**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**2 KINGS-006. A MIRACLE NEEDING EFFORT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25. So she went, and came unto the man of God to mount Carmel. And it came to pass, when the man of God saw her afar off, that he said to Gehazi his servant, Behold, yonder is that Shunammite: 26. Run now, I pray thee, to meet her, and say unto her, Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband! is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well. 27. And when she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught him by the feet: but Gehazi came near to thrust her away. And the man of God said, Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her: and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me. 28. Then she said, Did I desire a son of my lord! did I not say, Do not deceive met 29. Then he said to Gehazi, Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thine hand, and go thy way: if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not again: and lay my staff upon the face of the child. 30. And the mother of the child said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And he arose, and followed her. 31. And Gehazi passed on before them, and laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice, nor hearing. Wherefore he went again to meet him, and told him, saying, The child is not awaked. 32. And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed. 33. He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord. 34. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and stretched himself upon the child: and the flesh of the child waxed warm. 35. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him: and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. 36. And he called Gehazi, and said, Call this Shunammite. So he called her. And when she was come in unto him, he said, Take up thy son. 37. Then she went in, and fell at his feet, and bowed herself to the ground, and took up her son, and went out."*

*2 Kings 4:25-37*

The story of Elisha is almost entirely a record of his miracles, and the story of his miracles is almost entirely a record of deeds of beneficence. Exception has been taken to it on the ground of the strange accumulation of supernatural works, which have been said to make it like some mediaeval saint's legend. But why should it not be true that, after Elijah had proclaimed the truth, his successor's function was to enforce it chiefly by his acts, and to seek to draw Israel back to God by the cords of love and the gentle compulsion of mercies? The careful consideration of the work of the two prophets makes the peculiarities of Elisha's perfectly intelligible. This story of the great lady at Shunem, her joy over her only child and his piteous death on her knees, is one of the tenderest and sweetest pages in the history. Late won and early lost, the poor boy lies pale and dead on Elisha's bed at Shunem, while the mother hurries across the plain of Jezreel to Carmel,--a distance of some fifteen or sixteen miles,--where Elisha was then living, probably near the place of Elijah's sacrifice. This passage begins with her approach.

**I. Note first the meeting (verses 25-28).**

Somewhere on the slopes of Carmel, commanding a view of the plain stretching away in the blue distance eastward, sat the prophet. His eye was keen, though probably he was now old, and he recognised the lady at a distance, as she rode swiftly towards the mountain. He appears to have suspected that this unusual visit meant some calamity, and his gentle heart went out towards his hostess and friend. Gehazi could not get back sooner than she could come, but sympathy could not sit passive and watch her approach. So the instinctively despatched message beautifully witnesses the prophet's keen affection, and, as it were, the eager leap of his sympathy. So swift and ready to flash into act is the fellow-feeling of the Highest with the sorrows of us all; so should be the compassion of each with another. The higher in gifts or office in the kingdom a man is, the more is he bound to carry his sympathy in an outstretched hand. It is worth very little when it comes slowly. It is priceless when it runs to meet the mourner before she speaks.

The detailed question put into Gehazi's mouth describes the circle within which this woman's heart moved,--her husband, her child, herself. If these were well, nothing could be very ill; if ill, nothing could be well. But the message, which came so warm from Elisha's lips, had been cooled on the road, and sounded formal from Gehazi. It is hard for selfish indifference to carry tender words without freezing them. The bearer of sympathy must be sympathetic. As Gehazi spoiled Elisha's message, so we Christians too often do our Master's, and cool it down to our own temperature. The fact that Gehazi had done so is suggested by the curt answer, Peace! It is often quoted as the language of resignation, but it seems much rather to be evasion of the question, and that because her sorrow shrank from unveiling itself to the questioner. Nothing makes grief dumb so surely as prying and yet indifferent intrusion. A tenderer hand than Gehazi's is needed to unlock the sad secret of that burdened breast.

It was perhaps partly pique at her silencing him, and partly mere unfeeling attention to propriety, which made the servant wish to check the convulsive grasp of the feet, which the master allowed. Underlings are more careful of what they suppose to be their superior's dignity than he is. Much is permitted to love and sorrow, by a prophet, which would be repressed by smaller men. Her soul is bitter within her pardons much, and only unfeeling critics will be punctilious in dealing with even the extravagances of grief. But Elisha had another reason than pity. He wished to know her pain, and therefore he let her cling to his feet; for only there would she find her tongue. Does there not shine through the figure of the gentle prophet the image of the gentler Christ, who will not have the poorest and foulest spurned from His feet, though it be a woman who was a sinner, and lets us come as close to Him as we will, even to hide our faces on His breast, that we may pour out all our sorrows and sins to Him?

The limitations of the prophet's knowledge he frankly owns. How much better would it have been for the Church if its teachers had been more willing to copy his modesty, and said about a great many things, The Lord hath hid it from me!

The mother's answer is indeed the cry of a bitter heart. Its abrupt questions and its reticence as to the child's death are pathetically true to nature, and sound yet across all these centuries as if the bitter cry were for a grief of to-day. Did I desire a son? She upbraids Elisha and Elisha's God for having forced on her an unasked blessing. Did I not say, Do not deceive me? She did (verse 16); and she upbraids Elisha again for a worse deceit than she had meant then, by mocking her with a gift which was wrenched from her hands so suddenly and soon. How many a sad heart is to-day tempted to raise this cry of anguish! And how patient is Elisha with wild words, and how he discerns, beneath the apparent rough reproach, the misery which it implies and the petition which it veils! Elisha's Lord is no less tender in His judgment of our hasty, whirlwind words, when our hearts are sore; and if only we speak them to Him and cling to His feet, He translates them into the petitions which they mean, and is swift to answer the meaning and pass by the sound of our bitter cry.

**II. We note the ineffectual experiment of the staff (verses 29-31).**

The supposition that Gehazi was sent in such haste with the hope that the touch of the staff might bring back life, is dismissed as impossible by most commentators, who have therefore some difficulty in saying what he was sent for. Some of the Rabbis answered, To prevent putrefaction, which would set in soon on that harvest day. Others say that the intention was to prevent more life escaping from him. But dead is not usually supposed to be an adjective admitting of comparison. Others find the reason in the wish to deliver Israel from the superstitious veneration of such things as the staff, by showing that it was powerless. But verse 31 plainly implies that the result of Gehazi's attempt was not what had been expected. Why need there be any hesitation in taking the natural meaning, and supposing that Elisha sent his servant quickly, if peradventure the touch of his staff might suffice, and followed in person, because he did not know whether it would. There is nothing unworthy of a prophet who had just confessed his ignorance in the supposition. His unobtrusive spirit delighted to hide its power behind material vehicles, as is seen in most of his miracles; and, if he remembered how he himself, in his early days, had parted the waters with his master's cloak, he might think it possible that his servant should work a miracle with his staff.

The Shunemite quotes his own words on that far-off day; and perhaps she was reminded of them by perceiving the analogy of the two incidents. But her clinging to Elisha shows her doubt of the success of the attempt; and she was right. Why did the staff fail? Perhaps because of its bearer. Gehazi always appears unfavourably, and Elisha's staff loses its power in such hands. The mightiest instruments are weak when selfishness and coldness wield them. An unworthy minister can make the Gospel itself impotent. It is an awful thing to carry the rod of Thy strength and to hinder its exerting its energy. But possibly the non-success of the attempt was meant to teach Elisha and us that miracles of life-giving are not to be wrought so easily, but need the effort of the prophet himself. We cannot delegate the work of God, and no sending of others will do instead of going ourselves. Such things are not achieved without much personal toil, pains, and self-sacrifice.

**III. So we come to the last step, the communication of life (verses 32-37).**

It was noon when the child died. The mother's journey would take three or four hours, and the return at least as much. It would then be dark when the two reached her desolate home. She had laid the boy on Elisha's bed, as if even that brought her some comfort. It is difficult to say whether them twain (verse 33) means him and the mother, or him and the child; but the expression of the next verse, went up, suggests that the prayer with shut door was in the lower part of the house, and that the mother's cry was joined to the prophet's petitions. Such prayer is the true preparation for such a miracle. Beautiful consideration, born of sympathy, led him to shut out curious onlookers, and then to go up alone to the little chamber where that pale, tiny corpse lay. No eye but a mother's could have seen what followed without profanation; and a mother's heart would have been torn by hopes and fears if she had seen.

The actual miracle is remarkable for two peculiarities--the effort required and the slowness of the process. Of course, there is a profound and beautiful use to be made of the prophet's action in laying himself upon the dead child, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand, if we regard it as symbolic of that closeness of approach to our nature, dead in sins, which the Lord of life makes in His incarnation and in His continual drawing near. It is His own life which Jesus imparts, and it is imparted because He comes near and touches us. It is the warmth of His own heart which passes into those who live by derivation of life from Him. And Elisha may well stand as symbol of Jesus in this miracle. But besides that use of the narrative, which is no mere fanciful playing with it, we should also note the difference between the prophet and Christ in their miracles. Jesus raises the dead by His bare word. His expressed will is all-sufficient. Elisha prays, and then puts forth somewhat prolonged efforts, from which at first there is no effect, and which drain him of force, so that he is obliged to pause and leave the chamber, and gather himself together for a renewal of them. The ease of the one sets the difficulty of the other in a strong light. And the life which came back with a rush, in full stream, at Christ's bidding, comes only by degrees at Elisha's prayer and work. The one worker is the Lord of life, who speaks and it is done; the other is but the channel of power, and the appearance of effort and gradualness in result is owing to the narrowness of the channel, not to the inadequacy of the power.

In all Elisha's gentleness and lowliness there is yet a certain dignity as God's prophet; and it was not fitting that he should come from the scene of such a miracle with the glow of it upon him, to seek for the mother. So he summons her by Gehazi, and then, with beautiful delicacy, leaves her to go alone into the chamber. None are to see the transports of her joy, not even the author of it. How beautiful, too, are the quiet words, Take up thy son! She has no words; but, for all answer, comes close to him (there is no in in verse 37), and once again, but with what different feelings, clasps his feet. Not even Gehazi, or any other stickler for propriety, has the heart to thrust her back this time. The story draws a curtain over that meeting in the prophet's chamber. Sad hearts who have vainly longed for such a moment, can fancy the rapture. But the day will come, not here, but in the upper chamber, when parted ones shall clasp each other again; and many a mourner shall hear Jesus say from the throne what He once said from the Cross, Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother.