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

**MALACHI-003. A DIALOGUE WITH GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12.* *The Lord will cut off the man that doeth this ... out of the tents of Jacob, ... 14. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth."*

*Malachi 2:12, 14 (R.V.)*

It is obvious from the whole context that divorce and foreign inter-marriage were becoming increasingly prevalent in Malachi's time. The conditions in these respects were nearly similar to that prevailing in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is these sins which the Prophet is here vehemently condemning, and for which he threatens to cut off the transgressors out of the tents of Jacob, and to regard no more their offerings and simulated worship. They might cover the altar of the Lord with tears, but the sacrifice which they laid upon it was polluted by the sins of their daily domestic life, and therefore was not regarded by Him any more. Malachi is true to the prophetic spirit when he denounces a religion which has the form of godliness without its power over the practical life. But his sharp accusations have their edge turned by the question, Wherefore? which again calls out from the Prophet's lips a more sharply-pointed accusation, and a solemner warning that none should deal treacherously against the wife of his youth, for I hate putting away, saith the Lord. We may dismiss any further reference to the circumstances of the text, and regard it as but one instance of man's way of treating the voice of God when it warns of the consequences of the sin of man. Looked at from such a point of view the words of our text bring before us God's merciful threatenings and man's incredulous rejection of them.

**I. God's merciful threatenings.**

The fact of sin affects God's relation to and dealings with the sinner. It does not prevent the flowing forth of His love, which is not drawn out by anything in us, but wells up from the depths of His being, like the Jordan from its source at Dan, a broad stream gushing forth from the rock. But that love which is the outgoing of perfect moral purity must necessarily become perfect opposition to its own opposite in the sinfulness of man. The divine character is many-sided, and whilst to the pure it shows itself pure, it cannot but be that to the froward it will show itself froward. Man's sin has for its most certain and dreadful consequence that, if we may so say, it forces God to present the stern side of His nature which hates evil. But not merely does sin thus modify the fact of the divine relation to men, but it throws men into opposition in which they can see only the darkness which dwells in the light of God. To the eye looking through a red tinted medium all things are red, and even the crystal sea before the throne is a sea of glass mingled with fire.

No sin can stay our reception of a multitude of good gifts appealing to our hearts and revealing the patient love of our Father in heaven, but every sin draws after it as certainly as the shadow follows the substance, evil consequences which work themselves out on the large scale in nations and communities, and in the smaller spheres of individual life. And surely it is the voice of love and not of anger that comes to warn us of the death which is the wages of sin. It is not God who has ordained that the soul that sinneth it shall die, but it is God who tells us so. The train is rushing full steam ahead to the broken bridge, and will crash down the gulph and be huddled, a hideous ruin, on the rocks; surely it is care for life that holds out the red flag of danger, and surely God is not to be blamed if in spite of the flag full speed is kept up and the crash comes.

The miseries and sufferings which follow our sins are self-inflicted, and for the most part automatic. Whatsoever a man soweth, that--and not some other crop--will he also reap. The wages of sin are paid in ready money; and it is as just to lay them at God's door as it would be to charge Him with inflicting the disease which the dissolute man brings upon himself. It is no arbitrary appointment of God's that he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; nor is it His will acting as that of a jealous despot which makes it inevitably true that here and hereafter, Every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of reward, and that to be parted from Him is death.

If then we rightly understand the connection between sin and suffering, and the fact that the sorrows which are but the echoes of preceding sins have all a distinctly moral and restorative purpose, we are prepared rightly to estimate how tenderly the God who warns us against our sins by what men call threatenings loves us while He speaks.

**II. Man's rejection of God's merciful threatenings.**

It is the great mystery and tragedy of life that men oppose themselves to God's merciful warnings that all sin is a bitter, because it is an evil, thing. He has to lament, I have smitten your children, and they have received no correction. The question Wherefore? is asked in very various tones, but none of them has in it the accent of true conviction; and there is a whole world of difference between the lowly petition, Show me wherefore Thou contendest with me, and the curt, self-complacent brushing aside of God's merciful threatenings in the text. The last thing which most of us think of as the cause of our misfortunes is ourselves; and we resent as almost an insult the word, which if we were wise, we should welcome as the crowning proof of the seeking love of our Father in heaven. We are more obstinate and foolish than Balaam, who persisted in his purpose when the angel with the drawn sword in his hand would have barred his way, not to the tree of life, but to death. The awful mystery that a human will can, and the yet sadder mystery that it does, set itself against the divine, is never more unintelligible, never so stupid, and never so tragic as when God says, Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die? and we say, Why need I die? I will not turn.

The Wherefore? of our text is widely asked in the present day as an expression of utter bewilderment at the miseries of humanity, both in the wide area of this disordered world and in the narrower field of individual lives. There are whole schools of so-called political and social thinkers who have yet to learn that the one thing which the world and the individual need is not a change of conditions or environment, but redemption from sin. Man's sorrows are but a symptom of his disease, and he is no more to be healed by tinkering with these than a fever-stricken patient can be restored to health by treating the blotches on his skin which tell of the disease that courses through his veins.

But sometimes the question is more than an expression of bewilderment; it conceals an arraignment of God's justice, or even a denial that there is a God at all. There are men among us who hesitate not to avow that the miseries of the world have rooted out of their minds a belief in Him; and who point to all the ills under which humanity staggers as conclusive against the ancient faith of a God of love. They, too, forget that that love is righteousness, and that if there be sin in the world and God above it, He must necessarily war against it and hate it.

Our right response to God's merciful threatenings is to ask this question in the right spirit. We are not wise if we turn a deaf ear to His warnings, or go on in a headlong course which He by His providences declared to be dangerous and fatal. We use them as wise men should, only if our Wherefore? is asked in order to learn our evil, and having learned it, to purge our bosoms of the perilous stuff by confession and to seek pardon and victory in Christ. Then we shall know the secret of the Lord which is with them that fear Him; and the mysteries that still hang over our own histories and the world's destiny will have shining down upon them the steadfast light of that love which seeks to make men blessed by making them good.