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

**2 SAMUEL-004. THE ARK OF THE HOUSE OF OBED-EDOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The ark of the Lord continued in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the Lord blessed Obed-edom, and all his household."*

*2 Samuel 6:11*

Nearly seventy years had elapsed since the capture of the ark by the Philistines on the fatal field of Aphek. They had carried it and set it in insolent triumph in the Temple of Dagon, as if to proclaim that the Jehovah of Israel was the conquered prisoner of the Philistine god. But the morning showed Dagon's stump prone on the threshold. And so the terrified priests got rid of their dangerous trophy as swiftly as they could. From one Philistine city to another it passed, and everywhere its presence was marked by disease and calamity. So at last they huddled it into some rude cart, leaving the draught-oxen to drag it whither they would. They made straight for the Judaean hills, and in the first little village were welcomed by the inhabitants at their harvest, as they saw them coming across the plain. But again death attended the Presence, and curiosity, which was profanity, was punished. So the villagers were as eager to get rid of the ark as they had been to welcome it, and they passed it on to the little city of Kirjath-jearim, the city of the woods, as the name means, or, as we might say, Woodville. And there it lay, neglected and all but forgotten, for nearly seventy years. But as soon as David was established in his newly-won capital he set himself to reorganise the national worship, which had fallen into neglect and almost into disuse. The first step was to bring the ark. And so he passed with a joyful company to Kirjath. But again swift death overtakes Uzzah with his irreverent hand. And David shrinks, in the consciousness of his impurity, and bestows the symbol of the awful Presence in the house of Obed-edom. As we have already noted, he was probably not a Philistine, as the name Gittite at first sight suggests. There is an Obed-edom in the lists of David's Levites, who was an inhabitant of another Gath, and himself of the tribe of Levi.

He was not afraid to receive the ark. There were no idols, no irreverent curiosity, no rash presumption in his house. He feared and served the God of the ark, and so the Presence, which had been a source of disaster to the unworthy, was a source of unbroken blessing to him and to his household.

I have been the more particular in this enumeration of the wanderings of the ark and the opposite effects which its presence produced according to the manner of its reception, because these effects are symbols of a great truth which runs all through human life, and is most especially manifested in the message and the mission of Jesus Christ.

Let us, then, just trace out two or three of the spheres in which we may see the application of this great principle, which makes life so solemn and so awful, which may make it so sad or so glad, so base or so noble.

**I. First, then, note the twofold operation of all God's outward dealings.**

Everything that befalls us, every object with which we come in contact, all the variety of condition, all the variations of our experience, have one distinct and specific purpose. They are all meant to tell upon character, to make us better in sundry ways, to bring us closer to God, and to fill us more full of Him. And that one effect may be produced by the most opposite incidents, just as in some great machine you may have two wheels turning in opposite ways, and yet contributing to one resulting motion; or, just as the summer and the winter, with all their antitheses, have a single result in the abundant harvest. One force attracts the planet to the sun, one force tends to drive it out into the fields of space; but the two, working together, make it circle in its orbit around its centre. And so, by sorrow and by joy, by light and by dark, by giving and withholding, by granting and refusing, by all the varieties of our circumstances, and by everything that lies around us, God works to prepare us for Himself and to polish His instruments, sometimes plunging the iron into baths of hissing tears, and sometimes heating it hot with hopes and fears, and sometimes battering it with the shocks of doom, but all for the one purpose --that it may be a polished shaft in His quiver.

And whilst, thus, the most opposite things may produce the same effect, the same thing will produce opposite effects according to the way in which we take it. There is nothing that can be relied upon to do a man only good; there is nothing about which we need fear that its mission is only to do evil. For all depends on the recipient, who can make everything to fulfil the purpose for which God has sent him everything.

Here are two men tried by the same poverty. It beats the one down, makes him squalid, querulous, faithless, irreligious, drives him to drink, crushes him; and the other man it steadies and quiets and hardens, and teaches him to look beyond the things seen and temporal to the exceeding riches at God's right hand.

Here are two men tried by wealth; the gold gets into the one man's veins and makes him yellow as with jaundice, and kills him, destroying all that is noble, generous, impulsive, quenching his early dreams and enthusiasms, closing his heart to sweet charity, puffing him up with a false sense of Importance, and laying upon him the dreadful responsibility of misused and selfishly employed possessions. And the other man, tried in the same fashion, out of his wealth makes for himself friends that welcome him into everlasting habitations, and lays up for himself treasures in heaven. The one man is damned and the other man is saved by their use of the same thing.

Here are two men subjected to the same sorrows; the one is absorbed by his selfish regard to his own misery, blinded to all the blessings that still remain, made negligent of tasks and oblivious of the plainest duty. And he goes about saying, Oh, if thou hadst been here! or if, if something else had happened, then this would not have happened. And the other man, passing through the same circumstances, finds that, when his props are taken away, he flings himself on God's breast, and, when the world becomes dark and all the paths dim about him, he looks up to a heaven that fills fuller of meek and swiftly gathering stars as the night falls, and he says, It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good.

Here are two men tried by the same temptation; it leads the one man away captive with a dart through his liver; the other man by God's grace overcomes it, and is the stronger and the sweeter and the gentler and the humbler because of the dreadful fight. And so you might go the whole round of diverse circumstances, and about each of them find the same double result. Nothing is sure to do a man good; nothing necessarily does him hurt. All depends upon the man himself, and the use he makes of what God in His mercy sends. Two plants may grow in the same soil, be fed by the same dews and benediction from the heavens, be shone upon by the same sunshine, and the one of them will elaborate from all, sweet juices and fragrance, and the other will elaborate a deadly poison. So, my brother, life is what you and I will to make it, and the events which befall us are for our rising or our falling according as we determine they shall be, and according as we use them.

Think, then, how solemn, how awful, how great a thing it is to stand here a free agent, able to determine my character and my condition, surrounded by all these circumstances and the subject of all these wise and manifold divine dealings, in each of which there lie dormant, to be evoked by me, tremendous possibilities of elevation even to the very presence of God, or of sinking into the depths of separation from Him. The ark of God, that overthrew Dagon and smote Uzzah, was nothing but a fountain of blessing in the household of Obed-edom.

**II. Secondly, note the twofold operation of God's character and presence.**

The ark was the symbol of a present God, and His presence is meant to be the life and joy of all creatures, and the revelation of Him is meant to be only for our good, giving strength, righteousness, and peace. But the same double possibility which I have been pointing out as inherent in all externals belongs here too, and a man can determine to which aspect of the many-sided infinitude of the divine nature he shall stand in relation. The glass in stained windows is so coloured as that parts of it cut off, and prevent from passing through, different rays of the pure white light. And men's moral natures, the inclination of their hearts, and the set of their wills and energies, cut off, if I may say so, parts of the infinite, white light of the many-sided divine character, and put them into relations only with some part and aspect of that great whole which we call God. The man that loves the world, the man that is living for self, still more the man that is embruted in the pig-sty of sensuality and vice, cannot see the God whom the pure heart, which loves Him and is purified by its faith, discerns at the centre of all things. But the lower man sees either some very far-off Awfulness, in which he hopes vaguely that there is a kind of good nature that will let him off; or, if he has been shaken out of that superficial creed, which is only a creed for men whose consciences have not been touched, then he can see only a God whose love darkens into retribution, and who is the Judge and the Avenger. And no man can say that such a conception is not part of the truth; but, alas! he on whom the form of such a God glares has incapacitated himself, by his misuse of his powers and of God's world, from seeing the beauty of the love of the Father of us all, the righteous Father who in Christ loves every man.

And thus the thought of God, the consciousness of His Presence, may be like the ark which was its symbol, either dreadful and to be put away, or to be welcomed and blessing to be drawn from it. To many of us I am sure--though I do not know anything about many of you--that thought, Thou God seest me, breeds feelings like the uneasy discomfort of a prisoner when he knows that somewhere in the wall there is a spy-hole at which at any moment a warder's eye may be. And to some of us, blessed be His name, that same thought, Thou art near me, seems to bathe the heart in a sea of sweet rest, and to bring the assurance of a divine Companion that cheers all the solitude. And why is the difference? There are two people sitting in one pew; to the one man the thought of God is his ghastliest doubt, to the other it is his deepest joy. Wherefore? And which is it to me?

Then, again, this same duality of aspect attaches to the character and presence of God in another way. Because, according to the variety of men's characters, God is obliged to treat them as standing in different relations. He must manifest His judgment, His justice, His punitive justice. There is a solemn verse in one of the Psalms which I may quote in lieu of all words of my own of this matter. With the merciful Thou wilt show Thyself merciful, with the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure, with the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward. The present God has to modify His dealings according to the characters of men.

And so, dear friends, for the present life, and, as I believe, for the next life in a far more emphatic and awful way, the same thing makes blessedness and misery, the same thing makes life and death. The sunshine will kill and wither the slimy plants that grow in the dark recesses of some dripping cave; and if you take a fish out of the water, the air clogs its gills and it dies. Bring a man, such as some of you are, into a close, constant contact with the consciousness of the divine righteousness and presence, and you want nothing else to make a hell. The ark of the Lord will flash out its lightnings and Uzzah will die. That great Infinite Being, before whom we stand, holds in His right hand blessings beyond count or price, even the gift of Himself, and in His left His lightnings and His arrows. On which hand are you standing?

**III. Lastly, note the twofold operation of God's gospel.**

His dealings, His character and presence, and, most markedly and eminently of all, the gospel that is treasured in Jesus Christ and proclaimed amongst us, have this twofold operation. God sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. It was meant that His mission and message should only be for life, and that with ever-increasing abundance. But God cannot save men by magic, nor by indiscriminate bestowment of spiritual blessings. It is not in His power to force His salvation upon any one, and whether the Gospel shall turn out to be a man's salvation or his ruin depends on the man himself. The preaching of the gospel and your contact with it, if you have ever come into contact with it really and not by mere outward hearing, leaves no man as it found him. My poor words--and God knows how poor I feel them to be--leave none of you as they find you; and that is what makes our meeting together so solemn and awful, and sometimes weighs one down as with a sense of insufficiency for these things.

That twofold operation is seen first in the permanent effects of the Gospel upon character. If it has been offered to me, and if I accept it, then blessings beyond all enumeration, and which none but they who have them fully know, follow in its wake. Received by simple faith in Jesus Christ, God's sacrifice for a world's sin, it brings to us the clear consciousness of pardon, the calm sense of communion, the joyful spirit of adoption, righteousness rooted in our hearts and to be manifested day by day in our lives; it brings all elevation and strengthening and ennobling for the whole nature, and is the one power that makes us really men as God would have us all to be.

Rejected or neglected or passed by apparently without our having done anything in regard to it, what are the issues? What does it do? Well, it does this for one thing, it turns unconscious worldliness into conscious worldliness. If the offer has been clearly before your minds, Christ or the world? and you have said I take the world! you know that you have made the choice, and the act will tell on your character.

Rejection strengthens all the evil motives for rejection, and adds to the insensibility of the man who has rejected. The ice on our pavements in the winter time, that melts on the surface in the day and freezes again at night, becomes dense and slippery beyond all other. And a heart, like that which beats in some of our bosoms, that has been melted and then has frozen again, is harder than ever it was before. Hammering that does not break solidifies and makes tougher the thing that is struck. There are no men so hard to get at as men and women, like multitudes of you, that have been hammered at by preaching ever since they were children, and have not yielded their hearts to God. The ark has done you hurt if it has not done you good.

I do not dwell upon the other solemn thought, of the harmful results of contact with a gospel which we do not accept, as exemplified in the increase of responsibility and the consequent increase of condemnation. I only quote Christ's words, The servant that knew his Lord's will, and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.

My brother, Christ's gospel is never inert, one thing or other it does for every soul that it reaches. Either it softens or it hardens. Either it saves or it condemns. This Child is set for the rise or for the fall of many. Jesus Christ may be for me and for you the Rock on which we build. If He is not, He is the Stone against which we stumble and break our limbs. Jesus Christ may be for you and for me the Pillar that gives light by night to those on the one side; He either is that, or He is the Pillar that sheds darkness and dismay on those on the other. Jesus Christ and His Gospel may be to each of us the savour of life unto life; He either is that, or He is the savour of death unto death. Oh! dear friends, if you have neglected, turned away, delayed to receive Him or have forgotten impressions in the midst of the whirl of daily life, do not do so any longer. Take Him for yours, your Brother, Friend, Sacrifice, Inspirer, Lord, Aim, End, Reward, and very Heaven of Heaven. Take Him for your own by simple trusting; and say to Him, Arise! O Lord, into Thy rest, Thou and the Ark of Thy strength. So He will come into your hearts and smile His gladness as He whispers: Here will I dwell for ever; this is My rest, for I have desired it.