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

**2 KINGS-022. THE END by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he, and all his host, against Jerusalem, and pitched against it; and they built forts against it round about. 2. And the city was besieged unto the eleventh year of king Zedekiah. 3. And on the ninth day of the fourth month the famine prevailed in the city, and there was no bread for the people of the land. 4. And the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate, between two walls, which is by the king's garden; (now the Chaldees were against the city round about;) and the king went the way toward the plain. 5. And the army of the Chaldees pursued after the king, and overtook him in the plains of Jericho: and all his army were scattered from him. 6. So they took the king, and brought him up to the king of Babylon to Riblah; and they gave judgment upon him. 7. And they slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him with fetters of brass, and carried him to Babylon. 8. And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzar-adan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem: 9. And he burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire. 10. And all the army of the Chaldees, that were with the captain of the guard, brake down the walls of Jerusalem round about. 11. Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzar-adan, the captain of the guard, carry away. 12. But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to be vine-dressers and husbandmen."*

*2 Kings 25:1-12*

Eighteen months of long-drawn-out misery and daily increasing famine preceded the fall of the doomed city. The siege was a blockade. No assaults by the enemy, nor sorties by the inhabitants, are narrated, but the former grimly and watchfully drew their net closer, and the latter sat still in their despair. The passionless tone of the narrative here is very remarkable. Not a word escapes the writer to show his feelings, though he is telling his country's fall. We must turn to Lamentations for sighs and groans. There we have the emotions of devout hearts; here we have the calm record of God's judgment. It is all one long sentence, for in the Hebrew each verse begins with and, clause heaped on clause, as if each were a footstep of the destroying angel in his slow, irresistible march.

The narrative falls into two principal parts--the fate of the king and that of the city. It is unnecessary to dwell on the details. The confusion of counsels, the party strife, the fierce hatred of God's prophet, the agony of famine, are all suppressed here, but painted with terrible vividness in the Book of Jeremiah. At last the fatal day came. On the north side a breach was made in the wall, and through it the fierce besiegers poured--the princes of the king of Babylon, with their idolatrous and barbarous names, came in, and sat in the middle gate. It was night. The sudden appearance of the conquerors in the heart of the city shot panic into the feeble king and his men of war who had never struck one blow for deliverance; and they hurried under cover of darkness, and hidden between two walls, down the ravine to the king's garden, once the scene of pleasure, but waste now, and thence, as best they could, round or over Olivet to the road to Jericho. The king's flight by night had been foretold by Ezekiel far away in captivity (Ezek. xii. 12); and the same prophet received on that very day a divine message announcing the fall of the city, and bidding him write thee the name of the day, even of this selfsame day, as that on which the king of Babylon drew close unto Jerusalem (Ezek. xxiv. 1 et seq.).

Down the rocky road went the flying host, with their shaftless, broken bows closely followed by the avenging foe with red pursuing spear. Where Israel had first set foot on its inheritance, the last king of David's line was captured and his monarchy shattered. The scene of the first victory, when Jericho fell before unarmed men trusting in God, was the scene of the last defeat. The spot where the covenant was renewed, and the reproach of Israel rolled away, was the spot where the broken covenant was finally avenged and abrogated. The end came back to the beginning, and the cradle was the coffin.

Away up to Riblah, in the far north, under the shadow of Lebanon, the captive was dragged to meet the conqueror. The name of each is a profession of belief. The one means Jehovah is righteousness; the other, Nebo, protect the crown. The idol seemed to have overcome, but the defeat of the unbelieving confessor of the true God at the hands of the idolater is really the victory of the righteousness which the name celebrated and the bearer of the name insulted. His murdered sons were the last sight which he saw before he was blinded, according to the ferocious practice of the East. It was ingenuity of cruelty to let him see for so long, and then to give him that as the last thing seen, and therefore often remembered. Note how the enigma of Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek. 12:13) and its apparent contradiction of Jeremiah's (Jer. 32:4; 34:3) are reconciled, and learn how easily the fact, when it comes, clears the riddles of prophecy, and how easily, probably, the whole facts, if we knew them, would clear the difficulties of Scripture history. The blinded king was harmless, but according to Jewish tradition, was set to work in a mill (though that is probably only an application of Samson's story), and according to Jeremiah (Jer. 52:11), was kept in prison till his death. So ended the monarchy of Judah.

The fate of the city was not settled for a month, during which, no doubt, there was much consultation at Riblah whether to garrison or destroy it. The king of Babylon did not go in person, but despatched a force commanded by a high officer, to burn palace, Temple, the more important houses (the poorer people would probably be lodged in huts not worth burning), and to raze the fortifications. In accordance with the practice of the great Eastern despotisms, deportation followed victory--a clever though cruel device for securing conquests. But some were left behind; for the land, if deserted, would have fallen out of cultivation, and been profitless to Babylon. The bulk of the people of Jerusalem, the fugitives who had joined the invaders during the siege, and the mass of the general population, were carried off, in such a long string of misery as we may still see on the monuments, and a handful left behind, too poor to plot, and stirred to diligence by necessity. So ended the possession by Israel of its promised inheritance.

Now this fall of Jerusalem is like an object-lesson to teach everlasting truth as to the retributive providence of God. What does it say?

It declares plainly what brings down God's judgments. The terms on which Israel prospered and held its land were obedience to God's law. We cannot directly apply the principles of God's government of it to modern nations. The present analogue of Israel is the Church, not the nation. But when all deductions have been made, it is still true that a nation's religious attitude is a most potent factor in its prosperous development. It is not accidental that, on the whole, stagnant Europe and America are Roman Catholic, and the progressive parts Protestant. Nor was it causes independent of religion that scattered a decaying Christianity in the lands of the Eastern Church before the onslaught of wild Arabs, who, at all events, did believe in Allah. So there are abundant lessons for politics and sociology in the story of Jerusalem's fall.

But these lessons have direct application to the individual and to the Christian Church. All departure from God is ruin. We slay ourselves by forsaking Him, and every sinner is a suicide. We live under a moral government, and in a system of things so knit together as that even here every transgression receives its just recompense--if not visibly and palpably in outward circumstances, yet really and punctually in effects on mind and heart, which are more solemn and awful. Behold the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner. Sin and sorrow are root and fruit.

Especially does that crash of Jerusalem's fall thunder the lesson to all churches that their life and prosperity are inseparably connected with faithful obedience and turning away from all worldliness, which is idolatry. They stand in the place that was made empty by Israel's later fall. Our very privileges call us to beware. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. That great seven-branched candlestick was removed out of its place, and all that is left of it is its sculptured image among the spoils on the triumphal arch to its captor. Other lesser candlesticks have been removed from their places, and Turkish oppression brings night where Sardis and Laodicea once gave a feeble light. The warning is needed to-day; for worldliness is rampant in the Church. If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee. The fall of Jerusalem is not merely a tragic story from the past. It is a revelation, for the present, of the everlasting truth, that the professing people of God deserve and receive the sorest chastisement, if they turn again to folly.

Further, we learn the method of present retribution. Nebuchadnezzar knew nothing of the purposes which he fulfilled. He meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so. He was but the axe with which God hewed. Therefore, though he was God's tool, he was also responsible, and would be punished even for performing God's whole work upon Jerusalem, because of the glory of his high looks. The retribution of disobedience, so far as that retribution is outward, needs no miracle. The ordinary operations of Providence amply suffice to bring it. If God wills to sting, He will hiss for the fly, and it will come. The ferocity and ambition of a grim and bloody despot, impelled by vainglory and lust of cruel conquest, do God's work, and yet the doing is sin. The world is full of God's instruments, and He sends punishments by the ordinary play of motives and circumstances, which we best understand when we see behind all His mighty hand and sovereign will. The short-sighted view of history says Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem B.C. so and so, and then discourses about the tendencies of which Babylonia was exponent and creature. The deeper view says, God smote the disobedient city, as He had said, and Nebuchadnezzar was the rod of His anger.

Again, we learn the Divine reluctance to smite. More than four hundred years had passed since Solomon began idolatry, and steadily, through all that time, a stream of prophecy of varying force and width had flowed, while smaller disasters had confirmed the prophets voices. Rising up early and sending his servants, God had been in earnest in seeking to save Israel from itself. Men said then, Where is the promise of His coming? and mocked His warnings and would none of His reproof; but at last the hour struck and the crash came. As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord! when Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image. His judgment seems to slumber, but its eyes are open, and it remains inactive, that His long-suffering may have free scope. As long as His gaze can discern the possibility of repentance, He will not strike; and when that is hopeless, He will not delay. The explanation of the marvellous tolerance of evil which sometimes tries faith and always evokes wonder, lies in the great words, which might well be written over the chair of every teacher of history: The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward. Alas, that that divine patience should ever be twisted into the ground of indurated disobedience! Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

God's reluctance to punish is no reason for doubting that He will. Judgment is His strange work, less congenial, if we may so paraphrase that strong word of the prophet s, than pure mercy, but it will be done nevertheless. The tears over Jerusalem that witnessed Christ's sorrow did not blind the eyes like a flame of fire, nor stay the outstretched hand of the Judge, when the time of her final fall came. The longer the delay, the worse the ruin. The more protracted the respite and the fuller it has been of entreaties to return, the more terrible the punishment. Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God: towards them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in His goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.