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

**PROVERBS-011. WISDOM AND CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"30.* *Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; 31. Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men."*

*Proverbs 8:30-31*

There is a singular difference between the two portions of this Book of Proverbs. The bulk of it, beginning with chapter 10., contains a collection of isolated maxims which may be described as the product of sanctified common sense. They are shrewd and homely, but not remarkably spiritual or elevated. To these is prefixed this introductory portion, continuous, lofty in style, and in its personification of divine wisdom, rising to great sublimity both of thought and of expression. It seems as if the main body of the book had been fitted with an introduction by another hand than that of the compilers of the various sets of proverbial sayings. It is apparently due to an intellectual movement, perhaps not uninfluenced by Greek thought, and chronologically the latest of the elements composing the Old Testament scriptures. In place of the lyric fervour of prophets, and the devout intuition of psalmists, we have the praise of Wisdom. But that noble portrait is no copy of the Greek conception, but contains features peculiar to itself. She stands opposed to blatant, meretricious Folly, and seeks to draw men to herself by lofty motives and offering pure delights. She is not a person, but she is a personification of an aspect of the divine nature, and seeing that she is held forth as willing to bestow herself on men, that queenly figure shadows the great truth of God's self-communication as being the end and climax of all His revelation.

We are on the wrong tack when we look for more or less complete resemblances between the Wisdom of Proverbs and the Sophia of Greek thinkers. It is much rather an anticipation, imperfect but real, of Jesus than a pale reflection of Greek thought. The way for the perfect revelation of God in the incarnation was prepared by prophet and psalmist. Was it not also prepared by this vision of a Wisdom which was always with God, and yet had its delights with the sons of men, and whilst rejoicing always before Him, yet rejoiced in the habitable parts of the earth?

Let us then look, however imperfect our gaze may be, at the self-revelation in Proverbs of the personified divine Wisdom, and compare it with the revelation of the incarnate divine Word.

**I. The Self-revelation of Wisdom.**

The words translated in Authorised Version, As one brought up with him, are rendered in Revised Version, as a master workman, and seem intended to represent Wisdom--that is, of course, the divine Wisdom--as having been God's agent in the creative act. In the preceding context, she triumphantly proclaims her existence before His works of old, and that she was with God, or ever the earth was. Before the everlasting mountains she was, before fountains flashed in the light and refreshed the earth, her waters flowed. But that presence is not all, Wisdom was the divine agent in creation. That thought goes beyond the ancient one: He spake and it was done. Genesis regards the divine command as the cause of creatural being. God said, Let there be--and there was': the forthputting of His will was the impulse to which creatures sprang into existence at response. That is a great thought, but the meditative thinker in our text has pondered over the facts of creation, and notwithstanding all their apparent incompletenesses and errors, has risen to the conclusion that they can all be vindicated as very good. To him, this wonderful universe is not only the product of a sovereign will, but of one guided in its operations by all-seeing Wisdom.

Then the relation of this divine Wisdom to God is represented as being a continual delight and a childlike rejoicing in Him, or as the word literally means, a sporting in Him. Whatever energy of creative action is suggested by the preceding figure of a master workman, that energy had no effort. To the divine Wisdom creation was an easy task. She was not so occupied with it as to interrupt her delight in contemplating God, and her task gave her infinite satisfaction, for she rejoiced always before Him, and she rejoiced in His habitable earth. The writer does not shrink from ascribing to the agent of creation something like the glow of satisfaction that we feel over a piece of well-done work, the poet's or the painter's rapture as he sees his thoughts bodied forth in melody or glowing on canvas.

But there is a greater thought than these here, for the writer adds, and my delight was with the sons of men. It is noteworthy that the same word is used in the preceding verse. The delight of the heavenly Wisdom in God is not unlike that directed to man. The sons of men are the last, noblest work of Creation, and on them, as the shining apex, her delight settles. The words describe not only what was true when man came into being, as the utmost possible climax of creatural excellence, but are the revelation of what still remains true.

One cannot but feel how in all this most striking disclosure of the depths of God, a deeper mystery is on the verge of revelation. There is here, as we have said, a personification, but there seems to be a Person shining through, or dimly discerned moving behind, the curtain. Wisdom is the agent of creation. She creates with ease, and in creating delights in God as well as in her work, which calls for no effort in doing, and done, is all very good. She delights most of all in the sons of men, and that delight is permanent. Does not this unknown Jewish thinker, too, belong, as well as prophet and psalmist, to those who went before crying, Hosanna to Him that cometh in the name of the Lord? Let us turn to the New Testament and find an answer to the question.

**II. The higher revelation of the divine Word.**

There can be no doubt that the New Testament is committed to the teaching that the Eternal Word of God, who was incarnate in Jesus, was the agent of creation. John, in his profound prologue to the Gospel, utters the deepest truths in brief sentences of monosyllables, and utters them without a trace of feeling that they needed proof. To him they are axiomatic and self evident. All things were made by Him. The words are the words of a child; the thought takes a flight beyond the furthest reach of the mind of men. Paul, too, adds his Amen when he proclaims that All things have been created through Him and unto Him, and He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. The writer of Hebrews declares a Son through whom also He made the worlds, and who upholds all things by the word of His power and does not scruple at transferring to Jesus the grand poetry of the Psalmist who hymned Thou, Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands. We speak of things too deep for us when we speak of persons in the Godhead, but yet we know that the Eternal Word, which was from the beginning, was made flesh and dwelt among us. The personified Wisdom of Proverbs is the personal Word of John's prologue. John almost quotes the former when he says the same was in the beginning with God. for his word recalls the grand declaration, The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way ... I was set up in the beginning or ever the earth was. Then there are two beginnings, one lost in the depths of timeless being, one, the commencement of creative activity, and that Word was with God in the remotest, as in the nearer, beginning.

But the ancient vision of the Jewish thinker anticipated the perfect revelation of the New Testament still further, in its thought of an unbroken communion between the personified Wisdom and God. That dim thought of perfect communion and interchange of delights flashes into wondrous clearness when we think of Him who spake of the glory which I had with Thee before the foundation of the world, and calmly declared: Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. Into that depth of mutual love we cannot look, and our eyes are too dim-sighted to bear the blaze of that flashing interchange of glory, but we shall rob the earthly life of Jesus of its pathos and saving power, if we do not recognise that in Him the personification of Proverbs has become a person, and that when He became flesh, He not only took on Him the garment of mortality, but laid aside the visible robes of His imperial majesty, and that His being found in fashion as a man was humbling Himself beyond all humiliation that afterwards was His.

But still further, the Gospel reality fills out and completes the personification of Proverbs in that it shows us a divine person who so turned to the sons of men that He took on Him their nature and Himself bore their sicknesses. The Jewish writer had great thoughts of the divine condescension, and was sure that God's love still rested on men, sinful as they were, but not even he could foresee the miracle of long-suffering love in the Incarnate Jesus, and he had no power of insight into the depths of the heart of God, that enabled him to foresee the sufferings and death of Jesus. Till that supreme self-sacrifice was a fact, it was inconceivable. Alas, now that it is a fact, to how many hearts that need it most is it still incredible. But passing all anticipation as it is, it is the root of all joy, the ground of all hope, and to millions of sinful souls it is their only refuge, and their sovereign example and pattern of life.

The Jewish thinker had a glimpse of a divine wisdom which delighted in man, but he did not dream of the divine stooping to share in man's sorrows, or of its so loving humanity as to take on itself its limitations, not only to pity these as God's images, but to take part of the same and to die. That man should minister to the divine delight is wonderful, but that God should participate in man's grief passes wonder. Thereby a new tenderness is given to the ancient personification, and the august form of the divine Wisdom softens and melts into the yet more august and tender likeness of the divine Love. Nor is there only an adumbration of the redeeming love of Jesus as He dwells among us here, but we have to remember that Jesus delights in the sons of men when they love Him back again. All the sweet mysteries of our loving communion with Him, and of His joy in our faith, love, and obedience, all the secret treasures of His self-impartation to, and abiding in, souls that open themselves to His entrance, are suggested in that thought. We can minister to the joy of Jesus, and when He is welcomed into any heart, and any man's love answers His, He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied.

**III. The call of the personal Word to each of us.**

The Wisdom of Proverbs is portrayed in her queenly dignity, as calling men to herself, and promising them the satisfaction of all their needs. She describes herself that the description may draw men to her. The self-revelation of God is His mightiest means of attracting men to Him. We but need to know Him as He really is, in order to love Him and cling to Him. A fairer form than hers has drawn near to us, and calls us with tenderer invitations and better promises. The divine Wisdom has become Man with sweet human hands and lips and eyes. Such was His delight in the sons of men that He emptied Himself of His glory, and finished a greater work than that over which he presided when the mountains were settled and the hills brought forth. Now He calls us, and His summons is tenderer, and gives promise of loftier blessings than the call of Wisdom was and did. She called to the simple, Come eat ye of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. He invites us: If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink, and He furnishes a table for us, and calls us to eat of the bread which is His body broken for us, and to drink of the wine which is His blood shed for many for the remission of sins. She promises riches and honour, yea, durable riches and righteousness. His voice vibrates with sympathy, and calls the weary and heavy laden, of whom she scarcely thinks, and offers to them a gift, which may seem humble enough beside her more dazzling offers of fruit, better than gold and revenues, better than choice silver, but which come closer to universal wants, the gift of rest, which is really what all men long for, and none but they who take His yoke upon them possess. See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh, for if they escaped not when they refused her that spake through the Jewish thinker's lips of old, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that beseecheth us from heaven. Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and it is in Him crucified that our weakness and our folly are made strong and wise, and Wisdom's ancient promise is fulfilled: Whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.