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

**1 KINGS-024. AHAB AND MICAIAH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"7.* *And Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we might enquire of him? 8. And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, There is yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the Lord: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.-."*

*1 Kings 22:7-8*

An ill-omened alliance had been struck up between Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah. The latter, who would have been much better in Jerusalem, had come down to Samaria to join in an assault on the kingdom of Damascus; but, like a great many other people, Jehoshaphat first made up his mind without asking God, and then thought that it might be well to get some kind of varnish of a religious sanction for his decision. So he proposes to Ahab to inquire of the Lord about this matter. One would have thought that that should have been done before, and not after, the determination was made. Ahab does not at all see the necessity for such a thing, but, to please his scrupulous ally, he sends for his priests. They came, four hundred of them, and of course they all played the tune that Ahab called for. It is not difficult to get prophets to pat a king on the back, and tell him, Do what you like.

But Jehoshaphat was not satisfied yet. Perhaps he thought that Ahab's clergy were not exactly God's prophets, but at all events he wanted an independent opinion; and so he asks if there is not in all Samaria a man that can be trusted to speak out. He gets for answer the name of this Micaiah the son of Imlah. Ahab had had experience of him, and knew his man; and the very name leads him to an explosion of passion, which, like other explosions, lays bare some very ugly depths. I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.

That is a curious mood, is it not? that a man should know another to be a messenger of God, and therefore know that his words are true, and that if he asked his counsel he would be forbidden to do the thing that he is dead set on doing, and would be warned that to do it was destruction; and that still he should not ask the counsel, nor ever dream of dropping the purpose, but should burst out in a passion of puerile rage against the counsellor, and will have none of his reproofs. Very curious! But there are a great many of us that have something of the same mood in us, though we do not speak it out as plainly as Ahab did. It lurks more or less in us all, and it largely determines the attitude that some of us take to Christianity and to Christ. So I wish to say a word or two about it.

**I. My text suggests the inevitable opposition between a message from God, and man's evil.**

No doubt, God is love; and just because He is, it is absolutely necessary that what comes from Him, and is the reflex and cast, so to speak, of His character, should be in stern and continual antagonism to that evil which is the worst foe of men, and is sure to lead to their death. It is because God is love, that to the froward He shows Himself froward. and opposes that which, unopposed and yielded to, will ruin the man that does it. So this is one of the characteristic marks of all true messages from God, that men who will not part with their evil call them stern, rigid, gloomy, narrow Yes, of course; because God must look upon godless lives with disapprobation, and must desire by all means to draw men away from that which is drawing them away from Him and to their death.

Now, I suppose I need not spend time in enumerating or describing the points in the attitude of Christianity towards the solemn fact of human sin, which correspond to Ahab's complaint that the prophet spake always not good concerning him, but evil. The gospel of Jesus Christ proves its name to be true, and that it is good news, not only by its graciousness, its promises, its offers, and the rich blessings of eternal life with which its hands are full, but by its severity, as men call it. One characteristic of the gospel is the altogether unique place which the fact of sin fills in it. There is no other religion on the face of the earth that has so grasped and made prominent this thought: All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. There is none that has painted human nature as it is in such dark colours, because there is none that knows itself to be able to change human nature into such radiance of glory and purity. The gospel has, if I might so say, on its palette a far greater range of pigments than any other system. Its blacks are blacker; its whites are whiter; its golds are more lustrous than those of other painters of human nature as it is and as it may become. It is a mark of its divine origin that it unfalteringly looks facts in the face, and will not say smooth things about men as they are.

Side by side with that characteristic of the dark picture which it draws of us, as we are in ourselves, is its unhesitating restraint or condemnation of deep-seated desires and tendencies. It does not come to men with the smooth words on its lips, Do as thou wilt. It does not seek for favour by relaxing bonds, but it rigidly builds up a wall on either side of a narrow path, and says, Walk within these limits and thou art safe. Go beyond them a hair's-breadth, and thou perishest. It may suit Ahab's prophets to fling the reins on the neck of human nature; God's prophet says, Thou shalt not, That is another of the tests of divine origin, that there shall be no base compliance with inclinations, but rigid condemnation of many of our deep desires.

