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

**1 KINGS-022. AHAB AND ELIJAH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!"*

*1 Kings 21:20*

The keynote of Elijah's character is force-the force of righteousness. The New Testament, you remember, speaks of the power of Elias. The outward appearance of the man corresponds to his function and his character. Gaunt and sinewy, dwelling in the desert, feeding on locusts and wild honey, with a girdle of camel's skin about his loins, he bursts into the history, amongst all that corrupt state of society, with the force of a hammer that God's hand wields. The whole of his career is marked by this one thing,--the strength of a righteous man. And then, on the other hand, this Ahab;--the keynote of his character is the weakness of wickedness, and the wickedness of weakness. Think of him. Weakly longing--as idle and weak minds in lofty places always do--after something that belongs to somebody else; with all his gardens, coveting the one little herb-plot of the poor Naboth; weak and worse than womanly, turning his face to the wall and weeping when he cannot get it; weakly desiring to have it, and yet not knowing how to set about accomplishing his wish; and then--as is always the case, for there are always tempters everywhere for weak people--that beautiful fiend by his side, like the other queen in our great drama, ready to screw the feeble man that she is wedded to, to the sticking-place, and to dare anything to grasp that on which the heart was set. And so the deed is done: Naboth safe stoned out of the way; and Ahab goes down to take possession! The lesson of that is, my friend,--Weak dallying with forbidden desires is sure to end in wicked clutching at them. Young men, take care! You stand upon the beetling edge of a great precipice, when you look over, from your fancied security, at a wrong thing; and to strain too far, and to look too fixedly, leads to a perilous danger of toppling over and being lost! If you know that a thing cannot be won without transgression, do not tamper with hankerings for it. Keep away from the edge, and shut your eyes from beholding vanity.

But my business now is rather with the consequences of this apparently successful sin, than with what went before it. The king gets the crime done, shuffles it off himself on to the shoulders of his ready tools in the little village, goes down to get his toy, and gets it--but he gets Elijah along with it, which was more than he reckoned on. When, all full of impatience and hot haste to solace himself with his new possession, he rushes down to seize the vineyard, he finds there, standing at the gate, waiting for him--black-browed, motionless, grim, an incarnate conscience--the prophet whom he had not seen for years, the prophet that he had last seen on Carmel, bearding alone the servants of Baal, and executing on them the solemn judgment of death; and there leaps at once to his lip, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?'

**I. I find here, in the first place, this broad principle: Pleasure won by sin is peace lost.**

It does not need that there should be a rebuking prophet standing by to work out that law. God commits the execution of it to the natural operations of our own consciences and our own spirits. Here is the fact in men's natures on which it partly depends: when sin is yet tempting us, it is loved; when sin in done, it is loathed. Action and reaction, as the mechanicians tell us, are equal and contrary. The more violent the blow with which we strike upon the forbidden pleasure, the further back the rebound after the stroke. When sin tempts--when there hangs glittering before a man the golden fruit which he knows that he ought not to touch--then, amidst the noise of passion or the sophistry of desire, conscience is silenced for a little while. No man sins without knowing that it is wrong, without knowing that in the long run it is a mistake; but at the instant, in the delirium of yielding, as in moments of high physical excitement, he is blind and deaf, deaf to the voice of reason, blind to the sight of consequences. Conscience and consequence are alike lost sight of. Like a mad bull, the man that is tempted lowers his head and shuts his eyes, and rushes right on. The moment that the sin is done, that moment the passion or desire which tempted to it is satiated, and ceases to exist for the time. It is gone as a motive. Like some savage beast, being fed full, it lies down to sleep. There is a vacuum left in the heart, the noise is stilled, and then-- and then--conscience begins to speak. Or, to take another image, the passion, the desires, the impulses that lead us to do wrong things-- they are like a crew that mutiny, and take for a moment the wheel from the steersman and the command from the captain, but then, having driven the ship on the rocks, the mutineers get intoxicated, and lie down and sleep. Passion fulfils itself, and expires. The desire is satisfied, and it turns into a loathing. The tempter draws us to him, and then unveils the horrid face that lies beneath the mask. When the deed is done and cannot be undone, then comes satiety; then comes the reaction of the fierce excitement, the hot blood begins to flow more slowly; then rises up in the heart conscience; then rises up in majesty in the soul reason; then flashes and flares before the eye the vivid picture of the consequences. His enemy has found the sinner. He has got the vineyard--ay, but Elijah is there, and his dark and stern presence sucks all the brightness and the sunniness out of the landscape; and Naboth's blood stains the leaves of Naboth's garden! There is no sin which is not the purchase of pleasure at the price of peace.

Now, you will say that all that is true in regard to the grosser forms of transgression, but that it is not true in regard to the less vulgar and sensual kinds of crime. Of course it is most markedly observable with regard to the coarsest kind of sins; but it is as true, though perhaps not in the same degree--not in the same prominent, manifest way at any rate--in regard to every sin that a man does. There is never an evil thing which--knowing it to be evil--we commit, which does not rise up to testify against us. As surely as (in the words of our great philosopher poet) lust dwells hard by hate, and as surely as to-night's debauch is followed by to-morrow's headache, so surely--each after its kind, and each in its own region--every sin lodges in the human heart the seed of a quick-springing punishment, yea, is its own punishment. When we come to grasp the sweet thing that we have been tempted to seize, there is a serpent that starts up amongst all the flowers. When the evil act is done--opposite of the prophet's roll--it is sweet in the lips, but oh! it is bitter afterwards. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder!

Then, you may say again, All that is very much exaggerated. That is not the sort of feeling which men that go on persistently doing wrong things, cherish. They live quietly and contentedly enough. "There are no bands in their death, and their strength is firm." All that would be true if men's consciences kept sensitive in the midst of men's sins, but they do not; and so it cannot be that every transgression has thus its quick result in loss of peace. I grant you at once that it is quite possible for men to sin away the delicacy and susceptibility of their consciences. I dare say there are people here now who, after they have done a wrong thing, go on very quietly, with no knowledge of those agonies that I have been speaking about, with scarcely ever a prick of conscience for their sin. But what then? I did not say that all sin purchased pleasure by inflictions of agony; but I do say, that all sin purchases pleasure by loss of peace. The silence of a seared conscience is not peace. For peace you want something more than that a conscience shall be dumb. For peace you want something more than that you shall be able to live without the daily sense and sting of sin. You want not only the negative absence of pain, but the positive presence of a tranquillising guest in your heart--that conscience of yours testifying with you, blessing you in its witness, and shedding abroad rest and comfort. It is easy to kill a conscience--after a fashion at least. It is easy to stifle it. It is easy to come to that depth of wrongdoing that one gets used to it, and does it without caring. But oh! that cold vacuum, that dead absence in such a spirit of all healthy self-communing, that painful suspicion, If I look into myself, and be quiet for a little while, and take stock of my own character, and see what I am, the balance will be on the wrong side,--that is not peace. As the old historian says about the Roman armies that marched through a country, burning and destroying every living thing, They make a solitude, and they call it peace. And so men do with their consciences. They stifle them, sear them, forcibly silence them, somehow or other; and then, when there is a dead stillness in the heart, broken by no voice of either approbation or blame, but doleful like the unnatural quiet of a deserted city, then they call that peace, and the man's uncontrolled passions and unbridled desires dwell solitary in the fortress of his own spirit! You may almost attain to that. Do you think it is a goal to be set before you as an ideal of human nature? The loss of peace is certain--the presence of agony is most likely--from every act of sin.

And so, it is not only a crime that men commit when they do wrong, but it is a blunder. Sin is not only guilt, but it is a mistake. The game is not worth the candle, according to the French proverb. The thing that you buy is not worth the price you pay for it. Sin is like a great forest-tree that we may sometimes see standing up green in its leafy beauty, and spreading a broad shadow over half a field; but when we get round on the other side, there is a great dark hollow in the very heart of it, and corruption is at work there. It is like the poison-tree in travellers stories, tempting weary men to rest beneath its thick foliage, and insinuating death into the limbs that relax in the fatal coolness of its shade. It is like the apples of Sodom, fair to look upon, but turning to acrid ashes on the unwary lips. It is like the magician's rod that we read about in old books. There it lies; and if, tempted by its glitter, or fascinated by the power that it proffers you, you take it in your hand, the thing starts into a serpent with erected crest and sparkling eye, and plunges its quick barb into the hand that holds it, and sends poison through all the veins. Do not touch it, my brother! Every sin buys pleasure at the price of peace. Elijah is always waiting at the gate of the ill-gotten possession.

**II. In the second place, Sin is blind to its true friends and its real foes.**

Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? Elijah was the best friend that Ahab had in his kingdom. And that Jezebel there, the wife of his bosom, whom he loved and thanked for this new toy, she was the worst foe that hell could have sent him. Ay, and so it is always. The faithful rebuker, the merciful inflicter of pain, is the truest friend of the wrongdoer. The worst enemy of the sinful heart is the voice that either tempts it into sin, or lulls it into self-complacency. And this is one of the most certain workings of evil desires in our spirits, that they pervert for us all the relations of things, that they make us blind to all the moral truths of God's universe. Sin is blind as to itself, blind as to its own consequences, blind as to who are its friends and who are its foes, blind as to earth, blind as to another world, blind as to God. The man who walks in the vain show of transgression, whose heart is set upon evil,--he fancies that ashes are bread, and stones gold (as in the old fairy story); and, on the other hand, he thinks that the true sweet is the bitter, and turns away from God's angels and God's prophets, with, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? That is the reason, my friend, of not a little of the infidelity that haunts this world--that sin, perverted and blinded, stumbles about in its darkness, and mistakes the face of the friend for the face of the foe. God sends you in mercy a conscience to prick and sting you that you may be kept right; and you think that it is your enemy. God sends in His mercy the discipline of life, pains and sorrows, to draw us away from the wrong, to make us believe that the right in this world and the next is life, and that holiness is happiness for evermore. And then, when, having done wrong, God's merciful messenger of a sharp sorrow finds us out, we say, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? and begin to wonder about the mysteries of Providence, and how it comes that there is evil in the creation of a good God. Why, physical evil is the best friend of the man that is subject to moral evil. Sorrow is the truest blessing to a sinner. The best thing that can befall any of us is that God shall not let us alone in any wrong course, without making us feel His rod, without hedging up our way with thorns, and sending us by His grace into a better one. There is no mystery in sorrow. There is a mystery in sin; but sorrow following on the back of sin is the true friend, and not the enemy, of the wrong-doing spirit.

And then, again, God sends us a gospel full of dark words about evil. It deals with that fact of sin, as no other system ever did. There is no book like the Bible for these two things,--for the lofty notion that it has about what man may be and ought to be; and for the low notion that it has of what man is. It does not degrade human nature, because it tells us the truth about human nature as it is. Its darkest and bitterest sayings about transgression, they are veiled promises, my brother. It does not make the consequences of sin which it writes down. You and I make them for ourselves, and it tells us of them. Did the lighthouse make the rock that it stands on? Is it to be blamed for the shipwreck? If a man will go full tilt against the thing that he knows will ruin him, what is the right name for him who hedges it up with a prickly fence of thorns, and puts a great light above it, and writes below, If thou comest here thou diest? Is that the work of an enemy? And yet that is why people talk about the gloomy views of the gospel, about the narrow spirit of Christianity, about the harsh things that are here! The Bible did not make hell. The Bible did not make sin the parent of sorrow. The Bible did not make it certain that every transgression and disobedience should reap its just recompense of reward. We are the causes of their coming upon ourselves; and the Bible but proclaims the end to which the paths of sin must lead, and beseechingly calls to us all, Turn ye, turn ye! why will ye die? And yet when it comes to you, how many of you turn away from it, and say, It is mine enemy! How many shrink from its merciful knife, that cuts into all the wounds of the festering spirit! How many of you feel as if the truth that is in Jesus was a hard and bitter truth; when all the while its very heart's blood is love, and the very secret of its message is the tenderest compassion, the most yearning sympathy, for every soul amongst us!

Ay, and more than that:--sin makes us fancy that God Himself is our enemy; and sin makes that thought of God that ought to be most blessed and most sweet to us, the terror of our souls. You have the power, my friend, by your own wrongdoing, of perverting the whole universe, and, worst of all, of distorting the image of the merciful Father, of the loving God. God loves. God is the Father. God watches over us. God will not let us alone when we transgress, God in His love has appointed that sin shall breed sorrow. But we--we do wrong; and then, for God's Providence, and God's Gospel, and God's Son, and God Himself, there rises up in our hearts a hostile feeling, and we think that He is turned to be our enemy, and fights against us! But oh! He only fights against us that we may submit to, and love, Him. Will you, then, have it that God's highest mercy should be your greatest sorrow, that your truest friend should be your worst foe? You can make the choice. To you God and His truth are like that ark of His covenant which to Dagon and the Philistines was a curse, but to the house of Obededom was a blessing. He and His gospel are to you like that pillar that was darkness and trouble to the hosts of the Egyptians, but light by night to His children. To you, my brother, the gospel may be either the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death! If He comes to you with rebuke, and meets you when you are at the very door of your sin, and busy with your transgression,--usher Him in, and thank Him, and bless Him for words of threatening, for merciful severity, for conviction of sin;--because conviction of sin is the work of the Comforter; and all the threatenings and all the pains that follow and track, like swift hounds, the committer of evil, are sent by Him who loves too wisely not to punish transgression, and loves too well to punish without warning, and desires only when He punishes that we should turn from our evil way, and escape the condemnation. An enemy, or a friend,--which is God in His truth to you?

**III. Lastly, the sin which mistakes the friendly appeal for an enemy, lays up for itself a terrible retribution.**

Elijah comes to Jezreel and prophesies the fall of Ahab. The next peal, the next flash, fulfil the prediction. There, where he did the wrong, he suffered. In Jezreel, Ahab died. In Jezreel, Jezebel died. That plain was the battlefield for the subsequent discomfiture of Israel. Over and over again there encamped upon it the hosts of the spoilers. Over and over again its soil ran red with the blood of the children of Israel; and at last, in the destruction of the kingdom, Naboth was avenged and God's word fulfilled. The threatened evil was foretold that it might lead the king to repentance, and that thus it might never need to be more than a threat. But, though Ahab was partially penitent, and partially listened to the prophet's voice, yet for all that, he went on in his evil way. Therefore the merciful threatening becomes a stern prophecy, and is fulfilled to the very letter.

So, when God's message comes to us, friends, if we listen not to it, and turn not to its gentle rebuke, Oh! then we gather up for ourselves an awful futurity of judgment, when threatening will darken into punishment, and the voice that rebuked will swell into the voice of final condemnation. When a man fancies that God's prophet is his enemy, and dreams that his finding him out is a calamity and a loss, that man may be certain that something worse will find him out some day. His sins will find him out, and that is worse than the prophet's coming. My friend, picture to yourself this--a human spirit shut up, with the companionship of its forgotten and dead transgressions. There is a resurrection of acts as well as of bodies. Think what it will be for a man to sit surrounded by that ghastly company, the ghosts of his own sins!--and as each forgotten fault and buried badness comes, silent and sheeted, into that awful society, and sits itself down there, think of him greeting each with the question, Thou too? What! are ye all here? Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? and from each bloodless spectral lip there tolls out the answer, the knell of his life, I have found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord. Ah, my friend! if that were all we had to say, it might well stiffen us into stony despair. Thank God--thank God! such an issue is not inevitable. Christ speaks to you. Christ is your Friend. He loves you, and He speaks to you now--speaks to you of your danger, but in order that you may never rush into it and be engulfed by it; speaks to you of your sin, but in order that you may say to Him, Take Thou it away, O merciful Lord; speaks to you of justice, but in order that you may never sink beneath the weight of His stroke; speaks to you of love, in order that you may know, and fully know, the depth of His graciousness. When He says to you, I love thee; love thou Me: I have died for thee; trust Me, live by Me, and live for Me, will you not say to Him, My Friend, my Brother, my Lord, and my God?