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

**2 CHRONICLES-020. A STRANGE REWARD FOR FAITHFULNESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"After these things, and the establishment thereof, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came."*

*2 Chronicles 32:1*

The Revised Version gives a much more accurate and significant rendering of a part of these words. It reads: After these things and this faithfulness, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came. What are these things and this faithfulness? The former are the whole of the events connected with the religious reformation in Judah, which King Hezekiah inaugurated and carried through so brilliantly and successfully. This faithfulness directly refers to a word in a couple of verses before the text: Thus did Hezekiah throughout all Judah; and he wrought that which was good and right and faithfulness before the Lord his God. And, after these things, the re-establishment of religion and this faithfulness, though Hezekiah was perfect before God in all ritual observances and in practical righteousness, and though he was seeking the Lord his God with all his heart, here is what came of it:--After this faithfulness came not blessings or prosperity, but Sennacherib, king of Assyria! The chronicler not only tells this as singular, but one can feel that he is staggered by it. There is a tone of perplexity and wonder in his voice as he records that this was what followed the faithful righteousness and heart-devotion of the best king that ever sat on the throne of Judah. I think that this royal martyr's experience is really a mirror of the experience of devout men in all ages and a revelation of the great law and constant processes of the Divine Providence. And from that point of view I wish to speak now, not only on the words I have read, but on what follows them.

**I. We have here the statement of the mystery.**

It is the standing puzzle of the Old Testament, how good men come to be troubled, and how bad men come to be prosperous. And although we Christian men and women are a great deal too apt to suppose that we have outlived that rudimentary puzzle of the religious mind, yet I do not think by any means that we have. For we hear men, when the rod falls upon themselves, saying, What have I done that I should be smitten thus? or when their friends suffer, saying, What a marvellous thing it is that such a good man as A, B, or C should have so much trouble! or, when widespread calamities strike a community, standing aghast at the broad and dark shadows that fall upon a nation or a continent, and wondering what the meaning of all this heaped misery is, and why the world is thus allowed to run along its course surrounded by an atmosphere made up of the breath of sighs, and swathed in clouds which are moist with tears.

My text gives us an illustration in the sharpest form of the mystery. After these things and this faithfulness, Sennacherib came--and he always comes in one shape or another. For, to begin with, a good man's goodness does not lift him out of the ordinary associations and contingencies and laws of life. If he has inherited a diseased constitution, his devotion will not make him a healthy man. If he has little common sense, his godliness will not make him prosper in worldly affairs. If he is tied to unfortunate connections, he will have to suffer. If he happens to be in a decaying branch of business, his prayers will not make him prosperous. If he falls in the way of poisonous gas from a sewer, his godliness will not exempt him from an attack of fever. So all round the horizon we see this: that the godly man is involved like any other man in the ordinary contingencies and possible evils of life. Then, have we to say that God has nothing to do with these?

Again, Hezekiah's story teaches us how second causes are God's instruments, and He is at the back of everything. There are two sources of our knowledge of the history of Judah in the time with which we are concerned. One is the Bible, the other is the Assyrian monuments; and it is a most curious contrast to read the two narratives of the same events, agreeing about the facts, but disagreeing utterly in the spirit. Why? Because the one tells the story from the world's point of view, and the other tells it from God's point of view. So when you take the one narrative, it is simply this: There was a conspiracy down in the south against the political supremacy of Assyria, and a lot of little confederate kinglets gathered themselves; and Hezekiah, of Judah, was one, along with So-and-So of such-and-such a petty land, and they leaned upon Egypt; and I, Sennacherib, came down among them, and they tumbled to pieces, and that is all. Then the Bible comes in, and it says that God ordered all those political complications, and that they were all the working out of His purposes, and that the axe in His hand as Isaiah has it so picturesquely, was this proud king of Assyria, with his boastful mouth and vainglorious words.

Now, that is the principle by which we have to estimate all the events that befall us. There are two ways of looking at them. You may look at them from the under side or from the top side. You may see them as they appear to men who cannot look beyond their noses and only have concern with the visible cranks and shafting, or you may look at them from the engine-room and take account of the invisible power that drives them all. In the one case you will regard it as a mystery that good men should have to suffer so; in the other case, you will say, It is the Lord, let Him do--even when He does it through Sennacherib and his like, let Him do what seemeth Him good.

Then there is another thing to be taken into account--that is, that the better a man is, the more faithful he is and the more closely he cleaves to God, and seeks, like this king, to do, with all his heart, all his work in the service of the House of God and to seek his God, the more sure is he to bring down upon himself certain forms of trouble and trial. The rebellion which, from the Assyrian side of the river, seemed to be a mere political revolt, from the Jordan side of the river seemed to be closely connected with the religious reformation. And it was just because Hezekiah and his people came back to God that they rebelled against the King of Assyria and served him not. If you provoke Sennacherib, Sennacherib will be down upon you very quickly. That is to say, being translated, if you will live like Christian men and women and fling down the gage of battle to the world and to the evil that lies in every one of us, and say, No, I have nothing to do with you. My law is not your law, and, God helping me, my practice shall not be your practice, then you will find out that the power that you have defied has a very long arm and a very tight grasp, and you will have to make up your minds that, in some shape or other, the old law will be fulfilled about you. Through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom.

**II. Now, secondly, my text and its context solve the mystery which it raises.**

The chronicler, as I said, wishes us to notice the sequence, strange as it is, and to wonder at it for a moment, in order that we may be prepared the better to take in the grand explanation that follows. And the explanation lies in the facts that ensue.

Did Sennacherib come to destroy? By no means! Here were the results: first, a stirring to wholesome energy and activity. If annoyances and troubles and sorrows, great or small, do nothing else for us, they would be clear and simple gain if they woke us up, for the half of men pass half of their lives half-asleep. And anybody that has ever come through a great sorrow and can remember what deep fountains were opened in his heart that he knew nothing about before, and how powers that were all unsuspected by himself suddenly came to him, and how life, instead of being a trivial succession of nothings, all at once became significant and solemn--any man who can remember that, will feel that if there were nothing else that his troubles did for him than to shake him out of torpor and rouse him to a tension of wholesome activity, so that he cried out:

Call forth thy powers, my soul! and dare

The conflict of unequal war,

he would have occasion to bless God for the roughest handling. The tropics are very pleasant for lazy people, but they sap the constitution and make work impossible; and after a man has lived for a while in their perpetual summer, he begins to long for damp and mist and frost and east winds which bring bracing to the system and make him fit to work. God takes us often into very ungenial climates, and the vindication of it is that we may be set to active service. That was the first good thing that Sennacherib's coming did.

The next was that his invasion increased dependence upon God. You will remember the story of the insolent taunts and vulgar vaunting by him and his servants, and the one answer that was given: Hezekiah, the king, and Isaiah the son of Amoz the prophet, prayed and cried to God. Ah! dear brethren, any thing that drives us to His breast is blessing. We may call it evil when we speak from the point of view of the foolish senses and the quivering heart, but if it blows us into His arms, any wind, the roughest and the fiercest, is to be welcomed more than lazy calms or gentle zephyrs. If, realising our own weakness and impotence, we are made to hang more completely upon Him, then let us be thankful for whatever has been the means of such a blessed issue. That was the second good thing that Sennacherib did.

The third good thing that he--not exactly did--but that was done through him, was that experience of God's delivering power was enriched. You remember the miracle of the destruction of the army. I need not dilate upon it. A man who can look back and say, Thou hast been with me in six troubles, need never be afraid of the seventh; and he who has hung upon that strong rope when he has been swinging away down in the darkness and asphyxiating atmosphere of the pit, and has been drawn up into the sunshine again, will trust it for all coming time. If there were no other explanation, the enlarged and deepened experience of the realities of God's Gospel and of God's grace, which are bought only by sorrow, would be a sufficient explanation of any sorrow that any of us have ever had to carry.

Well roars the storm to him who hears

A deeper voice across the storm.

There are large tracts of Scripture which have no meaning, no blessedness to us until they have been interpreted to us by losses and sorrows. We never know the worth of the lighthouse until the November darkness and the howling winds come down upon us, and then we appreciate its preciousness.

So, dear friends! the upshot of the whole is just that old teaching, that if we realised what life is for, we should wonder less at the sorrows that are in it. For life is meant to make us partakers of His holiness, not to make us happy. Our happiness is a secondary purpose, not out of view of the Divine love, but it is not the primary one. And the direct intention and mission of sorrow, like the direct intention and mission of joy, are to further that great purpose, that we should be partakers of His holiness. Every branch in Me that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

**III. Lastly, my text suggests a warning against letting prosperity undo adversity's work.**

Hezekiah came bravely through his trials. They did exactly what God wanted them to do; they drove him to God, they forced him down upon his knees. When Sennacherib's letter came, he took it to the Temple and spread it before God, and said, O Lord! it is Thy business. It is addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee; do Thou answer it. And so he received the help that he wanted. But he broke down after that. He was exalted; and the allies, his neighbours, that had not lifted a finger to help him when he needed their help, sent him presents which would have been a great deal more seasonable when he was struggling for his life with Sennacherib. What came after (God's ) faithfulness? This--his heart was lifted up, and he rendered not according to the benefit rendered to him. Therefore the blow had to come down again. A great many people take refuge in archways when it rains, and run out as soon as it holds up, and a great many people take religion as an umbrella, to put down when the sunshine comes. We cross the bridge and forget it, and when the leprosy is out of us we do not care to go back and give thanks. Sometimes too, we begin to think, After all, it was we that killed Sennacherib's army, and not the angel. And so, like dull scholars, we need the lesson repeated once, twice, thrice, here a little and there a little, precept upon precept, line upon line. There is none of us that has so laid to heart our past difficulties and trials that it is safe for God to burn the rod as long as we are in this life.

Dear friends! do not let it be said of us, In vain have I smitten thy children. They have received no correction; but rather let us keep close to Him, and seek to learn the sweet and loving meaning of His sharpest strokes. Then the little book, written within and without with lamentation and woe, which we all in our turn have to absorb and make our own, may be bitter in the mouth, but will be sweet as honey thereafter.