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

**2 SAMUEL-011. GOD'S BANISHED ONES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"God doth devise means, that His banished be not expelled from Him."*

*2 Samuel 14:14*

David's good-for-nothing son Absalom had brought about the murder of one of his brothers, and had fled the country. His father weakly loved the brilliant blackguard, and would fain have had him back, but was restrained by a sense of kingly duty. Joab, the astute Commander-in-chief, a devoted friend of David, saw how the land lay, and formed a plan to give the king an excuse for doing what he wished to do. So he got hold of a person who is called a wise woman from the country, dressed her as a mourner, and sent her with an ingeniously made-up story of how she was a widow with two sons, one of whom had killed the other, and of how the relatives insisted on their right of avenging blood, and demanded the surrender of the murderer; by which, as she pathetically said, the coal that was left her would be quenched. The king's sympathy was quickly roused--as was natural in so impulsive and poetic a nature--and he pledged his word, and finally his oath, that the offender should be safe.

So the woman has him in a trap, having induced him to waive justice and to absolve the guilty by an arbitrary act. Then she turns upon him with an application to his own case, and bids him free himself from the guilt of double measures and inconsistency by doing with his banished son the same thing--viz. abrogating law and bringing back the offender. In our text she urges still higher considerations--viz. those of God's way of treating criminals against His law, of whom she says that He spares their lives, and devises means-or, as the words might perhaps be rendered, plans plannings--by which He may bring them back. She would imply that human power and sovereignty are then noblest and likest God's when they remit penalties and restore wanderers.

I do not further follow the story, which ends, as we all know, with Absalom's ill-omened return. But the wise woman's saying goes very deep, and, in its picturesque form, may help to bring out more vividly some truths--all-important ones--of which I wish to beg your very earnest consideration and acceptance.

**I. Note, then, who are God's banished ones.**

The woman's words are one of the few glimpses which we have of the condition of religious thought amongst the masses of Israel. Clearly she had laid to heart the teaching which declared the great, solemn, universal fact of sin and consequent separation from God. For the banished ones of whom she speaks are no particular class of glaring criminals, but she includes within the designation the whole human race, or, at all events, the whole Israel to which she and David belonged. There may have been in her words--though that is very doubtful--a reference to the old story of Cain after the murder of his brother. For that narrative symbolises the consequences of all evil-doing and evil-loving, in that he was cast out from the presence of God, and went away into a land of wandering, there to hide from the face of the Father. On the one hand, it was banishment; on the other hand, it was flight. So had Absalom's departure been, and so is ours.

Strip away the metaphor, dear brethren, and it just comes to this thought, which I seek to lay upon the hearts of all my hearers now--you cannot be blessedly and peacefully near God, unless you are far away from sin. If you take two polished plates of metal, and lay them together, they will adhere. If you put half a dozen tiny grains of sand or dust between them, they will fall apart. So our sins have come between us and our God. They have not separated God from us, blessed be His name! for His love, and His care, and His desire to bless, His thought, and His knowledge, and His tenderness, all come to every soul of man. But they have rent us apart from Him, in so far as they make us unwilling to be near Him, incapable of receiving the truest nearness and blessedness of His presence, and sometimes desirous to hustle Him out of our thoughts, and, if we could, out of our world, rather than to expatiate in the calm sunlight of His presence.

That banishment is self-inflicted. God spurns away no man, but men spurn Him, and flee from Him. Many of us know what it is to pass whole days, and weeks, and years, as practical Atheists. God is not in all our thoughts.

And more than that, the miserable disgrace and solitude of a soul that is godless in the world is what many of us like. The Prodigal Son scraped all his goods together, and thought himself freed from a very unwelcome bondage, and a fine independent youth, when he went away into the far country. It was not quite so pleasant when provisions and clothing fell short, and the swine's trough was the only table that was spread before him. But yet there are many of us, I fear, who are perfectly comfortable away from God, in so far as we can get away from Him, and who never are aware of the degradation that lies in a soul's having lowered itself to this, that it had rather not have God inconveniently near.

Away down in the luxurious islands of the Southern Sea you will find degraded Englishmen who have chosen rather to cast in their lot with savages than to have to strain and work and grow. These poor beach-combers of the Pacific, not happy in their degradation, but wallowing in it, are no exaggerated pictures of the condition, in reality, of thousands of us who dwell far from God, and far therefore from righteousness and peace.

