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

**2 KINGS-016. THE SPIRIT OF POWER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Elisha said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow. And he put his hand upon it: and Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands."*

*2 Kings 13:16*

This is part of one of the strangest narratives in the Old Testament. Elisha is on his deathbed, sick of the sickness wherewith he should die. A very different scene, that close sick-chamber, from the open plain beyond Jordan from which Elijah had gone up; a very different way of passing from life by wasting sickness than by fiery chariot! But God is as near His servant in the one place as in the other, and the slow wasting away is as much His messenger as the sudden apocalypse of the horsemen of fire. The king of Israel comes to the old prophet, and very significantly repeats over him his own exclamation over Elijah, My father! My father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof. Elisha takes no notice of the grief and reverence expressed by the exclamation, but goes straight to his work, and what follows is remarkable indeed.

Here is a prophet dying; and his last words are not edifying moral and religious reflections, nor does he seem to be much concerned to leave with the king his final protest against Israel's sin, but his thoughts are all of warfare, and his last effort is to stir up the sluggish young monarch to some of his own enthusiasm in the conflict with the enemy. It does not sound like an edifying deathbed. People might have said, Ah! secular and political affairs should be all out of a man's mind when he comes to his last moments. But Elisha thought that to stick to his life's work till the last breath was out of him, and to devote the last breath to stimulating successors who might catch up the torch that dropped from his failing hands, was no unworthy end of a prophet's life.

So there followed what perhaps is not very familiar to some of us, that strange scene in which the dying man is far fuller of energy and vigour than the young king, and takes the upper hand of him, giving him a series of curt, authoritative commands, each of which he punctiliously obeys. Take bow and arrow, and he took them. Then the prophet lays his wasted hand for a moment on the strong, young hand, and having thus either in symbol or reality--never mind which--communicated power, he says to him, Fling open the casement towards the quarter where the enemy's territory lies, and he flings it open. Now, shoot, and he shoots. Then the old man gathers himself up on his bed, and with a triumphant shout exclaims, The Lord's arrow of victory! ... Thou shalt smite the Syrians till they be consumed.

That is not all. There is a second stage. The promise is given; the possibility is opened before the king, and now all depends on the question whether he will rise to the height of the occasion. So the prophet says to him, Take the sheaf of arrows in your hand; and he takes them. And then he says, Now smite upon the ground. It is a test. If he had been roused and stirred by what had gone before; if he had any earnestness of belief in the power that was communicated, and any eagerness of desire to realise the promises that had been given of complete victory, what would he have done? What would Elisha have done if he had had the quiver in his hand? This king smites three perfunctory taps on the floor, and having done what will satisfy the old man's whim, and what in decency he had to do, he stops, as if weary of the whole performance. So the prophet bursts out in indignation on his dying bed--Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou conquered utterly. Now thou shalt conquer but thrice. A strange story; very far away from our atmosphere and latitude! Yet are there not obviously in it great principles which may be disentangled from their singular setting, and fully applied to us? I think so. Let us try and draw them from it.

**I. Here we have the power communicated.**

Now the story seems to indicate that it was only for a moment that the prophet's hands were laid on the king's hands, because, after they had been so laid, he is bidden to go to the window and fling it open, and the bedridden man could not go there with him; then he is bidden to draw the bow, and another hand upon his would have been a hindrance rather than a help. So it was but a momentary touch, a communication of power in reality or in symbol that the muscular young hand needed, and the wasted old one could give. And is that not a parable for us? We, too, if we are Christian men and women, have a gospel of which the very kernel is that there is to us a communication of power, and the very name of that divine Spirit whom it is Christ's greatest work to send flashing and flaming through the world, is the Spirit of Power. And so the old promise that ye shall be clothed with strength from on high is the standing prerogative of the Christian Church. There is not merely some partial communication, as when hand touched hand, but every organ is vitalised and quickened; as in the case of the other miracle of this prophet, when he stretched himself on the dead child eye to eye, and mouth to mouth, and hand to hand; and each part received the vitalising influence. We have, if we are Christian people, a Spirit given to us, and are strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man.

That gift, that strength comes to us by contact, not with Elisha, but with Elisha's Lord and Master. Christ's touch, when He was on earth, brought sight to the blind, healing to the sick, vigour to the limbs of the lame, life to the dead. And you and I can have that touch, far more truly, and far more mightily operative upon us than they had, who only felt the contact of His finger, and only derived corporeal blessing. For we can draw near to Him, and in union with Him by faith and love and obedience, can have His Spirit in close contact with our spirits, and strengthening us for all service, and for every task. Brethren! that touch which gives strength is a real thing. It is no mere piece of mystical exaggeration when we speak of our spirits being in actual contact with Christ's Spirit. Many of us have no clear conception, and still less a firm realisation, of that closer than corporeal contact, more real than bodily presence, and more intimate than any possible physical union, which is the great gift of God in Jesus Christ, and brings to us, if we will, life and strength according to our need. I would that the popular Christianity of this day had a far larger infusion of the sound, mystical element that lies in the New Testament Christianity, and did not talk so exclusively about a Christ that is for us as to have all but lost sight of the second stage of our relation to Christ, and lost a faith in a Christ that is in us Brethren! He can lay His hand upon your spirit's hand. He can flash light into your spirit's eye from His eye. He can put breath and eloquence into your spirit's lips from His lips, and His heart beating against yours can transfuse--if I may so say--into you His own life-blood, which cleanses from all sin, and fits for all conflict.

Then, further, let me remind you that this power, which is bestowed on condition of contact, is given before duties are commanded. This king, in our acted parable, first had the touch of Elisha's fingers, and then received the command from Elisha's lips, Shoot! So Jesus Christ gives before He commands, and commands nothing which He has not fitted us to perform. He is not an austere man, reaping where He did not sow, and gathering where He did not straw; but He comes first to us saying, I give thee Myself, and then He looks us in the eyes and says, Wilt thou not give Me thyself? He bestows the strength first, and He commands the consequent duty afterwards.

Further, this strength communicated is realised in the effort to obey Christ's great commands. Joash felt nothing when the prophet's hand was laid upon his but, perhaps, some tingling. But when he got the bow in his hand and drew the arrow to its head, the infused power stiffened his muscles and strengthened him to pull; and though he could not distinguish between his own natural corporeal ability and that which had been thus imparted to him, the two co-operated in the one act, and it was when he drew his bow that he felt his strength. Stretch forth thine hand, said Christ to the lame man. But the very infirmity to be dealt with was his inability to stretch it forth. At the command he tried, and, to his wonder, the stiffened sinews relaxed, and the joint that had been immovable had free play, and he stretched out his hand, and it was restored whole as the other. So He gives what He commands, and in obeying the command we realise and are conscious of the power. Elisha and Joash but act an illustration of the great word of Paul: Work out your own salvation ... for it is God that worketh in you.

**II. And now, secondly, look at the perfected victory that is possible.**

When the arrows, by God's strength operating through Joash's arm, had been shot, the prophet says, The arrow of the Lord's victory! ... thou shalt smite ... till thou have consumed. Yes, of course; if the arrow is the Lord's arrow, and the strength is His strength, then the only issue corresponding to the power is perfect victory. I would that Christian people realised more than they do practically in their lives that while men's ideals and aims may be all unaccomplished, or but partially approximated to, since God is God, His nature is perfection, and nothing that He does can fall beneath His ideal and purpose in doing it. All that comes from Him must correspond to Him from whom it comes. He never leaves off till He has completed, nor can any one say about any of His work, He began to build, and was not able to finish. So, Christian people! I would that we should rise to the height of our prerogatives, and realise the fact that perfect victory is possible, regard being had to the power which teaches our hands to war and our fingers to fight. A great deal of not altogether profitable jangling goes on at present in reference to the question of whether absolute sinlessness is possible for a Christian man on earth. Whatever view we take upon that question, it ought not to hide from us the fact which should loom very much more largely in our daily operative belief than it does with most of us, that in so far as the power which is given to us is concerned, perfect victory is within our grasp, and is the only worthy and correspondent result to the perfect power which worketh in us. So there is no reason, as from any defect of the divine gift to the weakest of us, why our Christian lives should have ups and downs, why there should be interruptions in our devotion, fallings short in our consecration, contradictions in our conduct, slidings backward in our progress. There is no reason why, in our Christian year, there should be summer and winter; but according to the symbolical saying of one of the old prophets, The ploughman may overtake the reaper, and he that treadeth out the grapes him that soweth the seed. In so far as our Christian life is concerned, the perfection of the power that is granted to us involves the possibility of perfection in the recipient.

And the same thing is true in reference to a Christian man's work in the world. God's Church has ample resources to overcome the evil of the world. The fire is tremendous, but the Christian Church has possession of the floods that can extinguish the fire. If we utilised all that we have, we might smite till we had consumed, and turned the world into the Church of God. That is the ideal, the possibility, when we look at the Christian man as possessor of the communicated power of God. And then we turn to the reality, to our own consciences, to the state of our religious communities everywhere, and we see what seems to be blank contradiction of the possibility. Where is the explanation?

**III. That brings me to my last point, the partial victory that is actually won.**

Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten the Syrians till they were consumed. But now thou shalt conquer but thrice. All God's promises and prophecies are conditional. There is no such thing as an unconditional promise of victory or of defeat; there is always an if. There is always man's freedom as a factor. It is strange. I suppose no thinking, metaphysical or theological, ever has solved or ever will, that great paradox of the power of a finite will to lift itself up in the face of, and antagonism to, an Infinite Will backed by infinite power, and to thwart its purposes. How often would I have gathered ... and ye would not. Here is all the power for a perfect victory, and yet the man that has it has to be contented with a very partial one.

It is a solemn thought that the Church's unbelief can limit and hinder Christ's work in the world, and we have here another illustration of that truth. You will find now and then in the newspapers, stories--they may be true or false--about caterpillars stopping a train. There is an old legend of that fabulous creature the remora, a tiny thing that fastened itself to the keel of a ship, and arrested it in mid-ocean. That is what we do with God and His purposes, and with His power granted to us.

A low expectation limits the power. This king did not believe, did not expect, that he would conquer utterly, and so he did not. You believe that you can do a thing, and in nine cases out of ten that goes nine-tenths of the way towards doing it. If we cast ourselves into our fight expecting victory, the expectation will realise itself in nine cases out of ten. And the man who in faith refuses to say that beast of a word--impossible! will find that all things are possible to him that believeth. Expect great things of God, and you will feel His power tingling to your very fingertips, and will be able to draw the arrow to its head, and send it whizzing home to its mark.

Small desires block the power. Where there is an iron-bound coast running in one straight line, the whole ocean may dash itself on the cliffs at the base, but it enters not into the land; but where the shore opens itself out into some deep gulf far inland, and broad across at the entrance, then the glad water rushes in and fills it all. Make room for God in your lives by your desires and you will get Him in the fullness of His power.

The use of our power increases our power. Joash had an unused quiver full of arrows, and he only smote thrice. To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken. The reason why many of us professing Christians have so little of the strength of God in our lives is because we have made so little use of the strength that we have. Stow away your seed-corn in a granary and do not let the air into it, and weevils and rats will consume it. Sow it broadcast on the fields with liberal hand, and it will spring up, some thirty, some sixty, some an hundredfold. Use increases strength in all regions, and unused organs atrophy and wither.

So, dear friends! if we will keep ourselves in contact with Christ, and tremulously sensitive to His touch, if we will expect power according to our tasks and our needs, if we will desire more of His grace, and if we will honestly and manfully use the strength that we have, then He will teach our hands to war and our fingers to fight, and will give us strength, so that a bow of brass is bent by our arms, and we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.