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

**2 CHRONICLES-014. PRUDENCE AND TRUTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Amaziah said to the man of God, But what shall we do for the hundred talents which I have given to the army of Israel? And the man of God answered, The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.."*

*2 Chronicles 25:9*

The character of this Amaziah, one of the Kings of Judah, is summed up by the chronicler in a damning epigram: He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart. He was one of your half-and-half people, or, as Hosea says, a cake not turned, burnt black on one side, and raw dough on the other. So when he came to the throne, in the buoyancy and insolence of youth, he immediately began to aim at conquests in the neighbouring little states; and in order to strengthen himself he hired a hundred thousand mighty men of valour out of Israel for a hundred talents of silver. To seek help from Israel was, in a prophet's eyes, equivalent to flinging off help from God. So a man of God comes to him, and warns him that the Lord is not with Israel, and that the alliance is not permissible for him. But, instead of yielding to the prophet's advice, he parries it with this misplaced question, But what shall we do for the hundred talents that I have given to the army of Israel? He does not care to ask whether the counsel that he is receiving is right or wrong, or whether what he is intending to do is in conformity with, or in opposition to, the will of God, but, passing by all such questions, at once he fastens on the lower consideration of expediency--What is to become of me if I do as this prophet would have me do? What a heavy loss one hundred talents will be! It is too much to sacrifice to a scruple of that sort. It cannot be done.

A great many of us may take a lesson from this man. There are two things in my text--a misplaced question and a triumphant answer: What shall we do for the hundred talents? The Lord is able to give thee much more than this. Now, remarkably enough, both question and answer may be either very right or very wrong, according as they are taken, and I purpose to look at those two aspects of each.

**I. A misplaced question.**

I call it misplaced because Amaziah's fault, and the fault of a great many of us, was, not that he took consequences into account, but that he took them into account at the wrong time. The question should have come second, not first. Amaziah's first business should have been to see clearly what was duty; and then, and not till then, the next business should have been to consider consequences.

Consider the right place and way of putting this question. Many of us make shipwreck of our lives because, with our eyes shut, we determine upon some grand design, and fall under the condemnation of the man that began to build, and was not able to finish. He drew a great plan of a stately mansion; and then found that he had neither money in the bank, nor stones in his quarry, to finish it, and so it stood--a ruin. All through our Lord's life He was engaged rather in repressing volunteers than in soliciting recruits, and He from time to time poured a douche of cold water upon swiftly effervescing desires to go after Him. When the multitudes followed Him, He turned and said to them, If you are counting on being My disciples, understand what it means: take up the cross and follow Me. When an enthusiastic man, who had not looked consequences in the face, came rushing to Him and said: Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest, His answer to him was another pull at the string of the shower bath: The Son of Man hath not where to lay His head. When the two disciples came to him and said: Grant that we may sit, the one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left, when Thou comest into Thy kingdom, He said: Are ye able to drink of the cup that I drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized withal? Look the facts in the face before you make your election. Jesus Christ will enlist no man under false pretences. Recruiting-sergeants tell country bumpkins or city louts wonderful stories of what they will get if they take the shilling and put on the king's uniform; but Jesus Christ does not recruit His soldiers in that fashion. If a man does not open his eyes to a clear vision of the consequences of his actions, his life will go to water in all directions. And there is no region in which such clear insight into what is going to follow upon my determinations and the part that I take is more necessary than in the Christian life. It is just because in certain types of character, the word is received with joy, and springs up immediately, that when the sun is risen with a burning heat--that is, as Christ explains, when the pinch of difficulty comes--immediately they fall away, and all their grand resolutions go to nothing. Lightly come, lightly go. Let us face the facts of what is involved, in the way of sacrifice, surrender, loss, if we determine to be on Christ's side; and then, when the anticipated difficulties come, we shall neither be perplexed nor swept away, but be able quietly to say, I discounted it all beforehand; I knew it was coming. The storm catches the ship that is carrying full sail and expecting nothing but light and favourable breezes; while the captain that looked into the weather quarter and saw the black cloud beginning to rise above the horizon, and took in his sails and made his vessel snug and tight, rides out the gale. It is wisdom that becomes a man, to ask this question, if first of all he has asked, What ought I to do? But we have here an instance of a right thing in a wrong place. It was right to ask the question, but wrong to ask it at that point. Amaziah thought nothing about duty. There sprang up in his mind at once the cowardly and ignoble thought: I cannot afford to do what is right, because it will cost me a hundred talents, and that was his sin. Consequences may be, must be, faced in anticipation, or a man is a fool. He that allows the clearest perception of disagreeable consequences, such as pain, loss of ease, loss of reputation, loss of money, or any other harmful results that may follow, to frighten him out of the road that he knows he ought to take, is a worse fool still, for he is a coward and recreant to his own conscience.

We have to look into our own hearts for the most solemn and pressing illustrations of this sin, and I daresay we all of us can remember clear duties that we have neglected, because we did not like to face what would come from them. A man in business will say, I cannot afford to have such a high standard of morality; I shall be hopelessly run over in the race with my competitors if I do not do as they do, or he will say, I durst not take a stand as an out-and-out Christian; I shall lose connections, I shall lose position. People will laugh at me. What am I to do for the hundred talents? But we can find the same thing in Churches. I do not mean to enter upon controversial questions, but as an instance, I may remind you that one great argument that our friends who believe in an Established Church are always bringing forward, is just a modern form of Amaziah's question, What shall we do for the hundred talents? How could the Church be maintained, how could its ministrations be continued, if its State-provided revenues were withdrawn or given up? But it is not only Anglicans who put the consideration of the consequences of obedience in the wrong place. All the Churches are but too apt to let their eyes wander from reading the plain precepts of the New Testament to looking for the damaging results to be expected from keeping them. Do we not sometimes hear, as answer to would-be reformers, We cannot afford to give up this, that, or the other practice? We should not be able to hold our ground, unless we did so-and-so and so-and-so.

But not only individuals or Churches are guilty in this matter. The nation takes a leaf out of Amaziah's book, and puts aside many plain duties, for no better reason than that it would cost too much to do them. What is the use of talking about suppressing the liquor traffic or housing the poor? Think of the cost. The hundred talents block the way and bribe the national conscience. For instance, the opium traffic; how is it defended? Some attempt is made to prove either that we did not force it upon China, or that the talk about the evils of opium is missionary fanaticism, but the sheet-anchor is: How are we ever to raise the Indian revenue if we give up the traffic? That is exactly Amaziah over again, come from the dead, and resurrected in a very ugly shape.

So national policy and Church action, and--what is of far more importance to you and me than either the one or the other,--our own personal relation to Jesus Christ and discipleship to Him, have been hampered, and are being hampered, just by that persistent and unworthy attitude of looking at the consequences of doing plain duties, and permitting ourselves to be frightened from the duties because the consequences are unwelcome to us.

Prudence is all right, but when prudence takes command and presumes to guide conscience, then it is all wrong. In some courts of law and in certain cases, the judge has an assessor sitting beside him, an expert about some of the questions that are involved. Conscience is the judge, prudence the assessor. But if the assessor ventures up on the judgment-seat, and begins to give the decisions which it is not his business to give--for his only business is to give advice--then the only thing to do with the assessor is to tell him to hold his tongue and let the judge speak. It is no answer to the prophet's prohibition to say, But what shall I do for the hundred talents? A yet better answer than the prophet gave Amaziah would have been, Never mind about the hundred talents; do what is right, and leave the rest to God. However, that was not the answer.

**II. The triumphant answer.**

The Lord is able to give thee much more than this. Now, this answer, like the question, may be right or wrong, according as it is taken. In what aspect is it wrong? In what sense is it not true? I suppose this prophet did not mean more than the undeniable truth that God was able to give Amaziah more than a hundred talents. He was not thinking of the loftier meanings which we necessarily, as Christian people, at a later stage of Revelation, and with a clearer vision of many things, attach to the words. He simply meant, You will very likely get more than the hundred talents that you have lost, if you do what pleases God. He was speaking from the point of view of the Old Testament; though even in the Old Testament we have instances enough that prosperity did not always attend righteousness. In the Old Testament we find the Book of Job, and the Book of Ecclesiastes, and many a psalm, all of which were written in order to grapple with the question, How is it that God does not give the good man more than the hundred talents that he has lost for the sake of being good? It is not true, and it is a dangerous mistake to suggest that it is true, that a man in this world never loses by being a good, honest, consistent Christian. He often does lose a great deal, as far as this world is concerned; and he has to make up his mind to lose it, and it would be a very poor thing to say to him, Now, live like a Christian man, and if you are flinging away money or anything else because of your Christianity, you will get it back. No; you will not, in a good many cases. Sometimes you will, and sometimes you will not. It does not matter whether you do or do not.

But the sense in which the triumphant answer of the prophet is true is a far higher one. The Lord is able to give thee much more than this,--what is more? a thousand talents? No; the much more that Christianity has educated us to understand is meant in the depths of such a promise as this is, first of all, character. Every man that sacrifices anything to convictions of duty gains more than he loses thereby, because he gains an inward nobleness and strength, to say nothing of the genial warmth of an approving conscience. And whilst that is true in all regions of life, it is most especially true in regard to sacrifices made from Christian principle. No matter how disastrous may be the results externally, the inward results of faithfulness are so much greater and sweeter and nobler than all the external evil consequences that may follow, that it is good policy for a man to beggar himself for Christ's sake, for the sake of the durable riches--which our Lord Himself explains to be synonymous with righteousness--which will come thereby. He that wins strength and Christ-likeness of character by sacrificing for Christ has won far more than he can ever lose.

He wins not only character, but a fuller capacity for a fuller possession of Jesus Christ Himself, and that is infinitely more than anything that any man has ever sacrificed for the sake of that dear Lord. Do you remember when it was that there was granted to the Apostle John the vision of the throned Christ, and that he felt laid upon him the touch of the vivifying Hand from Heaven? It was when I was in Patmos for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus. He lost Ephesus; he gained an open heaven and a visible Christ. Do you remember who it was that said, I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ? It was a good bargain, Paul! The balance-sheet showed a heavy balance to your credit. Debit, all things; credit, Christ. The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.

Remember the old prophecy: For brass I will bring gold; and for iron, silver. The brass and the iron may be worth something, but if we barter them away and get instead gold and silver, we are gainers by the transaction. Fling out the ballast if you wish the balloon to rise. Let the hundred talents go if you wish to get the more than this. And listen to the New Testament variation of this man of God's promise, If thou wilt have treasure in heaven, go and sell all that thou hast, and follow Me.