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

**JEREMIAH-023. THE LAST AGONY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army against Jerusalem, and they besieged it. 2. And in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, the ninth day of the month, the city was broken up. 3. And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in, and sat in the middle gate, even Nergal-sharezer, Samgar-nebo, Sarse-chim, Rab-saris, Nergal-sharezer, Rab-mag, with all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylon. 4. And it came to pass, that when Zedekiah the king of Judah saw them, and all the men of war, then they fled, and went forth out of the city by night, by the way of the king's garden, by the gate betwixt the two walls: and he went out the way of the plain. 5. But the Chaldeans army pursued after them, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he gave judgment upon him. 6. Then the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah in Riblah before his eyes: also the king of Babylon slew all the nobles of Judah. 7. Moreover he put out Zedekiah's eyes, and bound him with chains, to carry him to Babylon. 8. And the Chaldeans burned the king's house, and the houses of the people, with fire, and brake down the walls of Jerusalem. 9. Then Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard carried away captive into Babylon the remnant of the people that remained in the city, and those that fell away, that fell to him, with the rest of the people that remained. 10. But Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard left of the poor of the people, which had nothing, in the land of Judah, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time."*

*Jeremiah 39:1-10*

Two characteristics of this account of the fall of Jerusalem are striking,--its minute particularity, giving step by step the details of the tragedy, and its entire suppression of emotion. The passionless record tells the tale without a tear or a sob. For these we must go to the Book of Lamentations. This is the history of God's judgment, and here emotion would be misplaced. But there is a world of repressed feeling in the long-drawn narrative, as well as in the fact that three versions of the story are given here (chap. lii., 2 Kings xxv.). Sorrow curbed by submission, and steadily gazing on God's judicial act, is the temper of the narrative. It should be the temper of all sufferers. I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it. But we may note the three stages in the final agony which this section distinguishes.

**I. There is the entrance of the enemy.**

Jerusalem fell not by assault, but by famine. The siege lasted eighteen months, and ended when all the bread in the city was spent. The pitiful pictures in Lamentations fill in the details of misery, telling how high-born women picked garbage from dung-heaps, and mothers made a ghastly meal of their infants, while the nobles were wasted to skeletons, and the little children piteously cried for bread. At length a breach was made in the northern wall (as Josephus tells us, at midnight), and through it, on the ninth day of the fourth month (corresponding to July), swarmed the conquerors, unresisted. The commanders of the Babylonians planted themselves at the middle gate, probably a gate in the wall between the upper and lower city, so securing for them the control of both.

How many of these fierce soldiers are named in verse 3? At first sight there seem to be six, but that number must be reduced by at least two, for Rab-saris and Rab-mag are official titles, and designate the offices (chief eunuch and chief magician) of the two persons whose names they respectively follow. Possibly Samgar-Nebo is also to be deducted, for it has been suggested that, as that name stands, it is anomalous, and it has been proposed to render its first element, Samgar, as meaning cup-bearer, and being the official title attached to the name preceding it; while its second part, Nebo, is regarded as the first element in a new name obtained by reading shashban instead of Sarsechim, and attaching that reading to Nebo. This change would bring verse 3 into accord with verse 13, for in both places we should then have Nebo-shashban designated as chief of the eunuchs. However the number of the commanders is settled, and whatever their names, the point which the historian emphasises is their presence there. Had it come to this, that men whose very names were invocations of false gods (Nergal protect the king, Nebo delivers me if we read Nebo-shashban, or Be gracious, Nebo, if Samgar-nebo) should sit close by the temple, and have their talons fixed in the Holy City?

These intruders were all unconscious of the meaning of their victory, and the tragedy of their presence there. They thought that they were Nebuchadnezzar's servants, and had captured for him, at last, an obstinate little city, which had given more trouble than it was worth. Its conquest was but a drop in the bucket of his victories. How little they knew that they were serving that Jehovah whom they thought that Nebo had conquered in their persons! How little they knew that they were the instruments of the most solemn act of judgment in the world's history till then!

The causes which led to the fall of Jerusalem could be reasonably set forth as purely political without a single reference to Israel's sins or God's judgment; but none the less was its capture the divine punishment of its departure from Him, and none the less were Nergal-sharezer and his fellows God's tools, the axes with which He hewed down the barren tree. So does He work still, in national and individual history. You may, in a fashion, account for both without bringing Him in at all; but your philosophy of either will be partial, unless you recognise that the history of the world is the judgment of the world. It was the same hand which set these harsh conquerors at the middle gate of Jerusalem that sent the German armies to encamp in the Place de la Concorde in Paris; and in neither case does the recognition of God in the crash of a falling throne absolve the victors from the responsibility of their deeds.