**II. Notice God's yearning over His banished ones.**

The woman in our story hints at, or suggests, a parallel which, though inadequate, is deeply true. David was Absalom's father and Absalom's king; and the two relationships fought against each other in his heart. The king had to think of law and justice; the father cried out for his son. The young man's offence had neither altered his relationship nor affected the father's heart.

All that is true, far more deeply, blessedly true, in regard to our relation, the wandering exiles relation, to God. For, whilst I believe that the highest form of sonship is only realised in the hearts of men who have been made partakers of a new life through Jesus Christ, I believe, just as firmly and earnestly, that every man and woman on the face of the earth, by virtue of physical life derived from God, by virtue of a spiritual being, which, in a very real and deep sense, still bears the image of God, and by reason of His continued love and care over them, is a child of His. The banished son is still a son, and is His banished one. If there is love--wonderful as the thought is, and heart-melting as it ought to be--there must be loss when the child goes away. Human love would not have the same name as God's unless there were some analogy between the two. And though we walk in dark places, and had better acknowledge that the less we speak upon such profound subjects the less likely we are to err, yet it seems to me that the whole preciousness of the revelation of God in Scripture is imperilled unless we frankly recognise this--that His love is like ours, delights in being returned like ours, and is like ours in that it rejoices in presence and knows a sense of loss in absence. If you think that that is too bold a thing to say, remember who it was that taught us that the father fell on the neck of the returning prodigal, and kissed him; and that the rapture of his joy was the token and measure of the reality of his regret, and that it was the father to whom the prodigal son was lost. Deep as is the mystery, let nothing, dear brethren, rob us of the plain fact that God's love moves all around the worst, the unworthiest, the most rebellious in the far-off land, and desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his iniquity and live.

And it is you, you, whom He wants back; you whom He would fain rescue from your aversion to good and your carelessness of Him. It is you whom He seeks, according to the great saying of the Master, the Father seeketh for worshippers in spirit and in truth.

**III. Note the formidable obstacles to the restoration of the banished.**

The words banished and expelled in our text are in the original the same; and the force of the whole would be better expressed if the same English word was employed as the equivalent of both. We should then see more clearly than the variation of rendering in our text enables us to see, that the being expelled is no further stage which God devises means to prevent, but that what is meant is that He provides methods by which the banished should not be banished--that is, should be restored to Himself.

Now, note that the language of this wise woman, unconsciously to herself, confesses that the parallel that she was trying to draw did not go on all fours; for what she was asking the king to do was simply, by an arbitrary act, to sweep aside law and to remit penalty. She instinctively feels that that is not what can be done by God, and so she says that He devises means by which He can restore His banished.

That is to say, forgiveness and the obliteration of the consequences of a man's sin, and his restoration to the blessed nearness to God, which is life, are by no means such easy and simple matters as people sometimes suppose them to be. The whole drift of popular thinking to-day goes in the direction of a very superficial and easy gospel, which merely says, Oh, of course, of course God forgives! Is not God Love? Is not God our Father? What more do you want than that? Ah! you want a great deal more than that, my friends. Let me press upon you two or three plain considerations. There are formidable obstacles in the way of divine forgiveness.

If there are to be any pardon and restoration at all, they must be such as will leave untouched the sovereign majesty of God's law, and, untampered with, the eternal gulf between good and evil. That easygoing gospel which says, God will pardon, of course! sounds very charitable and very catholic, but at bottom it is very cruel. For it shakes the very foundations on which the government of God must repose. God's law is the manifestation of God's character; and that is no flexible thing which can be bent about at the bidding of a weak good-nature. I believe that men are right in holding that certainly God must pardon, but I believe that they are fatally wrong in not recognising this--that the only kind of forgiveness which is possible for Him to bestow is one in which there shall be no tampering with the tremendous sanctions of His awful law; and no tendency to teach that it matters little whether a man is good or bad. The pardon, which many of us seem to think is quite sufficient, is a pardon that is nothing more noble than good-natured winking at transgression. And oh! if this be all that men have to lean on, they are leaning on a broken reed. The motto on the blue cover of the Edinburgh Review, for over a hundred years now, is true: The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted. David struck a fatal blow at the prestige of his own rule, when he weakly let his son off from penalty. And, if it were possible to imagine such a thing, God Himself would strike as fatal a blow at the justice and judgment which are the foundations of His throne, if His forgiveness was such as to be capable of being confounded with love which was too weakly indulgent to be righteous.

Further, if there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must be such as will turn away the heart of the pardoned man from his evil. The very story before us shows that it is not every kind of pardon which makes a man better. The scapegrace Absalom came back unsoftened, without one touch of gratitude to his father in his base heart, without the least gleam of a better nature dawning upon him, and went flaunting about the court until his viciousness culminated in his unnatural rebellion. That is to say, there is a forgiveness which nourishes the seeds of the crimes that it pardons. We have only to look into our own hearts, and we have only to look at the sort of people round us, to be very sure that, unless the forgiveness that is granted us from the heavens has in it an element which will avert our wills and desires from evil, the pardon will be very soon needed again, for the evil will very soon be done again.

If there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must come in such a fashion as that there shall be no doubt whatsoever of their reality and power. The vague kind of trust in a doubtful mercy, about which I have been speaking, may do all very well for people that have never probed the depths of their own hearts. Superficial notions of our sin, which so many of us have, are contented with superficial remedies for it. But let a man get a glimpse of his own real self, and I think that he will wish for something a great deal more solid to grip hold of, than nebulous talk of the kind that I have been describing. If once we feel ourselves to be struggling in the black flood of that awful river, we shall want a firmer hold upon the bank than is given to us by some rootless tree or other. We must clutch something that will stand a pull, if we are to be drawn from the muddy waters.

People say to us, Oh, God will forgive, of course! Does this world look like a place where forgiveness is such an easy thing? Is there anything more certain than that consequences are inevitable when deeds have been done, and that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap and whatsoever he brews that shall he also drink? And is it into a grim, stern world of retribution like this that people will come, with their smiling, sunny gospel of a matter-of-course forgiveness, upon very easy terms of a slight penitence?

Brethren, God has to devise means, which is a strong way of saying, in analogy to the limitations of humanity, that He cannot, by an arbitrary act of His will, pardon a sinful man. His eternal nature forbids it. His established law forbids it. The fabric of His universe forbids it. The good of men forbids it. The problem is insoluble by human thought. The love of God is like some great river that pours its waters down its channel, and is stayed by a black dam across its course, along which it feels for any cranny through which it may pour itself. We could never save ourselves, but

He that might the vengeance best have took,

Found out the remedy.

**IV. And so the last word that I have to say is to note the triumphant, divine solution of these difficulties.**

The work of Jesus Christ, and the work of Jesus Christ alone, meets all the requirements. It vindicates the majesty of law, it deepens the gulf between righteousness and sin. Where is there such a demonstration of the awful truth that the wages of sin is death as on that Cross on which the Son of God died for us and for all His banished ones? Where is there such a demonstration of the fixedness of the divine law as in that death to which the Son of God submitted Himself for us all? Where do we learn the hideousness of sin, the endless antagonism between God and it, and the fatal consequences of it, as we learn them in the sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour? Where do we find the misery and desolation of banishment from God so tragically uttered as in that cry which rent the darkness of eclipse, My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?'

That work of Christ's is the only way by which it is made absolutely certain that sins forgiven shall be sins abhorred; and that a man once restored shall cleave to his Restorer as to his Life. That work is the only way by which a man can be absolutely certain that there is forgiveness, in spite of all the accusations of his own conscience; in spite of all the inexorable working out of penalties in the system of the world which seems to contradict the fond belief; in spite of all that a foreboding gaze tells, or ought to tell, of a judgment that is to follow.

Brethren, God has devised a means. None else could have done so. I beseech you, realise these facts that I have been trying to bring before you, and the considerations that I have based upon them, so far as they commend themselves to your hearts and consciences; and do not be content with acquiescing in them, but act upon them. We are all exiles from God, unless we have been brought nigh by the blood of Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, can God restore His banished ones. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find a pardon which cleanses the heart, and ensures the removal of the sin which it forgives. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find, not a peradventure, not a subjective certainty, but an external fact which proclaims that verily there is forgiveness for us all. I pray you, dear friends, do not be content with that half-truth, which is ever the most dangerous lie, of divine pardon apart from Jesus Christ. Lay your sins upon His head, and your hand in the hand of the Elder Brother, who has come to the far-off land to seek us, and He will lead you back to the Father's house and the Father's heart, and you will be no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.