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

**2 CHRONICLES-012. JOASH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"2. And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.... 17. Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them."*

*2 Chronicles 24:2, 17*

Here we have the tragedy of a soul. Joash begins life well and for the greater part of it remains faithful to his conscience and to his duty, and then, when outward circumstances change, he casts all behind him, forgets the past and commits moral suicide. It is the sad old story, a bright commencement, an early promise all scattered to the winds. It is a strange story, too. This seven-year-old king had been saved when his father had been killed, and that true daughter of Jezebel, as well by nature as by blood, Athaliah, had murdered all his brothers and sisters, and made herself queen. He had been saved by the courage of a woman who might worthily stand by the side of Deborah and other Jewish heroines. By this woman, who was his aunt, he was hidden and brought up in the Temple until, whilst yet a mere boy, he came to the throne, the High Priest Jehoiada, the husband of his aunt, being his guardian during his nonage. He reigns well till the lad of seven becomes a mature man of thirty or thereabouts, and then Jehoiada dies, full of years and honours, and they fitly lay him among the kings of Judah, a worthy resting-place for one who had done good in Israel. And now the weakling on the throne is left alone without the strong arm to guide him and keep him right, and we read that the princes of Judah came and made obeisance to him. They take him on his weak side, and I dare say Jehoiada had been too true and too noble to do that, and though we are not told what means they took to flatter and coax him, we see very plainly what they were conspiring to do, for we read that they left the house of the Lord their God, the God of their fathers, and served groves and idols, the groves here mentioned being symbols of Ashtaroth the goddess of the Sidonians. And so all the past is wiped out and Joash takes his place amongst the apostates. The story has solemn lessons.

**I. Note the change from loyal adhesion to apostasy.**

The strong man on whom Joash used to lean was away, and the poor, weak king went just where the wicked princes led him. It was probably out of sheer imbecility that he passed from the worship of God to the acknowledgment and service of idols.

The first point that I would insist upon is a well-worn and familiar one, as I am well aware, but I urge it upon you, and especially upon the younger portion of my audience. It is this, that there is no telling the amount of mischief that pure weakness of character may lead into. The worst men we come across in the Bible are not those who begin with a deliberate intention of doing evil. They are weak creatures, reeds shaken by the wind, who have no power of resisting the force of circumstances. It is a truth which every one's experience confirms, that the mother of all possible badness is weakness, and that, not only as Milton's Satan puts it, To be weak is to be miserable, but that weakness is wickedness sooner or later. The man who does not bar the doors and windows of his senses and his soul against temptation, is sure to make shipwreck of his life and in the end to become a fool. There is so much wickedness lying round us in this world that any man who lets himself be shaped and coloured by that with which he comes in contact, is sure to go to the bad in the long run. Where a man lays himself open to the accidents of time and circumstances, the majority of these influences will be contrary to what is right and good. Therefore, he must gather himself together and learn to say No! There is no foretelling the profound abysses into which a good, easy nature, with plenty of high and pure impulses, perhaps, but which are written in water, may fall. Thou, therefore, young man! be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Learn to say No! or else you will be sure to say Yes! in the wrong place, and then down you will go, like this Joash whose goodness depended on Jehoiada, and when he died, all the virtue that had characterised this life hitherto was laid with him in the dust.

Let us learn from this story in the next place, how little power of continuance there is in a merely traditional religion. Many of you call yourselves Christian people mainly because other people do the same. It is customary to respect and regard Christianity. You have been brought up in the midst of it. Our country is always considered a Christian land, and so, naturally, you tacitly accept the truth of a religion which is so influential. The lowest phase of this attitude is that which seeks some advantage from a church connection, like the foolish man in the Old Testament who thought he would do well because he had a Levite for his priest. Religion is the most personal thing about a man. To become a Christian is the most personal act one can perform. It is a thing that a man has to do for himself, and however friends and guides may help us in other matters, in trials and perplexities and difficulties, by their sympathy and experience, they are useless here. A man has here to act as if there were no other beings in the universe but a solitary God and himself, and unless we have ourselves done that act in the depths of our own personality, we have not done it at all. If you young people are good, just because you have pious parents who make you go to church or chapel on a Sunday, and keep you out of mischief during the week, your goodness is a sham. One great result of personal Christianity is to make a minister, a teacher, a guide, superfluous, and when such an one becomes so, his work has been successful and not till then. Unless you put forth for yourself the hand of faith and for yourself yield up the devotion and love of your own heart, your religion is nought.

However much active effort about the outside of religion there may be, it is of itself useless. It is without bottom and without reality. Here we have Joash busy with the externals of worship and actually deceiving himself thereby. It was a great deal easier to make that chest for contributions to a Temple Repairing Fund, and to get it well filled, and to patch up the house of the Lord, than for him to get down on his knees and pray, and he may have thought that to be busy about the house of God was to be devout. So it may be with many Sunday-school teachers and Church workers. Their religion may be as merely superficial and as little personal as this man's was. It is not for me to say so about A, B, or C. It is for you to ask of yourselves if it is so as to you. But I do say that there is nothing that masks his own soul from a man more than setting him to do something for Christianity and God's Church, while in his inmost self he has not yet yielded himself to God.

I look around and I see the devil slaying his thousands by setting them to work in Christian associations and leaving them no time to think about their own Christianity. My brother! if the cap fits, go home and put it on.

We see in Joash's life for how long a time a man may go on in this self-delusion of external and barren service and never know it. Joash came to the throne at the age of seven. Up till that age he had lived in the Temple in concealment. Until he was one and thirty he went on in a steady, upright course, never knowing that there was anything hollow in his life. Apparently, Jehoiada's long life of one hundred and thirty years extended over the greater part of Joash's reign, during most of which he had Jehoiada to direct him and keep him right, and all this tragedy comes at the tag end of it.

So he went on apparently all right, like a tree that has become quite hollow, till during some storm it is blown down and falls with a crash, and it is seen that for years it has been only the skin of a tree, bark outside, and inside--emptiness.

**II. We come now to the second stage in the later life of Joash: His resistance to the divine pleading.**

And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols, and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for their trespass, yet He sent prophets to them to bring them again unto the Lord. He sent with endless pity, with long-suffering patience. He would not be put away, and as they increased the distance between Him and them, He increased His energies to bring them back. But they lifted themselves up, Joash and his princes, and with that strange, awful power of resisting the attraction of the divine pleading, and hardening their hearts against the divine patience--they would not. And then comes the affecting episode of the death of the high priest Zechariah, who had succeeded to his father's place and likewise to his heroism, and who, with the Spirit of God upon him, stands up and pointing out his wickedness, rebukes the fallen monarch for his apostasy. Joash, doubtless stung to the quick by Zechariah's just reproaches, allowed the truculent princes to slay him in the court of the Temple, even between the very shrine and the altar.

What a picture we have here of the divine love which follows every wanderer with its pleadings and beseechings! It came to this man through the lips of a prophet. It comes to us all in daily blessings, sometimes in messages, like these poor words of mine. God will not let us ruin ourselves without pleading with us and wooing us to love Him and cling to Him. He rises up early and daily sends us His messages, sometimes rebukes and voices in our conscience, sometimes sunset glows and starry heavens lifting our thoughts above this low earth, sometimes sorrows that are meant to drive us to His breast, and above all, the Gospel of our salvation in Christ, ever, in such a land as ours, sounding in our ears.

Still further, we see in Joash what a strange, awful strength of obstinate resistance, a character weak as regards its resistance to man, can put forth against God. He never attempted to say No! to the princes of Judah, but he could say it again and again to his Father in heaven. He could not but yield to the temptations which were level with his eyes, and this poor creature, easily swayed by human allurements and influences, could gather himself together, standing, as it were, on his little pin point, and say to God, Thou dost call and I refuse. What a paradox, and yet repetitions of it are sitting in these pews, only half aware that it is about them that I am speaking!

The ever-deepening evil which began with forsaking the house of the Lord and serving Ashtaroth, ends with Joash steeping his hands in blood. The murder of Zechariah was beyond the common count of crimes, for it was a foul desecration of the Temple, an act of the blackest ingratitude to the man who had saved his infant life, and put him on the throne, an outrage on the claims of family connections, for Joash and Zechariah were probably blood relations. My brother! once get your foot upon that steep incline of evil, once forsake the path of what is good and right and true, and you are very much like a climber who misses his footing up among the mountain peaks, and down he slides till he reaches the edge of the precipice and then in an instant is dashed to pieces at the bottom. Once put your foot on that slippery slope and you know not where you may fall to.

**III. Last comes the final scene: The retribution.**

We have that picture of Zechariah, solemnly lifting up his eyes to heaven and committing his cause to God. The Lord look upon it and require it, says the martyr priest in the spirit of the old Law. The dying appeal was soon answered in the invasion of the Syrian army, a comparatively small company, into whose hands the Lord delivered a very great host of the Israelites. The defeat was complete, and possibly Joash's great diseases, of which the narrative speaks, refer to wounds received in the fight. The end soon comes, for two of his servants, neither of them Hebrews, one being the son of an Ammonitess and the other the son of a Moabitess, who were truer to his religion than he had been, and resolved to revenge Zechariah's death, entered the room, of the wounded king in the fortress whither he had retired to hide himself after the fight, and slew him on his bed. Imagine the grim scene--the two men stealing in, the sick man there on the bed helpless, the short ghastly struggle and the swift end. What an end for a life with such a beginning!

Now I am not going to dwell on this retribution, inflicted on Joash, or on that which comes to us if we are like him, through a loud-voiced conscience, and a memory which, though it may be dulled and hushed to sleep at present, is sure to wake some day here or yonder. But I beseech you to ask yourselves what your outlook is. Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. Is that all? Zechariah said, The Lord look upon it and require it. The great doctrine of retribution is true for ever. Yes; but our Zechariah lifts up his eyes to heaven and he says, Father! forgive them, for they know not what they do. And so, dear brother! you and I, trusting to that dear Lord, may have all our apostasy forgiven, and be brought near by the blood of Christ. Let us say with the Apostle Peter, Lord, to whom shall we go but to Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life.