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

**2 CHRONICLES-021. MANASSEH'S SIN AND REPENTANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"9. So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel. 10. And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken. 11. Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. 12. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, 13. And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God. 14. Now after this he built a wall without the city of David, on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entering in at the fish gate, and compassed about Ophel, and raised it up a very great height, and put captains of war in all the fenced cities of Judah. 15. And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. 16. And he repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel."*

*2 Chronicles 33:9-16*

The story of Manasseh's sin and repentance may stand as a typical example. Its historical authenticity is denied on the ground that it appears only in this Book of Chronicles. I must leave others to discuss that matter; my purpose is to bring out the teaching contained in the story.

The first point in it is the stern indictment against Manasseh and his people. The experience which has saddened many a humbler home was repeated in the royal house, where a Hezekiah was followed by a Manasseh, who scorned all that his father had worshipped, and worshipped all that his father had loathed. Happily the father's eyes were closed long before the idolatrous bias of his son could have disclosed itself. Succeeding to the throne at twelve years of age, he could not have begun his evil ways at once, and probably would have been preserved from them if his father had lived long enough to mould his character. A child of twelve, flung on to a throne, was likely to catch the infection of any sin that was in the atmosphere. The narrative specifies two points in which, as he matured in years, and was confirmed in his course of conduct, he went wrong: first, in his idolatry; and second, in his contempt of remonstrances and warnings. As to the former, the preceding context gives a terrible picture. He was smitten with a very delirium of idolatry, and wallowed in any and every sort of false worship. No matter what strange god was presented, there were hospitality, an altar, and an offering for him. Baal, Moloch, the host of heaven, wizards, enchanters, anybody who pretended to have any sort of black art, all were welcome, and the more the better. No doubt, this eager acceptance of a miscellaneous multitude of deities was partly reaction from the monotheism of the former reign, but also it was the natural result of being surrounded by the worshippers of these various gods; and it was an unconscious confession of the insufficiency of each and all of them to fill the void in the heart, and satisfy the needs of the spirit. There are gods many, and lords many, because they are insufficient; the Lord our God is one Lord, because He, in His single Self, is more than all these, and is enough for any and every man.

We may note, too, that at the beginning of the chapter Manasseh is said to have done like unto the abominations of the heathen, while in verse 9 he is said to have done evil more than did the nations. When a worshipper of Jehovah does like the heathen, he does worse than they. An apostate Christian is more guilty than one who has never tasted the good word of God, and is likely to push his sins to a more flagrant wickedness. The corruption of the best is the worst. We cannot do what the world does without being more deeply guilty than they.

The narrative lays stress on the fact that the king's inclination to idolatry was agreeable to the people. The kings, who fought against it, had to resist the popular current, but at the least encouragement from those in high places the nation was ready to slide back. Rulers who wish to lower the standard of morality or religion have an easy task; but the people who follow their lead are not free from guilt, though they can plead that they only followed. The second count in the indictment is the refusal of king and people to listen to God's remonstrances. 2 Kings, chap, 21., gives the prophets warnings at greater length. They would not hearken--can anything madder and sadder be said of any of us than that? Is it not the very sin of sins, and the climax of suicidal folly, that God should call and men stop their ears? And yet how many of us pay no more regard to His voice, in His providences, in our own consciences, in history, in Scripture, and, most penetrating and beseeching of all, in Christ, than to idle wind whistling through an archway! Our own evil deeds stop our ears, and the stopped ears make further evil deeds more easy.

The second step in this typical story is merciful chastisement, meant to secure a hearing for God's voice. 2 Kings tells the threat, but not the fulfilment; Chronicles tells the fulfilment, but not the threat. We note how emphatically God's hand is recognised behind the political complications which brought the Assyrians to Jerusalem, and how particularly it is stated that the invasion was not headed by Esarhaddon, but by his generals. The place of Manasseh's captivity also is specified, not as Nineveh, as might have been expected, but as Babylon. These details, especially the last, look like genuine history. It is history which carries a lesson. Here is one conspicuous instance of the divine method, which is working to-day as it did then. God's hand is behind the secondary causes of events. Our sorrows and misfortunes are sent to us by Him, not hurled at us by human hands only, or occurring by the working of impersonal laws. They are meant to make us bethink ourselves, and drop evil things from our hands and hearts. It is best to be guided by His eye, and not need bit and bridle; but if we make ourselves stubborn as the mule, which has no understanding, it is second best that we should taste the whip, that it may bring us to run in harness on the road which He wills. If we habitually looked at calamities as His loving chastisement, intended to draw us to Himself, we should not have to stand perplexed so often at what we call the mysteries of His providence.

The next step in the story is the yielding of the sinful heart when smitten. The worst affliction is an affliction wasted, which does us no good. And God has often to lament, In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction. Sorrow has in itself no power to effect the purpose for which it is sent; but all depends on how we take it. It sometimes makes us hard, bitter, obstinate in clinging to evil. A heart that has been disciplined by it, and still is undisciplined, is like iron hammered on an anvil, and made the more close-grained thereby. But this king took his chastisement wisely. An accepted sorrow is an angel in disguise, and nothing which drives us to God is a calamity. Manasseh praying was freer in his chains than ever he had been in his prosperity. Manasseh humbling himself greatly before God was higher than when, in the pride of his heart, he shut God out from it.

Affliction should clear our sight, that we may see ourselves as we are; and, if we do, there will be an end of high looks, and we shall take the lowest room. Thus humbled, we shall pray as the self-confident and outwardly prosperous cannot do. Sorrow has done its best on us when, like some strong hand on our shoulders, it has brought us to our knees. No affliction has yielded its full blessing to us unless it has thus set us by Manasseh's side.

The next step in the story is the loving answer to the humbled heart, and the restoration to the kingdom. He was entreated of him. No doubt, political circumstances brought about Manasseh's reinstatement, as they had brought about his captivity, but it was God that brought him again to his kingdom. We may not receive again lost good things, but we may be quite sure that God never fails to hear the cry of the humble, and that, if there is one voice that more surely reaches His ear and moves His heart than another, it is the voice of His chastened children, who cry to Him out of the depths, and there have learned their own sin and sore need. He will be entreated of them, and, whether He gives back lost good or not, He will give Himself, in whom all good is comprehended. Manasseh's experience may be repeated in us.

And the best part of it was, not that he received back his kingdom, but that then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God. The name had been but a name to him, but now it had become a reality. Our traditional, second-hand belief in God is superficial and largely unreal till it is deepened and vivified by experience. If we have cried to Him, and been lightened, then we have a ground of conviction that cannot be shaken. Formerly we could at most say, I believe in God, or, I think there is a God, but now we can say, I know, and no criticism nor contradiction can shake that. Such knowledge is not the knowledge won by the understanding alone, but it is acquaintance with a living Person, like the knowledge which loving souls have of each other; and he who has that knowledge as the issue of his own experience may smile at doubts and questionings, and say with the Apostle of Love, We know that we are of God, ... and we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true. Then, if we have that knowledge, we shall listen to the same Apostle's commandment, Keep yourselves from idols, even as the issue of Manasseh's knowledge of God was that he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord.