a very excellent piece about that. He says with regard to it: he'd slain this man, he's concerned about getting inside the gates of the city of refuge before the avenger of blood will overtake him. And therefore, he's fleeing with haste. He's hearing the voice that Lot heard. "Escape for thy life. Tarry not in all the plain." "Escape for thy life, lest thou be consumed." But Thomas Boston says, when he comes to the city of refuge, he's taken with it. It's a nice place. It's a place that appeals to him. It's a place that he delights in. A place where he's going to find rest.

Now, so it is in the soul fleeing to Christ. There's concern, there is haste, there is fear of coming short. But when the Holy Spirit is the Advocate for Christ in the conscience, He's showing that Christ is beautiful, He's showing what the church said: "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons." And what else? Well, he says this: "I sat down under his shadow with great delight." Now, these words mean this: "I delighted and sat down." That is, in the soul closing with Jesus Christ, there is a spiritual delight in Christ. Coming under the shadow of the apple tree is coming under the shelter of the blood of Christ. And so the soul, as the Holy Spirit reveals Christ and encourages the soul by the promises and invitations of the gospel, encourages the soul to embrace Christ by faith, and then secretly working faith in the

soul, so that the soul does embrace Christ. In that moment, the conscience is purged from dead works. Sins are forgiven through the blood of Christ, and as I said, they are forgiven forever.

You may say, “My sins are too many.” Well, you say that, I say this: the merit of Christ’s blood is infinite. You say, “I’m afraid that I’ll fall into sin again.” Well that is true, you may do that, and you’ll have forgiveness, by exercising faith and repentance towards God. The merit of Christ’s blood is eternal. The forgiveness is for ever, because the merit of Christ’s blood is unchangeable. Once God has forgiven the sins of a sinner, he will never change. That will never change. Never! Because the merit of the blood is unchangeable. It’s through the eternal spirit. The eternal spirit. The divine nature is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. And all the merit of the divine nature is behind the sacrifice of Christ.

Now, he says here, “If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father.” This Person made precious to the soul in the court of conscience, He’s an Advocate for the soul in the court of heaven. What a safe place to put your case! What a safe place to put your case. It must be done in time. I remember hearing about a woman, and she had a case in the law courts in Britain. She went to see a QC (that is, Queen’s Council) to get advice. She got advice but she did not take it. She did not take it. So she went back to him for advice once more, but when she came into his office he said to her, “You are too late. I was a QC before, but I am now a judge.” I am now a judge. And that’s true of this Person here who is now the Advocate, he will also be a Judge. It will be too late then. There will be no pardon then. There will be no peace then. And nothing from the great white throne but, “Depart from me into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

And therefore, how important it is for you and for me that we should know about these great things in connection with the soul, in connection with forgiveness. In connection with the blood of Christ, in connection with the love of Christ manifested, in His giving Himself a sacrifice of a sweet-smelling savour to God, for He is the propitiation for our sins, and not ours only, but also Jew and Gentile to the end of the world.

And all the people of God, in every age and generation, were saved by the blood of Christ. Each and every one of them, their consciences are purged from dead works, to what? “To serve the living God.” To serve the living God! You cannot serve God with a dead conscience. That’s something that is not understood by this generation of so-called professors of religion. You cannot serve God unless your conscience is

purged through the blood of Christ. That's the soul that delights in the service of God. We ought to remember this, when we are looking forward, the Lord sparing us to do it, to keeping in remembrance the death of Christ, the One who was dead is alive and alive for evermore, and He is the Advocate at God's right hand, and He is the one who obtains in His intercession every blessing that His people need, and the final blessing too, when He prays the Father, "Father, I will that those whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am."

Now I'll just make one last point about this intercession of Christ. We are not to think that when Christ is interceding at God's right hand, that He is exercised the way He was, say, in the garden of Gethsemane, when with strong cries and tears He was praying to God. Or praying like you and I pray. In fact, as I mentioned, the nature of the intercession is, "Father, I will." And Christ's presence, as the Advocate at God's right hand, is an intercession in itself. It's an intercession in itself that He's there. And then all His people are to be there as well. So that, when He prays at God's right hand, it is not with strong cries and tears, but it is "Father, I will."

And the Lord grants to give Him whatever His heart desires, to the ultimate end, "Father, I will that those whom Thou hast given Me may be with Me where I am." And they will behold the Lamb in the midst of the throne. The One who died in the midst of the malefactors, is now the Lamb in the midst of the throne. And their song unto the endless ages of eternity will be, "Unto Him who loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, be praise and honour and glory for ever and ever."