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

**2 KINGS-007. NAAMAN'S WRATH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10.* *And Elisha sent a messenger unto Naaman, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. 11. But Naaman was wroth, and went away."*

*2 Kings 5:10-11*

These two figures are significant of much beyond themselves. Elisha the prophet is the bearer of a divine cure. Naaman, the great Syrian noble, is stricken with the disease that throughout the Old Testament is treated as a parable of sin and death. He was the commander-in-chief of the army of Damascus, high in favour at Ben-hadad's court; his reputation and renown were on every tongue, but he was a leper. There is a but in every fortune, as there is a but in every character.

So he comes to the prophet's humble home in Samaria, and we find him waiting, a suppliant at the gate, with his cavalcade of attendants, and a present worth many thousands of pounds in our English money.

How does the prophet receive his distinguished visitor? In all the rest of his actions we find Elisha gentle, accessible, forgetful of his dignity. Here his conduct would be discourteous if there were not a reason for it. He is reserved, unsympathetic, keeps the great man at the staff-end, will not even come out to receive him as common courtesy might have suggested; sends him a curt message of direction, with not a word more than was necessary.

And then, naturally enough, the hot soldier begins to explode. His pride is touched; he has not been received with due deference. If the prophet would have come out and chanted incantations over him, and made mystical motions of his hands above the shining patches of his leprous skin, he could have believed in the cure. But there was nothing in the injunction given for his superstition to lay hold of. His patriotic susceptibilities are roused. If he is to be cleansed by bathing, are not the crystal streams of his own city, the glory of Damascus, better than the turbid and muddy Jordan that belongs to Israel? So he flounced away, and would have sacrificed his hope of cure to his passion if his servants had not brought him to common-sense by their cool remonstrance. He would have done any great thing which he had been set to do; he had already done a great thing in taking the long journey, and being ready to expend all that vast amount of treasure, and so surely there need be no difficulty in his complying, were it only as an experiment, with the very simple and easy terms which the prophet had enjoined.

Now, all these points may be so put as to suggest for us characteristics of that gospel which is God's cure for our leprosy. And the whole story shows us as in a glass what human nature would like the gospel to be, and how we sick men quarrel with our physic, and stumble at those very characteristics of the gospel which are its main glory and the secret of its power. My only purpose in this sermon is to bring out two or three of these as lying on the surface of the story before us.

**I. First, then, God's cure puts us all on one level.**

Naaman wished to be treated like a great man that happened to be a leper; Elisha treated him like a leper that happened to be a great man. I thought, he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God. The whole question about his treatment turns on this, Whether is the important thing his disease or his dignity? He thought it was his dignity, the prophet thought it was his disease. And so he served him as he would have served any one else that in similar circumstances, and for a like necessity, had come to him.

And now, if you will generalise that, it just comes to this--that Christianity brushes aside all the surface differences of men, and goes in its treatment of them straight to the central likenesses, the things which, in all mankind, are identical. There are the same wants, the same sorrows, the same necessity for the same cleansing beneath the queen's robes and the peer's ermine, the workman's jacket and the beggar's rags.

Whatever differences of culture, of station, of idiosyncrasy there may be, these are but surface and accidental. We are all alike in this, that we have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; and our Great Physician, in His great remedy, insists upon treating us all as patients, and not as this, that, or the other, kind of patients. The cholera, when it lays hold of ladies and gentlemen, deals with them in precisely the same fashion that it does when it lays hold of waifs on the dunghill; and a wise doctor will treat the Prince of Wales just as he will treat the Prince of Wales's stable-boy. Christianity has nothing to say, in the first place, to the accidents that separate us one from the other, but insists on looking at us all as standing on the one level and partaking of the one characteristic. We may be wise or foolish, we may be learned or ignorant, we may be rich or poor, we may be high or low, we may be barbarian or civilised, but we are all sinners. The leprosy runs through us all, according to the diagnosis of Christianity, and our Elisha deals with Naaman as he deals with the poorest footboy in Naaman's cavalcade who is afflicted with the same disease.

