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

**2 KINGS-020. HE UTTERED HIS VOICE, THE EARTH MELTED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"20.* *Then Isaiah the son of Amos sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard. 21. This is the word that the Lord hath spoken concerning him; The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee. 22. Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel.... 28. Because thy rage against Me and thy tumult is come up into Mine ears, therefore I will put My hook in thy nose, and My bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest. 29. And this shall be a sign unto thee, Ye shall eat this year such things as grow of themselves, and in the second year that which springeth of the same; and in the third year sow ye, and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat the fruits thereof. 30. And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. 31. For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of mount Zion: the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do this. 32. Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it. 33. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord. 34. For I will defend this city, to save it, for Mine own sake, and for My servant David's sake. 35. And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. 36. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 37. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.."*

*2 Kings 19:20-22, 28-37*

At an earlier stage of the Assyrian invasion Hezekiah had sent to Isaiah, asking him to pray to his God for deliverance, and had received an explicit assurance that the invasion would be foiled. When the second stage was reached, and Hezekiah was personally summoned to surrender, by a letter which scoffed at Isaiah's promise, he himself prayed before the Lord. Isaiah does not seem to have been present, and may not have known of the prayer. At all events, the answer was given to him to give to the king; and it is noteworthy that, as in the former case, he does not himself come, but sends to Hezekiah. He did come when he had to bring a message of death, and again when he had to rebuke (chap. 20.), but now he only sends. As the chosen speaker of Jehovah's will, he was mightier than kings, and must not imperil the dignity of the message by the behaviour of the messenger. In a sentence, Hezekiah's prayer is answered, and then the prophet, in Jehovah's name, bursts into a wonderful song of triumph over the defeated invader. I have heard. That is enough. Hezekiah's prayer has, as it were, fired the fuse or pulled the trigger, and the explosion follows, and the shot is sped. Whereas thou hast prayed, ... I have heard, is ever true, and God's hearing is God's acting in answer. The methods of His response vary, the fact that He responds to the cry of despair driven to faith by extremity of need does not vary.

But it is noteworthy that, with that brief, sufficient assurance, Hezekiah, as it were, is put aside, and instead of three fighters in the field, the king, with God to back him, and on the other side Sennacherib, two only, appear. It is a duel between Jehovah and the arrogant heathen who had despised Him. Jerusalem appears for a moment, in a magnificent piece of poetical scorn, as despising and making gestures of contempt at the baffled would-be conqueror, as Miriam and her maidens did by the Red Sea. The city is virgin, as many a fortress in other lands has been named, because uncaptured. But she, too, passes out of sight, and Jehovah and Sennacherib stand opposed on the field. God speaks now not concerning, but to, him, and indicts him for insane pride, which was really a denial of dependence on God, and passionate antagonism to Him, as manifested not only in his war against Jehovah's people, but also in the tone of his insolent defiances of Hezekiah, in which he scoffed at the vain trust which the latter was placing in his God, and paralleled Jehovah with the gods of the nations whom he had already conquered (Isaiah 19:12).

The designation of God, characteristic of Isaiah, as the Holy One of Israel, expresses at once His elevation above, and separation from, all mundane, creatural limitations, and His special relation to His people, and both thoughts intensify Sennacherib's sin. The Highest, before whose transcendent height all human elevations sink to a uniform level, has so joined Israel to Himself that to touch it is to strike at Him, and to vaunt one's self against it is to be arrogant towards God. That mighty name has received wider extension now, but the wider sweep does not bring diminished depth, and lowly souls who take that name for their strong tower can still run into it and be safe from the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, and the strongest foes.

There is tremendous scorn in the threat with which the divine address to Sennacherib ends. The dreaded world-conqueror is no more in God's eyes than a wild beast, which He can ring and lead as He will, and not even as formidable as that, but like a horse or a mule, that can easily be bridled and directed. What majestic assertion lies in these figures and in My hook and My bridle! How many conquerors and mighty men since then have been so mastered, and their schemes balked! Sennacherib had to return by the way that he came, and to tramp back, foiled and disappointed, over all the weary miles which he had trodden before with such insolent confidence of victory. A modern parallel is Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. But the same experience really befalls all who order life regardless of God. Their schemes may seem to succeed, but in deepest truth they fail, and the schemers never reach their goal.

In verse 29 the prophet turns away abruptly and almost contemptuously from Sennacherib to speak comfortably to Jerusalem, addressing Hezekiah first, but turning immediately to the people. The substance of his words to them is, first, the assurance that the Assyrian invasion had limits of time set to it by God; and, second, that beyond it lay prosperous times, when the prophetic visions of a flourishing Israel should be realised in fact. For two seed-times only field work was to be impossible on account of the Assyrian occupation, but it was to foam itself away, like a winter torrent, before a third season for sowing came round.

But how could this sequence of events, which required time for its unfolding, be a sign? We must somewhat modify our notions of a sign to understand the prophet. The Scripture usage does not only designate by that name a present event or thing which guarantees the truth of a prophecy, but it sometimes means an event, or sequence of events, in the future, which, when they have come to pass in accordance with the divine prediction of them, will shed back light on other divine words or acts, and demonstrate that they were of God. Thus Moses was given as a sign of his mission the worshipping in Mount Sinai, which was to take place only after the Exodus. So with Isaiah's sign here. When the harvest of the third year was gathered in, then Israel would know that the prophet had spoken from God when he had sung Sennacherib's defeat. For the present, Hezekiah and Judah had to live by faith; but when the deliverance was complete, and they were enjoying the fruits of their labours and of God's salvation, then they could look back on the weary years, and recognise more clearly than while these were slowly passing how God had been in all the trouble, and had been carrying on His purposes of mercy through it all. And there will be a sign for us in like manner when we look back from eternity on the transitory conflicts of earthly life, and are satisfied with the harvest which He has caused to spring from our poor sowings to the Spirit.

The definite promise of deliverance in verses 32-34 is addressed to Judah, and emphasises the completeness of the frustration of the invader's efforts. There is a climax in the enumeration of the things that he will not be allowed to do--he will not make his entry into the city, nor even shoot an arrow there, nor even make preparation for a siege. His whole design will be overturned, and as had already been said (ver. 28), he will retrace his steps a baffled man.

Note the strong antithesis: He shall not come into this city, ... for I will defend this city. Zion is impregnable because Jehovah defends it. Sennacherib can do nothing, for he is fighting against God. And if we are come unto the city of the living God, we can take the same promise for the strength of our lives. God saves Zion for His own sake, for His name is concerned in its security, both because He has taken it for His own and because He has pledged His word to guard it. It would be a blot on His faithfulness, a slur on His power, if it should be conquered while it remains true to Him, its King. His honour is involved in protecting us if we enter into the strong city of which the builder and maker is God. And for David's sake, too, He defends Zion, because He had sworn to David to dwell there. But Zion's security becomes an illusion if Zion breaks away from God. If it becomes as Sodom, it shares Sodom's fate.

It is remarkable that neither in the song of triumph nor in the prophecy of deliverance is there allusion to the destruction of the Assyrian army. How the exultant taunts of the one and the definite promises of the other were to be fulfilled was not declared till the event declared it. But faithful expectation had not long to wait, for that night the blow fell, and no second was needed. We are not told where the Assyrian army was, but clearly it was not before Jerusalem. Nor do we learn what was the instrument of destruction wielded by the angel of the Lord, if there was any. The catastrophe may have been brought about by a pestilence, but however effected, it was the act of God, the fulfilment of His promise, the making bare of His arm. By terrible things in righteousness did He answer the prayer of Hezekiah, and give to all humble souls who are oppressed and cry to Him a pledge that as they have heard, so will they see, in the city of their God. How much more impressive is the stern, naked brevity of the Scriptural account than a more emotional expansion of it, like, for instance, Byron's well-known, and in their way powerful lines, would have been! To the writer of this book it seemed the most natural thing in the world that the foes of Zion should be annihilated by one blow of the divine hand. His business is to tell the facts; he leaves commentary and wonder and triumph or terror to others.

There is but one touch of patriotic exultation apparent in the half-sarcastic and half-rejoicing accumulation of synonyms descriptive of Sennacherib's retreat. He departed, and went and returned. It is like the picture in Psalm 48., which probably refers to the same events: They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and hasted away.

About twenty years elapsed between Sennacherib's retreat and his assassination. During all that time he dwelt at Nineveh, so far as Judah was concerned. He had had enough of attacking it and its God. But the notice of his death is introduced here, not only to complete the narrative, but to point a lesson, which is suggested by the fact that he was murdered as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god. Hezekiah had gone into the house of his God with Sennacherib's letter, and the dead corpses of an army showed what Jehovah could do for His servant; Sennacherib was praying in the temple of his god, and his corpse lay stretched before his idol, an object lesson of the impotence of Nisroch and all his like to hear or help their worshippers.