**II. We have the flight and fate of Zedekiah and his evil advisers (vs. 4-7).**

His weakness of character shows itself to the end. Why was there no resistance? It would have better beseemed him to have died on his palace threshold than to have skulked away in the dark between the shelter of the two walls. But he was a poor weakling, and the curse of God sat heavy on his soul, though he had tried to put it away. Conscience made a coward of him; for he, at all events, knew who had set the strangers by the middle gate. Men who harden heart and conscience against threatened judgments are very apt to collapse, when the threats are fulfilled. The frost breaks up with a rapid thaw.

Ezekiel (Ezek. 12:12) prophesied the very details of the flight. It was to be in the dark, the king himself was to carry some of his valuables, they were to dig through the earthen ramparts; and all appears to have been literally fulfilled. The flight was taken in the opposite direction from the entrance of the besiegers; two walls, which probably ran down the valley between Zion and the temple mount, afforded cover to the fugitives as far as to the south city wall, and there some postern let them out to the king's garden. That is a tragic touch. It was no time then to gather flowers. The forlorn and frightened company seems to have scattered when once outside the city; for there is a marked contrast in verse 4 between they fled and he went. In the description of his flight Zedekiah is still called, as in verses 1 and 2, the king; but after his capture he is only Zedekiah.

Down the rocky valley of the Kedron he hurried, and had a long enough start of his pursuers to get to Jericho. Another hour would have seen him safe across Jordan, but the prospect of escape was only dangled before his eyes to make capture more bitter. Probably he was too much absorbed with his misery and fear to feel any additional humiliation from the mighty memories of the scene of his capture; but how solemnly fitting it was that the place which had seen Israel's first triumph, when by faith the walls of Jericho fell down, should witness the lowest shame of the king who had cast away his kingdom by unbelief! The conquering dead might have gathered in shadowy shapes to reproach the weakling and sluggard who had sinned away the heritage which they had won. The scene of the capture underscores the lesson of the capture itself; namely, the victorious power of faith, and the defeat and shame which, in the long-run, are the fruits of an evil heart of unbelief, departing from the living God.

That would be a sad march through all the length of the fair land that had slipped from his slack fingers, up to far-off Riblah, in the great valley between the Lebanon and the anti-Lebanon. Observe how, in verses 5 and 6, the king of Babylon has his royal title, and Zedekiah has not. The crown has fallen from his head, and there is no more a king in Judah. He who had been king now stands chained before the cruel conqueror. Well might the victor think that Nebo had overcome Jehovah, but better did the vanquished know that Jehovah had kept his word.

Cruelty and expediency dictated the savage massacre and mutilation which followed. The death of Zedekiah's sons, and of the nobles who had scoffed at Jeremiah's warnings, and the blinding of Zedekiah, were all measures of precaution as well as of savagery. They diminished the danger of revolt; and a blind, childless prisoner, without counsellors or friends, was harmless. But to make the sight of his slaughtered sons the poor wretch's last sight, was a refinement of gratuitous delight in torturing. Thus singularly was Ezekiel's enigma solved and harmonised with its apparent contradictions in Jeremiah's prophecies: Yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there (Ezek. xii. 13).

Zedekiah is one more instance of the evil which may come from a weak character, and of the evil which may fall on it. He had good impulses, but he could not hold his own against the bad men round him, and so he stumbled on, not without misgivings, which only needed to be attended to with resolute determination, in order to have reversed his conduct and fate. Feeble hands can pull down venerable structures built in happier times. It takes a David and a Solomon to rear a temple, but a Zedekiah can overthrow it.

**III. We have the completion of the conquest (vs. 8-10).**

The first care of the victors was, of course, to secure themselves, and fires and crowbars were the readiest way to that end. But the wail in the last chapter of Lamentations hints at the usual atrocities of the sack of a city, when brutal lust and as brutal ferocity are let loose. Chapter lii. shows that the final step in our narrative was separated from the capture of the city by a month, which was, no doubt, a month of nameless agonies, horrors, and shame. Then the last drop was added to the bitter cup, in the deportation of the bulk of the inhabitants, according to the politic custom of these old military monarchies. What rending of ties, what weariness and years of long-drawn-out yearning, that meant, can easily be imagined. The residue left behind to keep the country from relapsing into waste land was too weak to be dangerous, and too cowed to dare anything. One knows not who had the sadder lot, the exiles, or the handful of peasants left to till the fields that had once been their own, and to lament their brethren gone captives to the far-off land.

Surely the fall of Jerusalem, though all the agony is calmed ages ago, still remains as a solemn beacon-warning that the wages of sin is death, both for nations and individuals; that the threatenings of God's Word are not idle, but will be accomplished to the utmost tittle; and that His patience stretches from generation to generation, and His judgments tarry because He is not willing that any should perish, but that for all the long-suffering there comes a time when even divine love sees that it is needful to say Now!? and the bolt falls. The solemn word addressed to Israel has application as real to all Christian churches and individual souls: You only have I known of all the inhabitants of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities.