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

**2 SAMUEL-008. MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH HIM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. And the children of Ammon came out, and put the battle in array at the entering in of the gate: and the Syrians of Zoba, and of Rehob, and Ish-tob, and Maacah, were by themselves in the field. 9. When Joab saw that the front of the battle was against him before and behind, he chose of all the choice men of Israel, and put them in array against the Syrians: 10. And the rest of the people he delivered into the hand of Abishai his brother, that he might put them in array against the children of Ammon. 11. And he said, if the Syrians be too strong for me, then thou shalt help me: but if the children of Ammon be too strong for thee, then I will come and help thee. 12. Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the Lord do that which seemeth Him good. 13. And Joab drew nigh, and the people that were with him, unto the battle against the Syrians: and they fled before him. 14. And when the children of Ammon saw that the Syrians were fled, then fled they also before Abishai, and entered into the city. So Joab returned from the children of Ammon, and came to Jerusalem. 15. And when the Syrians saw that they were smitten before Israel, they gathered themselves together. 16. And Hadarezer sent, and brought out the Syrians that were beyond the river: and they came to Helam: and Shobach the captain of the host of Hadarezer went before them. 17. And when it was told David, he gathered all Israel together, and passed over Jordan, and came to Helam. And the Syrians set themselves in array against David, and fought with him. 18. And the Syrians fled before Israel; and David slew the men of seven hundred chariots of the Syrians, and forty thousand horsemen, and smote Shobach the captain of their host, who died there. 19. And when all the kings that were servants to Hadarezer saw that they were smitten before Israel, they made peace with Israel, and served them. So the Syrians feared to help the children of Ammon any more."*

*2 Samuel 10:8-19*

David's growing power would naturally be regarded by neighbouring states as a menace. Success provokes envy, and in this selfish world strength usually encroaches on weakness, and weakness dreads strength. So it was quite according to the way of the world that David's friendly embassy to the king of Ammon should be suspected of covering hostile intentions. Those who have no kindness in their own hearts are slow to believe in kindness in others. What does he want to get by it? is the question put by cynical shrewd men, when they see a good man doing a gracious, self-forgetting act.

But the Ammonite courtiers need not have rejected David's overtures so insolently as by shaving half his ambassadors beards and docking their robes. The insult meant war to the knife. Probably it was deliberately intended as a declaration of hostilities, as it was immediately followed by the preparation of a formidable coalition against Israel. Possibly, indeed, the coalition preceded and occasioned the rejection of David's conciliatory message. But, in any case, the Ammonite king summoned his Syrian allies from a number of small states of which we barely know the names, the chief of which was Zobah.

That state had apparently started into prominence under its king Hadar-ezer, as he is called in this chapter, which is obviously a clerical error for Hadad-ezer, as in 2 Samuel viii. 3, etc. The name Hadad occurs again in Ben-hadad, and belonged to a Syrian god; so that the king of Zobah's name, meaning Hadad [is] help, may be taken as the banner flaunted in the face of the army of Israel, and as making the war a struggle of the false against the true God.

The war with the same enemies narrated in 2 Samuel viii. 3-13 is now generally supposed to be the same as that recorded in the latter part of this passage. It certainly seems more probable that there has been some dislocation of the text, than that so crushing a defeat as that retold in chapter viii. should have been followed by a revival of the same coalition within a short time. If, however, there was such a revival, it may remind us of the conditions of all warfare for God and goodness, either in our own lives or in the world. Sins and vicious institutions, once defeated, have a terrible power of swift recovery. The thorns cut down sprout fast again. Let no man say, I have extirpated that sin from my nature, for, if he does, it will surprise him when he is lulled in false security. Hadad-ezer is not so easily got rid of. He does not know when he is beaten.

David took the bull by the horns, and did not wait to be attacked. It was good policy to carry the war into the enemies country, as it generally is. God's soldiers have to be aggressive, and there is no better way of losing what they have won than by being contented with it. We must advance if we are not to retrograde. From I Chronicles we learn that the Ammonites had begun the campaign by besieging Medeba, a trans-Jordanic Israelitish city. The answer of Joab was to lay siege to Rabbath, the capital of Ammon, an almost impregnable fastness, perched on a cliff, and surrounded on all sides but one by steep ravines.

Apparently his bold strategy led to the abandonment of the attack on Medeba, and to the hurried march of its besiegers to relieve Rabbath. Probably the Syrian allies had been before Medeba, and suddenly appeared in Joab's rear. Their advance led the besieged to attempt a sortie, so that Joab was between two fires. It was a difficult position. Whichever foe he attacked, his retreat was cut off, and another enemy was ready to hurl itself on his rear. There was no time for manoeuvring, and nothing for it but to face both assailants. So, without hesitation he made his dispositions. The new-comers, the Syrians, were evidently the more formidable, and Joab picked the best men to deal with them under his own command, while his brother Abishai was to give account of the Ammonites, who were pouring out of Rabbath. There is sometimes advantage in being Mr. Facing-both-ways. We are often surrounded by allied evils or sins; for all our vices are kindred, and help each other, and all public or social iniquities are in league against the army of righteousness. We have to be many-sided in our attacks on what is wrong, as well as in our development of what is right.

Danger woke the best in Joab, Fierce and truculent as he often was, he had a hero's mettle in him, and in that dark hour he flamed like a pillar of light. His ringing words to his brother as they parted, not knowing if they would ever meet again, are like a clarion call. They extract encouragement out of the separation of forces, which might have depressed, and cheerily pledge the two divisions to mutual help. What was to happen, Joab, if the Syrians were too strong for thee, and the Ammonites for Abishai? That very possible contingency is not contemplated in his words. Rash confidence is unwise, but God's soldiers have a right to go into battle not anticipating utter defeat. Such expectation is apt to fulfil itself, and, on the other hand, to believe that we shall conquer goes a long way towards making us conquerors.

Does not Joab's pledge of mutual help carry in it a lesson applicable to all the divisions of God's great army? In the presence of the coalition of evil, is not the separation of the friends of good, madness? When bad men unite, should not good men hold together? The defeat or victory of one is the defeat or victory of all. We serve under the same banner, and, instead of shutting up our sympathies within the narrow limits of our own regiment, and even having a certain satisfaction at the difficulties into which another has got, we should feel that, if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it, and should be ready to help all our fellow-soldiers who need help. Self-preservation as well as comradeship, and, above all, loyalty to Him for whom we fight, should lead to that; for, if Abishai is crushed, Joab will be in sorer peril.

His other word is equally pregnant. Be of good courage is an exhortation always in season for Christ's soldiers, for, whatever are their foes, He that is with them is more than they that are with their enemies. One man with Christ to back him may always be sure of victory. Calculations of probabilities and of resources may often yield occasion for despondency if we calculate only what appears to sense, but if we bring Christ into the calculation we shall be of good cheer. The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?'

We may note, too, the stimulating motive drawn from the thought of what Israel's army fought for,--Our people, and the cities of our God. Patriotism and devotion coalesced, and, like two contiguous flames in some duplex lamp, each made the other burn the brighter. So we may feel that we have the highest good of our people, our brethren, in view, and that, in helping them and warring against evil, we are fighting for what belongs to God.

High courage, the effort to do their very best, and not to spare blood or life in the fight, blended nobly in Joab and his brother with recognition of God's supreme determination of the event. Nothing can stand before men who live and fight in such a temper as that. The early conquests of Mohammedanism were secured by just such a blending of courage and submission. These were vulgar and poor, compared with the victories that would attend a Church which was animated by these principles in the higher form in which Christianity presents them.

The account of the victory is remarkable. It is surely not by accident that no word is said about fighting. Note that it was as Joab drew nigh unto the battle that the Syrians fled as if in sudden panic, and infected the Ammonites with their terror. We hear nothing of men slain, or of any actual crossing of swords. Contrast verse 18, which tells of a real fight. It is, perhaps, not pressing omissions too far to suggest that the narrative favours the supposition of a bloodless victory. The dangers that often appal Christ's servants have a way of often disappearing when they are marched boldly up to. Like ghosts, they vanish when accosted.

So ended one campaign. But Hadad-ezer, the soul of the coalition, was not crushed, and the latter part of the passage tells of his renewed attempt. Partial defeat stirs up our foes to stronger struggles. The league was extended to include Syrian states farther east, and a still more formidable expedition was fitted out to attack this dangerous upstart king of Israel, who was casting his shadow so far. Such is always the case. We are never in more danger of fresh assailants than when we have won some victory over evil in ourselves or around us. David repeated his former tactics. Not waiting to be attacked, and to have the soil of Israel profaned and wasted by enemies, he crossed Jordan to meet the would-be invader, and, when he met him, struck hard, and crushed him and his host, slew the commander, and dispersed the thunder-cloud. The coalition broke down. Hadad-ezer's tributaries were glad to shake off his yoke and transfer their allegiance to David.

Nothing succeeds like success. The alliances between worldly men banded against God's soldiers are held together by self-interest, and, when that can be best secured by deserting a man when he is down, away go all the allies, tumbling over each other in their haste to be the first to desert and bring feigned submission to the conqueror. The jackals leave the sick lion. The Syrians had had enough of helping Ammon, and Rabbath might fall without their lifting a finger. So hollow are the world's coalitions against God and His anointed!