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

**2 KINGS-008. NAAMAN'S IMPERFECT FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"15. And he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came and stood before him: and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. 16. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none. And he urged him to take it; but he refused. 17. And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt-offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord. 18. In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing. 19. And he said unto him, Go in peace. So he departed from him a little way. 20. But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, Behold, my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought: but, as the Lord liveth, I will run after him, and take somewhat of him. 21. So Gehazi followed after Naaman: and when Naaman saw him running after him, he lighted down from the chariot to meet him, and said, Is all well? 22. And he said, All is well. My master hath sent me, saying, Behold, even now there be come to me from mount Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets: give them, I pray thee, a talent of silver, and two charges of garments. 23. And Naaman said, Be content, take two talents. And he urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of garments and laid them upon two of his servants; and they bare them before him. 24. And when he came to the tower, he took them from their hand, and bestowed them in the house: and he let the men go, and they departed. 25. But he went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, Whence comest thou, Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. 26. And he said unto him, Went not mine heart with thee, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? 27. The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow."*

*2 Kings 5:15-27*

Like the Samaritan leper healed by Jesus, Naaman came back to give glory to God. Samaria was quite out of his road to Damascus, but benefit melted his heart, and the pride, which had been indignant that the prophet did not come out to him, faded before thankfulness, which impelled him to go to the prophet. God's gifts should humble, and gratitude is not afraid to stoop. Elisha would not see Naaman before, for he needed to be taught; but he gladly welcomes him into his presence now, for he has learned his lesson. Sometimes the best way to attract is to repel, and the true servant of God consults not his own dignity, but others good, whichever he does.

**I. The first point is the offer and refusal of the gift.**

The benefited is liberal and the benefactor disinterested. Naaman was a convert to pure monotheism. His avowal is clear and full. But what a miserable conclusion he draws with that therefore! He should have said, Therefore I come to trust under the shadow of His wings. But he is not ready to give himself, and, like some of the rest of us, thinks to compound by giving money. When the outward giving of goods is token of inward surrender of self, it is accepted. When it is a substitute for that, it is rejected. No doubt, too, Naaman thought that Elisha was, like the sorcerers of heathenism, very accessible to gifts; and if he had come to believe in Elisha's God, he had yet to learn the loving-kindness of the God in whom he had come to believe. He had to learn next that the gift of God was not purchased with money and the prophet's acceptance of his present would have dimmed Elisha's own character, and that of his God, in the newly opened eyes of Naaman.

Elisha's answer begins with the solemn adjuration which we first hear from Elijah. In its use here, it not only declares the unalterable determination of Elisha, but reveals its grounds. To a man who feels ever the burning consciousness that he is in the presence of God, all earthly good dwindles into nothing. How should talents of silver and gold, and changes of raiment, have worth in eyes before which that awful, blessed vision flames? A candle shows black against the sun. If we walk all the day in the light of God's countenance, we shall not see much brightness to dazzle us in the pale and borrowed lights of earth. The vivid realisation of God in our daily lives is the true shield against the enticements of the world. Further, the consciousness of being God's servant, which is implied in the expression before whom I stand, makes a man shrink from receiving wages from men. To his own Master he standeth or falleth, and will be scrupulously careful that no taint of apparent self-seeking shall spoil his service, in the eyes of men or in the judgment of the great Taskmaster. Elisha felt that the honour of his order, and, in some sense, of his God, in the eyes of this half-convert, depended on his own perfect and transparent disinterestedness. Therefore, although he made no scruple of taking the Shunemite's gifts, and probably lived on similar offerings, he steadfastly refused the enormous sum proffered by Naaman. The labourer is worthy of his hire, but if accepting it is likely to make people think that he did his work for the sake of it, he must refuse it. A hireling is not a man who is paid for his work, but one who works for the sake of the pay. If once a professed servant of God falls under reasonable suspicion of doing that, his power for good is ended, as it should be.

**II. The next point to notice is the alloy in the gold, or the imperfection of Naaman's new convictions.**

He had been cured of his leprosy at once, but the cure of his soul had to be more gradual. It is unreasonable to expect clear sight, with the power of rightly estimating magnitudes, from a man seeing for the first time. But though Naaman's shortcomings are very natural and excusable, they are plainly shortcomings. Note the two forms which they take,--superstition and selfish compromise. What good would a couple of loads of soil be, and could he not have taken that from the roadside without leave? The connection between the two halves of verse 17 makes his object plain. He wished the earth for he would not sacrifice but to Jehovah. That is, he meant to use it as the foundation of an altar, as if only some of the very ground on which Jehovah had manifested Himself was sacred enough for such a purpose. He did not, indeed, think of the Lord as a local deity of Israel, as his ample confession of faith in verse 15 proves; but neither had he reached the point of feeling that the Being worshipped makes the altar sacred. No wonder that he did not unlearn in an hour his whole way of thinking of religion! The reliance on externals is too natural to us all, even with all our training in a better faith, to allow of our wondering at or severely blaming him. A sackful of earth from Palestine has been supposed to make a whole graveyard a Campo Santo; and, no doubt, there are many good people in England who have carried home bottles of Jordan water for christenings. Does not the very name of the Holy Land witness to the survival of Naaman's sentimental error?

The other tarnish on the clear mirror was of a graver kind. Notice that he does not ask Elisha's sanction to his intended compromise, but simply announces his intention, and hopes for forgiveness. It looks ill when a man, in the first fervour of adopting a new faith, is casting about for ways to reconcile it with the public profession of his old abandoned one. We should have thought better of Naaman's monotheism, if he had not coupled his avowal of it, where it was safe to be honest, with the announcement that he did not intend to stand by his avowal when it was risky. It would have required huge courage to have gone back to Damascus and denied Rimmon; and our censure must be lenient, but decided.

Naaman was the first preacher of a doctrine of compromise, which has found eminent defenders and practisers, in our own and other times. To separate the official from the man, and to allow the one to profess in public a creed which the other disavows in private, is rank immorality, whoever does or advocates it. The motive in this case was, perhaps, not so much cowardice as selfish unwillingness to forfeit position and favour at court. He wants to keep all the good things he has got; and he tries to blind his conscience by representing the small compliance of bowing as almost forced on him by the grasp of the bowing king, who leaned on his hand. But was it necessary that he should be the king's favourite? A deeper faith would have said, Perish court favour and everything that hinders me from making known whose I am. But Naaman is an early example of the family of Facing-both-ways, and of trying to make the best of both worlds. But his sophistication of conscience will not do, and his own dissatisfaction with his excuse peeps out plainly in his petition that he may be forgiven. If his act needed forgiveness, it should not have been done, nor thus calmly announced. It is vain to ask forgiveness beforehand for known sin about to be committed.

Elisha is not asked for his sanction, and he neither gives nor refuses it. He dismissed Naaman with cold dignity, in the ordinary conventional form of leave-taking. His silence indicated at least the absence of hearty approval, and probably he was silent to Naaman because, as he said about the Shunemite's trouble, the Lord had been silent to him, and he had no authoritative decision to give. Let us hope that Naaman's faith grew and stiffened before the time of trial came, and that he did not lie to God in the house of Rimmon. Let us take the warning that we are to publish on the housetops what we hear in the ear, and that, if in anything we should be punctiliously sincere, it is in the profession of our faith.

**III. The last point is Gehazi's avarice, and what he got by it.**

How differently the same sight affected the man who lived near God and the one who lived by sense! Elisha had no desires stirred by the wealth in Naaman's train. Gehazi's mouth watered after it. Regulate desires and you rule conduct. The true regulation of desires is found in communion with God. Gehazi had a sordid soul, like Judas; and, like the traitor Apostle, he was untouched by contact with goodness and unworldliness. Perhaps the parallel might be carried farther, and both were moved with coarse contempt for their master's silly indifference to earthly good. That feeling speaks in Gehazi's soliloquy. He evidently thought the prophet a fool for having let this Syrian off so easily. He was fair game, and he had brought the wealth on purpose to leave it. Profanity speaks in uttering a solemn oath on such an occasion. The putting side by side of the Lord liveth and I will run after him would be ludicrous if it were not horrible. How much profanity may live close beside a prophet, and learn nothing from him but a holy name to sully in an oath!

The after part of the story suggests that Naaman was out of sight of the city before he saw Gehazi coming after him. The cunning liar timed his arrival well. The courtesy of Naaman in lighting down from his chariot to receive the prophet's servant shows how real a change had been wrought upon him, even though there were imperfections in him. Gehazi's story is well hung together, and has plenty of local colour to make it probable. Such glib ingenuity in lying augurs long practice in the art. If he had been content with a small fee, he needed only to have told the truth; but his story was required to put a fair face on the amount of his request. And in what an amiable light it sets Elisha! He would not take for himself, but he has nothing to give to the two imaginary scholars, who have come from some of the schools of the prophets in the hill-country of Ephraim, thirsting for instruction. How sweet the picture, and what a hard heart that could refuse the request! Truly said Paul, The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Any sin may come from it, and be done to gratify it. Honestly if you can, but get it, was Gehazi's principle, as it is that of many a man in the Christian Churches of this day. Greed of gain is a sin that seldom keeps house alone. Naaman no doubt was glad to give, both because he was grateful, and because, like most people in high positions, he was galled by the sense of obligation to a man beneath him in rank. So back went Gehazi, with the two Syrian slaves carrying his baggage for him, and he chuckling at his lucky stroke, and pleasantly imagining how to spend his wealth.

The tower in verse 24 is more correctly the hill, and it was probably there where the little group would come in sight of Elisha's house. So Gehazi gets rid of the porters before they could be seen or speak to any one, and manages his load for a little way himself, carefully hides it in the house, and, seeing the men safely off, appears obsequious and innocent before Elisha. The prophet's gift of supernatural knowledge was intermittent, as witness his ignorance of the Shunemite's sorrow; but Gehazi must have known its occasional action, and we can fancy that his heart sank at the ominous question, so curt in the original, and conveying so clearly the prophet's knowledge that he had been away from the house: Whence, Gehazi? One lie needs another to cover it, and every sin is likely to beget a successor. So, with some tremor, but without hesitation, he tries to hide his tracks. Did not Elisha's eye pierce the wretched hypocrite as with a dart? and did not his voice ring like a judgment trumpet, as he confounded the silent sinner with the conviction that the prophet himself had been at the spot, though his body had remained in the house? So, at last, will men be reduced to stony dumbness, when they discover that an Eye which can see deeper than Elisha's has been gazing on all their secret sins. The question, Is this a time to receive? etc., suggests the special reasons, in Naaman's new faith, for conspicuous disregard of wealth, in order that he might thereby learn the free love of Elisha's God and of Jehovah's servant, both of which had been tarnished by Gehazi's ill-omened greed. The long enumeration following on garments includes, no doubt, the things that Gehazi had solaced his return with the thought of buying, and so adds another proof that his heart was turned inside out before the prophet.

His punishment is severe; but his sin was great. The leprosy was a fitting punishment, both because it had been Naaman's, from which obedient reliance on God had set him free, and because of its symbolical meaning, as the type of sin. Gehazi got his coveted money, but he got something else along with it, which he did not bargain for, and which took all the sweetness out of it. That is always the case. Ill-gotten gear never prospers; and, if a man has set his heart on worldly good, he may succeed in amassing a fortune, but the leprosy will cleave to him, and his soul will be all crusted and foul with that living death. How many successful men, perhaps high in reputation in the Church as in the world, would stand lepers as white as snow, if we had God's eyes to see them with!