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

**2 CHRONICLES-002. CONTRASTED SERVISES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"They shall be his servants: that they may know My service, and the service of the kingdoms of the countries."*

*2 Chronicles 12:8*

Rehoboam was a self-willed, godless king who, like some other kings, learned nothing by experience. His kingdom was nearly wrecked at the very beginning of his reign, and was saved much more by the folly of his rival than by his own wisdom. Jeroboam's religious revolution drove all the worshippers of God among the northern kingdom into flight. They might have endured the separate monarchy, but they could not endure the separate Temple. So all priests and Levites in Israel, and all the adherents of the ancestral worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, withdrew to the southern kingdom and added much to its strength.

Rehoboam's narrow escape taught him neither moderation nor devotion, his new strength turned his head. He forsook the law of the Lord. The dreary series, so often illustrated in the history of Israel, came into operation. Prosperity produced irreligion; irreligion brought chastisement; chastisement brought repentance; repentance brought the removal of the invader--and then, like a spring released, back went king and nation to their old sin.

So here--Rehoboam's sins take visible form in Sheshak's army. He has sown the dragon's teeth and they spring up armed men. Shemaiah the prophet, the first of the long series of noble men who curbed the violence of Jewish monarchs, points the lesson of invasion in plain, blunt words: Ye have forsaken Me. Then follow penitence and confession--and the promise that Jerusalem shall not be destroyed, but at the same time they are to be left as vassals and tributaries of Egypt--an anomalous position for them--and the reason is given in these words of our text.

**I. The contrasted Masters.**

Judah was too small to be independent of the powerful warlike states to its north and south, unless miraculously guarded and preserved. So it must either keep near God, and therefore free and safe from invasion, or else, departing from God and following its own ways, fall under alien dominion. Its experience was a type of that of universal humanity. Man is not independent. His mass is not enough for him to do without a central orb round which he may revolve. He has a choice of the form of service and the master that he will choose, but one or other must dominate his life and sway his motions. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon; ye must serve God or Mammon. The solemn choice is presented to every man, but the misery of many lives is that they drift along, making their election unawares, and infallibly choosing the worse by the very act of lazily or weakly allowing accident to determine their lives. Not consciously and strongly to will the right, not resolutely and with coercion of the vagrant self to will to take God for our aim, is to choose the low, the wrong. Perhaps none, or very few of us, would deliberately say I choose Mammon, having carefully compared the claims of the opposite systems of life that solicit me, and with open-eyed scrutiny measured their courses, their goods and their ends. But how many of us there are who have in effect made that choice, and never have given one moment's clear, patient examination of the grounds of our choice! The policy of drift is unworthy of a man and is sure to end in ruin.

It is not for me to attempt here to draw out the contrast between man's chief end and all other rival claimants of our lives. Each man must do that for himself, and I venture to assert that the more thoroughly the process of comparison is carried out, and the more complete the analysis not only of the rival claims and gifts, but of our capacities and needs, the more sun-clear will be the truth of the old, well-worn answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever. The old woman by her solitary fireside who has learned that and practises it, has chosen the better part which will last when many shining careers have sunk into darkness, and many will-o-the-wisps, which have been pursued with immense acclamations, have danced away into the bog, and many a man who has been envied and admired has had to sum up his successful career in the sad words, I have played the fool and erred exceedingly. I cannot pretend to conduct the investigation for you, but I can press on every one who does not wish to let accidents mould him, at least to recognise that there is a choice to be made, and to make it deliberately and with eyes open to the facts of the case. It is a shabby way of ruining yourself to do it for want of thought. The rabble of competitors of God catch more souls by accident than of set purpose. Most men are godless because they have never fairly faced the question: what does my soul require in order to reach its highest blessedness and its noblest energy?

**II. The contrasted experience of the servants.**

Judah learned that the yoke of obedience to God's law was a world lighter than the grinding oppression of the Egyptian invader.

**(a)** God's service is freedom; the world's is slavery.

Liberty is unrestrained power to do what we ought. Man must be subject to law. The solemn imperative of duty is omnipresent and sovereign. To do as we like is not freedom, but bondage to self, and that usually our worst self, which means crushing or coercing the better self. The choice is to chain the beast in us or to clip the wings of the angel in us, and he is a fool who conceits himself free because he lets his inferior self have its full swing, and hustles his better self into bondage to clear the course for the other. There is but one deliverance from the sway of self, and it is realised in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. To make self our master inevitably leads to setting beggars on horseback and princes walking. Passion, the flesh is terribly apt to usurp the throne within when once God is dethroned. Then indulgence feeds passion, and deeper draughts become necessary in order to produce the same effects, and cravings, once allowed free play, grow in ravenousness, while their pabulum steadily loses its power to satisfy. The experience of the undevout sensualist is but too faithful a type of that of all undevout livers, in the failure of delights to delight and of acquisitions to enrich, and in the bondage, often to nothing more worthy to be obeyed than mere habit, and in the hopeless incapacity to shake off the adamantine chains which they have themselves rivetted on their limbs. There are endless varieties in the forms which the service of self assumes, ranging from gross animalism, naked and unashamed, up to refined and cultured godlessness, but they are one in their inmost character, one in their disabling the spirit from a free choice of its course, one in the limitations which they impose on its aspirations and possibilities, one in the heavy yoke which they lay on their vassals. The true liberty is realised only when for love's dear sake we joyously serve God, and from the highest motive enrol ourselves in the household of the highest Person, and by the act become no more servants but sons. Well may we all pray--

Lord! bind me up, and let me lie

A prisoner to my liberty,

If such a state at all can be

As an imprisonment, serving Thee.

