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

**2 SAMUEL-014. ITTAI OF GATH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Ittai answered the king, and said, As the Lord liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be."*

*2 Samuel 15:21*

It was the darkest hour in David's life. No more pathetic page is found in the Old Testament than that which tells the story of his flight before Absalom. He is crushed by the consciousness that his punishment is deserved--the bitter fruit of the sin that filled all his later life with darkness. His courage and his buoyancy have left him. He has no spirit to make a stand or strike a blow. If Shimei runs along the hillside abreast of him, shrieking curses as he goes, all he says is: Let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him.

So, heartbroken and spiritless, he leaves Jerusalem. And as soon as he has got clear of the city he calls a halt, in order that he may muster his followers and see on whom he may depend. Foremost among the little band come six hundred men from Gath--Philistines--from Goliath's city. These men, singularly enough, the king had chosen as his bodyguard; perhaps he was not altogether sure of the loyalty of his own subjects, and possibly felt safer with foreign mercenaries, who could have no secret leanings to the deposed house of Saul. Be that as it may, the narrative tells us that these men had come after him from Gath. He had been there twice in the old days, in his flight from Saul, and the second visit had extended over something more than a year. Probably during that period his personal attraction, and his reputation as a brilliant leader, had led these rough soldiers to attach themselves to his service, and to be ready to forsake home and kindred in order to fight beside him.

At all events here they are, faithful among the faithless, as foreign soldiers surrounding a king often are--notably, for instance, the Swiss guard in the French Revolution. Their strong arms might have been of great use to David, but his generosity cannot think of involving them in his fall, and so he says to them: I am not going to fight; I have no plan. I am going where I can. You go back and "worship the rising sun." Absalom will take you and be glad of your help. And as for me, I thank you for your past loyalty. Mercy and peace be with you!

It is a beautiful nature that in the depth of sorrow shrinks from dragging other people down with itself. Generosity breeds generosity, and this Philistine captain breaks out into a burst of passionate devotion, garnished, in soldier fashion, with an unnecessary oath or two, but ringing very sincere and meaning a great deal. As for himself and his men, they have chosen their side. Whoever goes, they stay. Whatever befalls, they stick by David; and if the worst come to the worst they can all die together, and their corpses lie in firm ranks round about their dead king. David's heart is touched and warmed by their outspoken loyalty; he yields and accepts their service. Ittai and his noble six hundred tramp on, out of our sight, and all their households behind them. Now what is there in all that, to make a sermon out of?

**I. First, look at the picture of that Philistine soldier, as teaching us what grand passionate self-sacrifice may be evolved out of the roughest natures.**

Analyse his words, and do you not hear, ringing in them, three things, which are the seed of all nobility and splendour in human character? First, a passionate personal attachment; then, that love issuing, as such love always does, in willing sacrifice that recks not for a moment of personal consequences; that is ready to accept anything for itself if it can serve the object of its devotion, and will count life well expended if it is flung away in such a service. And we see, lastly, in these words a supreme restful delight in the presence of him whom the heart loves. For Ittai and his men, the one thing needful was to be beside him in whose eye they had lived, from whose presence they had caught inspiration; their trusted leader, before whom their souls bowed down. So then this vehement speech is the pure language of love.

Now these three things,--a passionate personal attachment, issuing in spontaneous heroism of self-abandonment, and in supreme satisfaction in the beloved presence,--may spring up in the rudest, roughest nature. A Philistine soldier was not a very likely man in whom to find refined and lofty emotion. He was hard by nature, hardened by his rough trade; and unconscious that he was doing anything at all heroic or great. Something had smitten this rock, and out of it there came the pure refreshing stream. And so I say to you, the weakest and the lowest, the roughest and the hardest, the most selfishly absorbed man and woman among us, has lying in him and her dormant capacities for flaming up into such a splendour of devotion and magnificence of heroic self-sacrifice as is represented in these words of my text. A mother will do it for her child, and never think that she has done anything extraordinary; husbands will do such things for wives; wives for husbands; friends and lovers for one another. All who know the sweetness and power of the bond of affection know that there is nothing more gladsome than to fling oneself away for the sake of those whom we love. And the capacity for such love and sacrifice lies in all of us. Prosaic, commonplace people as we are, with no great field on which to work out our heroisms; yet we have it in us to love and give ourselves away thus, if once the heart be stirred.

And lastly, this capacity which lies dormant in all of us, if once it is roused to action, will make a man blessed and dignified as nothing else will. The joy of unselfish love is the purest joy that man can taste; the joy of perfect self-sacrifice is the highest joy that humanity can possess, and they lie open for us all.

And wherever, in some humble measure, these emotions of which I have been speaking are realised, there you see weakness springing up into strength, and the ignoble into loftiness. Astronomers tell us that sometimes a star that has shone inconspicuous, and stood low down in their catalogues as of fifth or sixth magnitude, will all at once flame out, having kindled and caught fire somehow, and will blaze in the heavens, outshining Jupiter and Venus. And so some poor, vulgar, narrow nature, touched by this Promethean fire of pure love that leads to perfect sacrifice, will flame in the forehead of the morning sky an undying splendour, and a light for evermore.

Brethren, my appeal to you is a very plain and simple one, founded on these facts:--You all have that capacity in you, and you all are responsible for the use of it. What have you done with it? Is there any person or thing in this world that has ever been able to lift you up out of your miserable selves? Is there any magnet that has proved strong enough to raise you from the low levels along which your life creeps? Have you ever known the thrill of resolving to become the bondservant and the slave of some great cause not your own? Or are you, as so many of you are, like spiders living in the midst of your web, mainly intent upon what you can catch by it? You have these capacities slumbering in you. Have you ever set a light to that inert mass of enthusiasm that lies within you? Have you ever woke up the sleeper? Look at this rough soldier of my text, and learn from him the lesson that there is nothing that so ennobles and dignifies a commonplace nature as enthusiasm for a great cause, or self-sacrificing love for a worthy heart.

**II. The second remark which I make is this:--These possibilities of love and sacrifice point plainly to God in Christ as their true object.**

Whose image and superscription hath it? said Christ, looking at the Roman denarius that they brought and laid on His palm. If the Emperor's head is on it, why, then, he has a right to it as tribute. And then He went on to say, Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's. So there are things that have God's image and superscription stamped on them, and such are our hearts, our whole constitution and nature. As plainly as the penny had the head of Tiberius on it, and therefore proclaimed that he was Emperor where it was current, so plainly does every soul carry in the image of God the witness that He is its owner and that it should be rendered in tribute to Him.

And amongst all these marks of a divine possession and a divine destination printed upon human nature, it seems to me that none is plainer than this fact, that we can all of us thus give ourselves away in the abandonment of a profound and all-surrendering love. That capacity unmistakably proclaims that it is destined to be directed towards God and to find its rest in Him. As distinctly as some silver cup, with its owner's initials and arms engraved upon it, declares itself to be meet for the master's use, so distinctly does your soul, by reason of this capacity, proclaim that it is meant to be turned to Him in whom alone all love can find its perfect satisfaction; for whom alone it is supremely blessed and great to lose life itself; and who only has authority over human spirits.

We are made with hearts that need to rest upon an absolute love; we are made with understandings that need to grasp a pure, a perfect, and, as I believe, paradoxical though it may sound, a personal Truth. We are made with wills that crave for an absolute authoritative command, and we are made with a moral nature that needs a perfect holiness. And we need all that love, truth, authority, purity, to be gathered into one, for our misery is that, when we set out to look for treasures, we have to go into many lands and to many merchants, to buy many goodly pearls. But we need One of great price, in which all our wealth may be invested. We need that One to be an undying and perpetual possession. There is One to whom our love can ever cleave, and fear none of the sorrows or imperfections that make earthward-turned love a rose with many a thorn, One for whom it is pure gain to lose ourselves, One who is plainly the only worthy recipient of the whole love and self-surrender of the heart.

That One is God, revealed and brought near to us in Jesus Christ. In that great Saviour we have a love at once divine and human, we have the great transcendent instance of love leading to sacrifice. On that love and sacrifice for us Christ builds His claim on us for our hearts, and our all. Life alone can communicate life; it is only light that can diffuse light. It is only love that can kindle love; it is only sacrifice that can inspire sacrifice. And so He comes to us, and asks that we should just love Him back again as He has loved us. He first gives Himself utterly for and to us, and then asks us to give ourselves wholly to Him. He first yields up His own life, and then He says: He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it. The object, the true object, for all this depth of love which lies slumbering in our hearts, is God in Christ, the Christ that died for us.

**III. And now, lastly, observe that the terrible misdirection of these capacities is the sin and the misery of the world.**

I will not say that such emotions, even when expended on creatures, are ever wasted. For however unworthy may be the objects on which they are lavished, the man himself is the better and the higher for having cherished them. The mother, when she forgets self in her child, though her love and self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice may, in some respects, be called but an animal instinct, is elevated and ennobled by the exercise of them. The patriot and the thinker, the philanthropist, ay! even--although I take him to be the lowest in the scale--the soldier who, in some cause which he thinks to be a good one, and not merely in the tigerish madness of the battlefield, throws away his life--are lifted in the scale of being by their self-abnegation.

And so I am not going to say that when men love each other passionately and deeply, and sacrifice themselves for one another, or for some cause or purpose affecting only temporal matters, the precious elixir of love is wasted. God forbid! But I do say that all these objects, sweet and gracious as some of them are, ennobling and elevating as some of them are, if they are taken apart from God, are insufficient to fill your hearts: and that if they are slipped in between you and God, as they often are, then they bring sin and sorrow.

There is nothing more tragic in this world than the misdirection of man's capacity for love and sacrifice. It is like the old story in the Book of Daniel, which tells how the heathen monarch made a great feast, and when the wine began to inflame the guests, sent for the sacred vessels taken from the Temple of Jerusalem, that had been used for Jehovah's worship; and (as the narrative says, with a kind of shudder at the profanation), They brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the House of God, which was at Jerusalem, and the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine and praised the gods. So this heart of mine, which, as I said, has the Master's initials and His arms engraven upon it, in token that it is His cup, I too often fill with the poisonous and intoxicating draught of earthly pleasure and earthly affections; and as I drink it, the madness goes through my veins, and I praise gods of my own making instead of Him whom alone I ought to love.

Ah, brethren! we should be our own rebukers in this matter, and the heroism of the world should put to shame the cowardice and the selfishness of the Church. Contrast the depth of your affection for your household with the tepidity of your love for your Saviour. Contrast the willingness with which you sacrifice yourself for some dear one with the grudgingness with which you yield yourselves to Him. Contrast the rest and the sense of satisfaction in the presence of those whom you love, and your desolation when they are absent, with the indifference whether you have Christ beside you or not. And remember that the measure of your power of loving is the measure of your obligation to love your Lord; and that if you are all frost to Him and all fervour to them, then in a very solemn sense a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.

And so let me gather all that I have been saying into the one earnest beseeching of you that you would bring that power of uncalculating love and self-sacrificing affection which is in you, and would fasten it where it ought to fix--on Christ who died on the cross for you. Such a love will bring blessedness to you. Such a love will ennoble and dignify your whole nature, and make you a far greater and fairer man or woman than you ever otherwise could be. Like some little bit of black carbon put into an electric current, my poor nature will flame into beauty and radiance when that spark touches it. So love Him and be at peace; give yourselves to Him and He will give you back yourselves, ennobled and transfigured by the surrender. Lay yourselves on His altar, and that altar will sanctify both the giver and the gift. If you can take this rough Philistine soldier's words in their spirit, and in a higher sense say, Whether I live I live unto the Lord, or whether I die I die unto the Lord; living or dying, I am the Lord's, He will let you enlist in His army; and give you for your marching orders this command and this hope, If any man serve Me let him follow Me; and where I am there shall also My servant be.