Side by side with these two, there is a third characteristic that the Word, which is the outcome and expression of the divine love, is distinguished by its plain and stern declarations of the bitter consequences of evil-doing. I need not dwell upon these, brethren. They seem to me to be far too solemn to be spoken of by a man to men in other words than Scripture's. But I beseech you to remember that this, too, is the characteristic of Christ's message. So a man should feel, when he thinks of the dark and solemn things that the Old Testament partially, and the New Testament more clearly, utter as to the death which is the outcome of sin, that these are indeed the very voice of infinite love pleading with us all. Brother I do not so misapprehend facts as to think that the restraints and threatenings and dark pictures which Christ and His servants have drawn are anything but the utterance of the purest affection.

**II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look for a moment at the strange dislike which this attitude of Christianity kindles.**

I have said that Ahab's mental condition was a very odd one. Strange as it is, it is, as I have already remarked, in some degree a very frequent one. There are in us all, as we see in many regions of life, the beginnings of the same kind of feeling. Here, for example, is a course that I am quite sure, if I pursue it, will land me in evil. Does the drunkard take a glass the less, because he knows that if he goes on he will have a drunkard's liver and die a miserable death? Does the gambler ever take away his hand from the pack of cards or the dice-box, because he knows that play means, in the long run, poverty and disgrace? When a man sets his will upon a certain course, he is like a bull that has started in its rage. Down goes the head, and, with eyes shut, he will charge a stone wall or an iron door, though he knows it will smash his skull. Men are very foolish animals; and there is no greater mark of their folly than the conspicuous and oft-repeated fact that the clearest vision of the consequences of a course of conduct is powerless to turn a man from it, when once his passions, or his will, or, worse still, his weakness, or, worst of all, his habits, have bound him to it.

Take another illustration. Do we not all know that honest friends have sometimes fallen out of favour, perhaps with ourselves, because they have persistently kept telling us what our consciences and common-sense knew to be true, that if we go on by that road we shall be suffocated in a bog? A man makes up his mind to a course of conduct. He has a shrewd suspicion that an honest friend will condemn him, and that the condemnation will be right. What does he do, therefore? He never consults his friend, but if by chance that friend should say what was expected of him, he gets angry with his adviser and doggedly goes his own road. I suppose we all know what it is to treat our consciences in the style in which Ahab treated Micaiah. We do not listen to them because we know what they will say before they have said it; and we call ourselves sensible people! Martin Luther once said, It is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. But Ahab put Micaiah in prison; and we shut up our consciences in a dungeon, and put a gag in their mouths, and a muffler over the gag, that we may hear them say no word, because we know that what we are doing, and we are doggedly determined to do, is wrong.

But the saddest illustration of this infatuation is to be found in the attitude that many men take in regard to Christianity. There is a great craving to-day, more perhaps than there has been in some other periods of the world's history, for a religion which shall adorn, but shall not restrain; for a religion which shall be toothless, and have no bite in it; for a religion that shall sanction anything that it pleases our sovereign mightiness to want to do. We should all like to have God's sanction for our actions. But there are a great many of us who will not take the only way to secure that--viz. to do the actions which He commands, and to abstain from those which He forbids. Popular Christianity is a very easy-fitting garment; it is like an old shoe that you can slip off and on without any difficulty. But a religion which does not put up a strong barrier between you and many of your inclinations in not worth anything. The mark of a message from God is that it restrains and coerces and forbids and commands. And some of you do not like it because it does.

There is a great tendency in this day to cut out of the Old and New Testaments all the pages that say things like this, The soul that sinneth it shall die; or things like this, This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light; or things like this, Then shall the wicked go away into outer darkness. Brethren, men being what they are, and God being what He is, there can be no divine message without a side of what the world calls threatening, or what Ahab called prophesying evil. I beseech you, do not be carried away by the modern talk about Christianity being gloomy and dark, or fancy that we put a blot and an excrescence upon the pure religion of the Man of Nazareth, when we speak of the death that follows sin, and of the darkness into which unbelief carries a man.

**III. Once more, let me say a word about the intense folly of such an attitude.**

Ahab hated Micaiah. Why? Because Micaiah told him what would come to him as the fruit of his own actions. That was foolish. It is no less foolish for people to take up a position of dislike, and to turn away from the gospel of Jesus Christ because it speaks in like manner. I said that men are very foolish animals; there is surely nothing in all the annals of human stupidity more stupid than to be angry with the word that tells you the truth about what you are bringing down upon your heads. It is absurd, because Micaiah did not make the evil, but Ahab made it; and Micaiah's business was only to tell him what he was doing. It is absurd, because the only question to be asked is. Are the warnings true? are the threatenings representations of what really will come? are the prohibitions reasonable? And it is absurd, because, if these things are so--if it is true that the soul that sinneth dies, and will die; if it is true that you, who have heard of the name and the salvation of Jesus Christ over and over again, and have turned away from it, will, if you continue in that negligence and unbelief, reap bitter fruits here and hereafter therefrom--if these things are true, surely the man that tells you so, and the gospel that tells you so, deserve better treatment than Ahab's petulant hatred or your stolid indifference and neglect.

Would you think it wise for a sea-captain to try to take the clapper out of the bell that floats and tolls above a shoal on which his ship will be wrecked if it strikes? Would it be wise to put out the lighthouse lamps, and then think that you had abolished the reef? Does the signalman with his red flag make the danger of which he warns, and is it not like a baby to hate and to neglect the message that comes to you and says, Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?

**IV. So, lastly, I notice the end of this foolish attitude.**

Ahab was told in plain words by Micaiah, before the interview closed, that he would never come back again in peace. He ordered the bold prophet into prison, and rode away gaily, no doubt, to his campaign. Weak men are very often obstinate, because they are not strong enough to rise to the height of changing a purpose when reason condemns it. This weak man was always obstinate in the wrong place, as so many of us are. So away he went, down from Samaria, across the plain, down to the fords of the Jordan. But when he had crossed to the other side, and was coming near his objective point, the memories of Micaiah in prison at Samaria began to sit heavy on his soul.

So he tried to deceive divine judgment, and got up an ingenious scheme by which his ally was to go into the field in royal pomp, and he to slip into it disguised. A great many of us try to hoodwink God, and it does not answer. The man who drew the bow at a venture had his hand guided by a higher Hand. Ahab was plated all over with iron and brass, but there is always a crevice through which God's arrow can find its way; and, where God's arrow finds its way, it kills. When the night fell, he was lying dead on his chariot floor, and the host was scattered, and Micaiah, the prisoner, was avenged; and his word had taken hold on the despiser of it.

So it always will be. So it will be with us, dear brethren, if we do not give heed to our ways and listen to the word which may be bitter in the mouth, but, eaten, turns sweet as honey. Nailing the index of the barometer to set fair will not keep off the thunderstorm, and no negligence or dislike of divine threatenings will arrest the slow, solemn march, inevitable as destiny, of the consequences of our doings. Things will be as they will be. Believed or unbelieved, the avalanche will come.

Dear brethren, there is one way to get Micaiah on your side. Listen to him, and then he will speak good to you, and not what you foolishly call evil. Let God's word convince you of sin. Let it bring you to the Cross for pardon. Jesus Christ addresses each of us in the Apostle's words: Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth? The sternest threatenings in the Bible come from the lips of that infinite Love. If you will listen to Him, if you will yield yourselves to Him, if you will take Him for your Saviour and your Lord, if you will cast your confidence and anchor your love upon Him, if you will let Him restrain you, if you will consult Him about what He would have you do, if you will accept His prohibitions as well as His permissions, then His word and His act to you, here and hereafter, will be only good and not evil, all the days of your life.

Remember Ahab lying dead on the floor of his chariot in a pool of his own blood, and bethink yourselves of what despising the threatenings, and turning away from the rebukes and prohibitions of the divine word, come to. These threatenings are spoken that they may never need to be put in effect. If you give heed to them they will never be put in effect in regard to you, if you neglect them and will none of God's reproof, they will come down on you like a mighty rock loosed from the mountain, and will grind you to powder.