

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia
on Sunday, February 26, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ISAIAH 1:18

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord; though
your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

A STUDY IN SCARLET

I wonder what picture was before the prophet's mind as he penned these words! Perhaps that very morning, as he had mingled with the crowds in the city street, the gaudy, bright-red robe of some wealthy merchant had made him think of the contrast between that and the snow-white robes of God's redeemed. Or had he, as he meditated in an eastern garden, seen in the flowers the contrast which conjured up this thought -- on the one hand the flaming, flaunting, riotous crimson of the poppy, and on the other the serene, snow—white purity of the Madonna lily? Or again, he may have gazed, spellbound, one evening, as a blood—red sun sank majestically, like some great ball of fire, behind the snow-capped mountains of Lebanon.

But somehow, I suspect that Isaiah, with his keen, observing eyes, had gazed that very day, at a worker, an artisan in the local bazaar — a textile expert who was busily removing ugly red stains from a piece of white cloth. Indeed, he may have been working with a piece of woollen cloth which had been dyed red; and his job was to restore it to its original color. What a difficult assignment, for everyone knows that crimson is the most difficult color to eradicate from any fabric. It was a task that would tax to the utmost the skill of the most cunning professional. And as the prophet watches this expert succeed in restoring the cloth to its pristine whiteness, suddenly he sees it as the picture of God removing the stains of sin from a human life --

“Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be
as white as snow; though they be red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.”

As we read the Bible, we discover that sin is often portrayed as being blood-red; but I wonder do we ever recognize the striking significance of this comparison.

But the question at once suggests itself -- why is crimson the color chosen for the textile worker in the bazaar to work with? The prophet surely intends us to realize how great is the importance he attaches to it, for he stresses it by repetition — “though your sins be like scarlet... though they be red like crimson.” It is by no means a negative color that he identifies with sin. And that is surely remarkable, for crimson, or scarlet, is hardly the color our world today would use to describe sin.

1. **“If we think of sinlessness as a spotless white, then ‘sin’, we are told, “is just the fading**

or dulling of that pure white.” The unsullied purity of childhood cannot be retained indefinitely. It is inevitable that the pure robe of innocence should become soiled through contact with the world. What the theologians call “sin” just can’t be avoided, and anyway, it’s not terribly serious, and we ought not to be unduly troubled by it. With our increased knowledge of psychology, sin is not the multi-headed monster it once was. True, it is regrettable, but it is not to be taken too seriously. The modern novel and the modern drama so often seek to bear out this contention. “Sin,” they say, “is not a thing to break your heart over.” The agony of mind and soul which prompted St. Paul to cry out — “Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this dead body?” calls for the attention of a psychiatrist, not a minister!

No, sin is not to be regarded as blood-red — it is just a somewhat dirty white. Anyway, it is due to ignorance; and when people are properly educated, what the preachers call “sin” will simply disappear!

Now a great deal of sin is due to ignorance — “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing” — but is it only the uneducated who defy the moral law of God? By no means! Sin all too often parades itself unashamed, and in its grossest forms, in our institutions of higher learning. Do people always sin in ignorance? Does a person never sin with the clear consciousness that he is breaking God’s law? Explain it as you will, if the people of the world were to receive at this moment the gift of perfect knowledge, sin would still rear its ugly head in the world tomorrow morning. Sin is no monopoly of the ignorant. Its roots go right down through the mind into the wicked and unregenerate heart of man.

2. **“If sinlessness is pure white, then what you call ‘sin’ is an ugly gray.”** It is the seamy side of life. Sin is due to selfishness, we are told; and it is selfishness which gives the drab effect to life: and so, we witness the age-old contrast between wealth and poverty, the rich and the poor, the “haves” and the “have nots.” Sin, in essence, is vulgar greed -- man giving in to his lower nature. If selfishness could only be rooted out of the world, “sin” would become a thing of the past.

But would it? The tragedy is that people so often sin against their higher and better nature. They will destroy their bodies and damn their souls. No, sin cannot be dismissed as a lifeless insipid gray. For sin is red, the symbol of ruin, ruthless and pitiless, blood red. From the day Cain plunged the knife into the heart of Abel his brother, sin has been stained with the very life-blood of humanity -- the blood of men and women -- and God help us — the blood of little children.

3. **“If sinlessness is pure white, then surely ‘sin’ is jet black”** — the most tragic, hideous reality in all of God’s universe -- the source of all the sorrow and suffering which blight and blast human life -- sin -- as black as night and as hateful as hell itself.

But is sin always like that? Is it always clothed in somber colors? No — and that is the real point of our text! Liquor is a beautiful crutch to the poor beaten alcoholic. It would be relatively easy to be good if sin were always dressed in repellant black. But it isn’t! Sin is not always clothed in dark colors. If it was, no one would want to have anything to do with it. But what of the glamour and the glitter with which sin is so often associated and with which it

fascinates and enthralls the worldly heart? The prophet is right!

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous "Sherlock Holmes" story is entitled "A Study in Scarlet" — and this gave me the title for this sermon because that is what sin is -- a study in scarlet. It flaunts itself as a magnificent blood—red poppy, a great flaming flower, full of beauty and magic; but in its heart, is poison and drugged death. The real menace of sin lies in this fact that it is so dangerously attractive, so full of deadly fascination.

How appropriate, then, is the color scarlet to describe sin! Sin is pleasing, attractive, and glamorous, subtly alluring. That is why the world sins and goes on sinning. We hear the voice of conscience which warns us that the thing is wrong, but we are as fascinated by it as the moth which flutters spellbound round the flame until it is destroyed.

How then are we to awaken the conscience to the drugged death in the heart of this subtly attractive but poisonous flower? Dr. George Matheson, the famous Scottish preacher, once said — "No man can see his sin by looking at it; he can only see it by looking away from it." It is only in the vision of purity that we see our own impurity. A newly-washed handkerchief may look perfectly white until you place it on top of newly—fallen snow.

When we read the Gospels, we are introduced to the One Who can deliver us from sin because He died for sin. "God made Him (the Lord Jesus Christ) Who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). But thank God, we do not need to comprehend fully the hatefulness of sin before we come to Jesus and commit our lives to Him. But when we do come to Him; when we look into those eyes of incarnate purity, we fall on the ground and confess that we are guilty and wretched and ashamed, and that we should hide our faces from Him. It is only when He stretches out His hand to lift us up that our eyes are opened to enable us to see the depth to which we had fallen.

But be certain of this, that when we really see Jesus with the eye of faith, then we see our sin like a great scarlet stain, like the spots of blood on Lady Macbeth's hand, that not all the perfumes of Arabia could sweeten. But we see also that wondrous provision which God has made in Christ whereby our sin may be blotted out forever. Millions throughout the ages have had their guilty stains washed whiter than the snow by the red blood that flowed from the Cross on Calvary's hill!

How wonderfully mysterious are the processes by which a holy yet loving God redeems His people! Why is it that the crimson stains of sin can be washed white only by plunging them in a crimson fountain? No human mind has ever been able fully to fathom the mystery of redemption, or to provide a completely reasoned explanation of the atonement that was offered for sin when our Lord died on the Cross. Yet all down the Christian centuries the ransomed Church of God has lifted up its voice in thankful praise for that fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness.

"Oh, precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow!
No other fount I know

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

Many today would try to dismiss the Christian doctrine of the Atonement as a relic of barbarism -- a legacy of savage thought -- and yet a great multitude which no man can number have proved in their own experience that “the blood of Jesus Christ God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7), and have found in that experience of forgiveness and cleansing, an assurance of eternal life. “Godliness,” as Dr. Joseph Parker once said, “is the best argument for Cod.” And shall we not say that the redeemed life is the best argument for the efficacy -- the absolute effectiveness -- of the redeeming blood of Jesus? It is because He died that we live. It is because our sin-stained garments have been plunged in the red fountain of His blood, that we may hope to wear the snow-white robes of the redeemed. We cannot attempt to explain fully the blessed mystery of the divine cleansing.

“But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed thro’
‘Ere He found His sheep that was lost.”

I cannot fathom, by any theory of atonement, all that happened when my Savior died on Calvary; but I do know that it was through those deep waters and that dark night that He passed through, that my sins have been forgiven; and for that I want to praise Him at this very moment and for all eternity. Don’t you?

And now -- “Unto Him Who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood... to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.”

Amen.