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

**2 KINGS-009. SIGHT AND BLINDNESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. Then the king of Syria warred against Israel, and took counsel with his servants, saying, In such and such a place shall be my camp. 9. And the man of God sent unto the king of Israel, saying, Beware that them pass not such a place; for thither the Syrians are come down. 10. And the king of Israel sent to the place which the man of God told him and warned him of, and saved himself there, not once nor twice. 11. Therefore the heart of the king of Syria was sore troubled for this thing; and he called his servants, and said unto them, Will ye not shew me which of us is for the king of Israel? 12. And one of his servants said, None, my Lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber. 13. And he said, Go and spy where he is, that I may send and fetch him. And it was told him, saying, Behold, he is in Dothan. 14. Therefore sent he thither horses, and chariots, and a great host: and they came by night, and compassed the city about. 15. And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? 16. And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. 17. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. 18. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed unto the Lord, and said, Smite this people, I pray Thee, with blindness. And He smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha."*

*2 Kings 6:8-18*

The revelation of the angel guard around Elisha is the important part of this incident, but the preliminaries to it may yield some instruction. The first point to be noted is the friendly relations between the king and the prophet. The king was probably Joram, who had given up Baal worship, though still retaining the calves at Bethel and Dan (2 Kings 3:2). The whole tone of things is changed from the stormy days of Elijah. The prophet is frequently an inhabitant of the capital, and a trusted counsellor. No doubt much of this improvement was owing to Elijah's undaunted denunciation, but much, too, was due to Elisha's gentle persuasion. We are often tempted to do injustice to the sterner predecessors when we see how the gentler ways of their followers seem to accomplish more than theirs did. Unless winter storms had come first, spring sunshine would draw forth few flowers. All honour to the heroes who begin the fight, and do not see the victory.

The Syrian king's way of warfare was not by a regular continued invasion, but by dashes across the border on undefended places; and time after time he found himself out in his calculations, and troops enough to beat him off massed where he meant to strike. No wonder that he suspected treachery. The prompt answer of his servants implies that Elisha's intervention was well known by them, and measures the reputation in which he stood. Let no one suppose that thwarting Syria was an unworthy use of a supernatural gift. The preservation of Israel and the revelation of God were worthy ends, and all that is accessory to a worthy end is worthy. It is foolish to call anything a trifle which serves a great purpose.

Joram had learned to obey the prophet, and his people and their enemies had learned that Elisha was a prophet. That was much. He had no great revelations of the deep things of God to give to his generation or to posterity, but he gave directions as to practical life which bore on the wellbeing of the state; and that office was not less divinely conferred. It is a good thing when God's servants are not afraid to make their voices heard in politics, and a safeguard for a nation when their counsels are taken. The quiet prophet was more to Israel than an army.

The great host sent to capture Elisha shows the terror which he had inspired, and the importance attached to getting possession of him. It is, too, an odd instance of the inconsistency of godless men, in that it never occurs to the Syrian king that Elisha, who knew all his schemes, might know this one too, or that horses and chariots were of little use against a man who had Heaven to back him. Dothan lay on an isolated hill in a wide plain, and could easily be surrounded. A night-march offered the chance of a surprise, which seems to have been prevented by the unusually early rising of Elisha's servant, the young successor of Gehazi. Apparently he had gone out of the little city before he discovered the besiegers, and then rushed back in terror. Note the strongly contrasted pictures of the lad and his master,--the one representing the despair of sense, the other the confidence of faith. The lad's passionate exclamation was most natural, and fear darkening to bewildered helplessness is reasonable to men who only see the material and visible dangers and enemies that beset every life. The wonder is, not that we should sometimes be afraid, but that we should ever be free from fear, if we look only at visible facts. Worse foes ring us round than those whose armour glittered in the morning sunshine at Dothan, and we are as helpless to cope with them as that frightened youth was. Any man who calmly reflects on the possibilities and certainties of his life will find abundant reason for a sinking heart. So much that is dreadful and sad may come, and so much must come, that the boldest may well shrink, and the most resourceful cry Alas! how shall we do? It is not courage, but blindness, which enables godless men to front life so unconcernedly.

How nobly the calmness of Elisha shows beside the lad's alarm! Probably both were now outside the city, as the immediately following verse speaks of the mountain as the scene. If so, Elisha had gone forth to meet the enemy, and that must have brought fresh terror to his servant. The quiet Fear not! was of little use without the assurance of the next clause; for there is no more idle expenditure of breath than in telling a man not to be afraid, and doing nothing to remove the grounds of his fear. That is all that the world can do to comfort or hearten. Fear not? the youth might well have said. It is all very easy to say that; but look there! How can I help being afraid? There is only one way to help it, and that is to believe that they that be with us are more than they that be with them. The true and only conqueror of reasonable fear is still more reasonable trust. The two parts played by the servant and the prophet are united in the man who cleaves to Jesus Christ as his defence. He would not cling so close to Him but for the fear that tightens his grip. He would tremble far more but for that grip. He who says in his heart, What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee, will presently get to saying, I will trust, and not be afraid.

Note, further, the sight seen by opened eyes. Elisha did not pray that the heavenly guards might come; for they were there already. Nor does it appear that he saw them; for he did not need that heightened condition of spiritual perception which appears to be meant by the opening of the eyes. And what a sight the trembling young man saw! Where he had seen only barren rock or sparse vegetation, he saw that same fiery host that had attended Elijah in his translation, now enclosing the unarmed prophet and himself within a flaming ring. The manifestation, not the presence, of the angel guards was the miracle. It was a momentary unveiling of what always was, and would be after the curtain was drawn again. I suppose that no reverent reader of Scripture can doubt the existence of angelic beings, or their office to minister to the heirs of salvation. To us, indeed, who know Him who is the Head of all principalities and powers, the doctrine of angelic ministration is of less importance than that of Christ's divine help; but the latter truth does not supersede the former, though its brightness throws the other, about which we know so much less, into comparative shadow. But we may still learn from this transient disclosure of the things that are, the permanent truth of the ever-active presence of divinely sent helps and guards, with all who trust in Him.

This manifestation has several features of resemblance to that given to Jacob, in his most defenceless hour, when he saw beside his unprotected camp of women and children God's host, and, in a rapture of thankful wonder, named the place Mahanaim,--Two Camps. The sight teaches us that God's messengers are ever near, and then most near when needed most. It tells us, too, that they come in the form needed. They are warriors when we are ringed about by foes, counsellors when we are perplexed, comforters when we mourn. Their shapes are as varied as our needs, and ever correspond to the present distress. They come in power sufficient to conquer. There was force enough circling the prophet to have annihilated all the Syrians. True, they did not draw their celestial swords, but they were there, and their presence was enough for the triumphant faith of the guarded men. What living thing could come through that wall of fire?

Our eyes are blinded and we need to have them cleared, if not in the same manner as this lad's, yet in an analogous way. We look so constantly at the things seen that we have no sight for the unseen. Worldliness, sin, unbelief, sense and its trifles, time and its transitoriness, blind the eyes of our mind; and we need those of sense to be closed, that these may open. The truest vision is the vision of faith. It is certain, direct, and conclusive. The world says, Seeing is believing; the gospel says, Believing is seeing. If we would but live near to Jesus Christ, pray to Him to touch our blind eyeballs, and turn away from the dazzling unrealities which sense brings, we should find Him the master-light of all our seeing, and be sure of the eternal, invisible things, with an assurance superior to that given by the keenest sight in the brightest sunshine. When we are blind to earth, we see earth glorified by angel presences, and fear and despair and helplessness and sorrow flee away from our tranquil hearts. If, on the other hand, we fix our gaze on earth and its trifles, there will generally be more to alarm than to encourage, and we shall do well to be afraid, if we do not see, as in such a case we shall certainly not see, the fiery wall around us, behind which God keeps His people safe.

Note, finally, the blindness. Elisha's dealing with the advancing host of Syria can only be rightly estimated by looking beyond the limits of the text. His object was to carry the whole army into Samaria, that they might there be won by giving them bread to eat and water to drink, and so heaping coals of fire on their head. The prophet, who was in so many points a foreshadowing of the gospel type of excellence, was the first to show the right way to conquer. Nineteen centuries of so-called Christianity have not brought Christendom to practise Elisha's recipe for finishing a war. It succeeded in his hands; for, after that feast and liberation of a captured army, the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel. How could they, as long as the remembrance of that kindness lasted? Pity that the same sort of treatment were not tried to-day!

The blindness which fell on the Syrians does not seem to have been total loss of sight,--for, if so, they could not have followed Elisha to Samaria, nearly fifteen miles off,--but rather an ocular affection which prevented them from recognising what they saw. It was a supernatural impediment in any case, however far it extended. God did according to the word of Elisha, a wonderful inversion of the ordinary formula. But that was because Elisha was doing according to the word of the Lord. The prayers which are according to His will are the answered prayers.

They who see not the angels, see nothing clearly. There is a mist over every eye that beholds only the things of time, which prevents it from seeing these as they are, and from recognising a prophet when he is before them. If we would rightly estimate the objects of sense, we must discern, shining through them, the far loftier and greater things of eternity. That flaming background is needed to supply a scale by which to measure the others. The flat plain of Lombardy is most beautiful when its flatness is seen girdled by the giant Alps, where lies the purity of the snow which feeds the rivers that fertilise the levels below.