**(b)** God's service brings solid good, the world's is vain and empty.

God's service brings an approving conscience, a calm heart, strength and gladness. It is in full accord with our best selves. Tranquil joys attend on it. In keeping Thy commandments there is great reward, and that not merely bestowed after keeping, but realised and inherent in the very act. On the other side, think of the stings of conscience, the illusions on which those feed who will not eat of the heavenly food, the husks of the swine-trough, the ashes for bread, that self and the world, in all their forms set before men. A pathetic character in modern fiction says, If you make believe very much it is nice. It takes a tremendous amount of make-believe to keep up an appetite for the world's dainties or to find its meats palatable, after a little while. No sin ever yields the fruit it was expected to produce, or if it does it brings something which was not expected, and the bitter tang of the addition spoils the whole. It may be wisely adapted to secure a given end, but that end is only a means to secure the real end, our substantial blessedness, and that is never attained but by one course of life, the life of service of God. We may indeed win a goodly garment, but the plague is in the stuff and, worn, it will burn into the bones like fire. I read somewhere lately of thieves who had stolen a cask of wine, and had their debauch, but they sickened and died. The cask was examined and a huge snake was found dead in it. Its poison had passed into the wine and killed the drinkers. That is how the world serves those who swill its cup. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? The threatening pronounced against Israel's disobedience enshrines an eternal truth: Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies ... in hunger and in thirst, and in nakedness and in want of all things.

**(c)** God's service has final issues and the world's service has final issues.

Only fools try to blink the fact that all our doings have consequences. And it augurs no less levity and insensibility to blink the other fact that these consequences show no indications of being broken short off at the end of our earthly life. Men die into another life, as they have ever, dimly and with many foolish accompaniments, believed; and dead, they are the men that they have made themselves while living. Character is eternal, memory is eternal, death puts the stamp of perpetuity on what life has evolved. Nothing human ever dies. The thought is too solemn to be vulgarised by pulpit rhetoric. Enough to say here that these two tremendous alternatives, Life and Death, express some little part of the eternal issues of our fleeting days. Looking fixedly into these two great symbols of the ultimate issues of these contrasted services, we can dimly see, as in the one, a wonder of resplendent glories moving in a sphere as calm as it is bright, so, in the other, whirling clouds and jets of vapour as in the crater of a volcano. One shuddering glance over the rim of it should suffice to warn from lingering near, lest the unsteady soil should crumble beneath our feet.

But the true Lord of our lives loves us too well to let us experience all the bitter issues of our foolish rebellion against His authority, and yet He loves us too well not to let us taste something of them that we may know and see that it is an evil thing and a bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God. The experiences of the consequences of godless living are in some measure allowed to fall on us by God's love, lest we should persist in the evil and so bring down on ourselves still more fatal issues. It is mercy that here chastises the evildoer with whips, in hope of not having to chastise him with scorpions. God desires to teach us, by the pains and heartaches of an undevout life, by disappointments, foiled plans, wrecked hopes, inner poverty, the difference between His service and that of the kingdoms of the countries, if haply He may not be forced to let the full flood of fatal results overwhelm us. It is best to be drawn to serve Him by the cords of love, but it is possible to have the beginnings of the desire so to serve roused by the far lower motives of weariness and disgust at the world's wages, and by dread of what these may prove when they are paid in full. Self-interest may sicken a man of serving Mammon, and may be transformed into the self-surrender which makes God's service possible and blessed. The flight into the city of refuge may be quickened by the fear of the pursuer, whose horse's hoofs are heard thundering on the road behind the fugitive, and whose spear is all but felt a yard from his back, but once within the shelter of the city wall, gratitude for deliverance will fill his heart and perfect love will cast out fear.

The king concerning whom our text was spoken had to suffer humiliation by the Egyptian invasion. His sufferings were meant to be educational, and when they in some measure effected their purpose, God curbed the invader and granted some measure of deliverance. So is it with us, if, moved by whatever impulse, we betake ourselves to Jesus to save us from the bitter fruits of our evil lives. The extreme severity of the results of our sins does not fall on penitent, believing spirits, but some do fall. As the Psalmist says: Thou wast a God that forgavest them though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions. A profligate course of life may be forgiven, but health or fortune is ruined all the same. In brief, the so-called natural consequences are not removed, though the sin which caused them is pardoned. Polluted memories, indulged habits, defiled imaginations, are not got rid of, though the sins that inflicted them are forgiven.

Is it not, then, the part of wise men to lay to heart the lessons of experience, and to let what we have learned of the bitter fruit of godless living turn us away from such service, and draw us by merciful chastisement to yield ourselves to God, whom to serve accords with our deepest needs and brings first fruits and pre-libations of blessedness and peace here, and fullness of joy with pleasures for evermore hereafter?