Now that rubs against our self-importance; a great many of us would be quite willing to go to heaven, but we do not like to go in a common caravan. We want to have a compartment to ourselves, and to travel in a manner becoming our position. We are quite willing to be healed, but we would like to be healed with due deference. You are an educated man, a student; you do not like to take the same place as the most unlettered, and to feel that the common fact of sin puts you, in a very solemn respect, upon the level of these narrow foreheads and unlettered people. And so some of you turn away because Christianity, with such impartiality and persistency, insists upon the identity of the fact of sin in us all, and passes by the little diversities on which we plume ourselves, and which part us the one from the other. Dear brethren, I am sure that some of my audience have been kept away from the gospel by this humbling characteristic of it, that at the very beginning it insists on bringing us all into the one category; and I venture to ask you to ponder with yourselves this question, Is it not wise, is it not necessary that the physician should look only at the disease and think nothing of all the other facts of the patient's character or life? Surely, surely, it is a fact that we are transgressors, and surely it is a fact that if we be transgressors that is the most important thing about us--far more important than all these diversities of which I have been speaking. They are skin-deep, this is the central truth, that we have souls which ought to stand in a living relation of glad obedience to our Father in heaven; and which, alas! do stand in an attitude often of sulky alienation, often of indifference, and not seldom of rebellion. If so, then it is both wise and kind to deal with that solemn fact first. In wisdom and in mercy Christianity deals with all men as sinners, needing chiefly to be healed of that disease. The Scripture hath concluded all under sin--shut up the whole race as in a great chamber, that so cleansing and forgiveness might reach them all. They are gathered together as patients in a hospital are gathered, that their sickness may be medicined and their wounds dressed.

For this impartiality of the gospel, putting us all on one level, and its determination to deal with us all as sinners, is but the other side of, and the preparation for, that blessed universality of a sacrifice for all, and a gospel for the whole world. Do not quarrel with your physic because the Physician insists upon dealing with you as sick men.

**II. Then take another of the thoughts that come out of the incident before us. God's cure puts the messengers of the cure well away in the background.**

Naaman, heathen-like, wanted something sensuous for his confidence in the prophet's cure to lay hold upon. If the prophet would only have come out, and done like the sorcerers and magic-workers of whom he had had experience; if he would have come weaving mystical incantations, and calling upon the God whom he worshipped, but whom Naaman did not, and making passes with his hands over the leprous places--then there would have been something for his sense to build upon, and he would have been ready to believe in the prophet's power to cure. But that was the very thing which the prophet did not want him to believe in. Elisha desired to conceal himself, and to make God's power prominent. He wished to cure Naaman's soul of the leprosy of idolatry as well as to cure his body; and we see, in the sequel of the story, that the very simplicity of the means enjoined and the absence of any human agency, which at first staggered the sensuous nature and offended the pride of Naaman, at last led him to see and confess that there was no God in all the earth but in Israel. Therefore the prophet keeps in the background. His part is not to cure, but to bring God's cure. He is only a voice. He brings the sick man and God's prescription face to face, and there leaves him. Naaman would have liked to force him into the place of a magician, in whom miracle-working power resided. Elisha will only take the place of a herald who proclaims how God's power may be brought to heal. So men have always sought to turn the messengers of God's cure into miracle-workers. Making the ministers of God's word into priests who by external acts convey grace and forgiveness, is a superstition that has its roots deep in human nature. It is not that the priests have made themselves so much as that the people have made the priests. Here is an instance in a rude form of the tendency which has been at work in all generations, and has been the corruption of Christianity from the beginning, and is doing mischief every day--the tendency to place one's confidence in a man who is supposed to be, in some mysterious manner, the bearer of a grace that will cure and cleanse. And the prophet's position in our story brings out very clearly the position which all Christian ministers hold. They are nothing but heralds, their personality disappears, they are merely a voice. All that they have to do is to bring men into contact with God's own word of command and promise, and then to vanish.

Christianity has no priests, Christianity has no sacraments. Christianity has no external rites which bring grace or help except in so far as by their aid the soul is brought into contact with the truth, and by meditation and faith is thus made capable of receiving more of Christ's Spirit. Our only commission is to bring to you God's message of how you may be healed. When we have said, Wash, and be clean, as plainly, earnestly, and lovingly as we can, we have done all our appointed office. We are heralds, and nothing more. Our business is to preach, not to do rites, or minister sacraments. Our business is to preach, not to argue. We are neither priests nor professors, but preachers. We have to deliver the message given to us faithfully. We have to ring out the proclamation loudly. The virtue of a town crier is that he make people hear and understand. The virtue of a messenger is that he repeats precisely what he was told. And a Christian minister has to lift up his voice and not be afraid, to see to it that his speech be plain, and that it do not overlay the message with fripperies of ornament, or affectations, or personalities, and to plead earnestly and lovingly with men to come to the divine Healer. John Baptist's description of himself is true of them. With rare self-abnegation, he would only reply to the question, Who art thou? with I am a voice. His personality was nothing. His message was all. A musical string cannot be seen as it vibrates. So the man should be lost in his proclamation. We are heralds and nothing more, and the more we keep in the background and the less our hearers depend on us, the better. If you want priests who will call on the name of their God, and wave their hands over the place, and convey grace and healing to you by anything that they do for or to you, you will have to go beyond the limits of New Testament Christianity to find them. So men quarrel with their medicine because their cure is purely a spiritual process, depending on spiritual forces, and sense cries out for sacred rites and persons to be the channels of God's healing.

**III. And now, lastly, God's cure wants nothing from you but to take it.**

Naaman's servants were quite right: My father! If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? Yes! Of course he would, and the greater the better. Men will stand, as Indian fakirs do, with their arms above their heads until they stiffen there. They will perch themselves upon pillars, like Simeon Stylites, for years, till the birds build their nests in their hair: they will measure all the distance from Cape Comorin to Juggernaut's temple with their bodies along the dusty road. They will give the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. They will wear hair shirts and scourge themselves. They will fast and deny themselves. They will build cathedrals and endow churches. They will do as many of you do, labour by fits and starts all through your lives at the endless task of making yourselves ready for heaven, and winning it by obedience and by righteousness. They will do all these things and do them gladly, rather than listen to the humbling message that says, You do not need to do anything--wash! Is it your washing, or the water, that will clean you? Wash and be clean! Ah, my brother! Naaman's cleansing was only a test of his obedience, and a token that it was God who cleansed him. There was no power in Jordan's waters to take away the taint of leprosy. Our cleansing is in that blood of Jesus Christ that has the power to take away all sin, and to make the foulest amongst us pure and clean.

But the two commandments--that of the symbol in my text, that of the reality in the Christian gospel--are alike in this respect, that both the one and the other are a confession that the man himself has no part in his own cleansing. And so Naamans, in all generations, who were eager to do some great thing, have stumbled, and turned away from that gospel which says, It is finished! Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us. Dear brother, you can do nothing. You do not need to do anything. It is a hard pill for my pride to swallow, to be indebted to absolute mercy, which I have done nothing to bring, for all my hope, but it is a position that we have to take. Hard to take for all of us, very hard for you who have never looked in the face the solemn fact of your own sinfulness, and pondered upon the consequences of that; but most blessed if only you will open your eyes to see that the stern refusal to accept anything from us as working out our salvation is but the other side of the great truth that Christ's death is all-sufficient, and that in Him the foulest may be clean.

Nothing in my hand I bring.

If you bring anything you cannot grasp the Cross. Do not try to eke out Christ's work with yours; do not build upon penitence, or feelings, or faith, or anything, but build only upon this: When I had nothing to pay He frankly forgave me all. And build upon this: Christ alone has died for me; and Christ alone is all-sufficient. Wash and be clean; accept and possess; believe and live!