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

**2 SAMUEL-015. THE WAIL OF A BROKEN HEART by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"18.* *Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself a pillar, which is in the king's dale; for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance; and he called the pillar after his own name: and it is called unto this day, Absalom's Place. 19. Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok, Let me now run, and bear the king tidings, how that the Lord hath avenged him of his enemies. 20. And Joab said unto him. Thou shalt not bear tidings this day, but thou shalt bear tidings another day; but this day thou shalt bear no tidings, because the king's son is dead. 21. Then said Joab to Cushi, Go tell the king what thou hast seen. And Cushi bowed himself unto Joab, and ran. 22 Then said Ahimaaz the ton of Zadok yet again to Joab, But howsoever, let me, I pray thee, also run after Cushi. And Joab said, Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready? 23. But howsoever, said he, let me run. And he said unto him, Run. Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and overran Cushi. 24. And David sat between the two gates: and the watchman went up to the roof over the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold a man running alone. 25. And the watchman cried, and told the king. And the king said, If he be alone, there is tidings in his mouth. And he came apace, and drew near. 26. And the watchman saw another man running: and the watchman called unto the porter, and said, Behold another man running alone. And the king said, He also bringeth tidings. 27. And the watchman said, Me thinketh the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man, and cometh with good tidings. 28. And Ahimaaz called, and said unto the king, All is well. And he fell down to the earth upon his face before the king, and said, Blessed be the Lord thy God, which hath delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king. 29. And the king said, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Ahimaaz answered, When Joab sent the king's servant, and me thy servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was. 30. And the king said unto him, Turn aside, and stand here. And he turned aside, and stood still. 31. And, behold, Cushi came; and Cushi said, Tidings, my lord the king: for the Lord hath avenged thee this day of all them that rose up against thee. 32. And the king said unto Cushi, Is the young man Absalom safe I And Cushi answered, The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is. 33. And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

*2 Samuel 18:18-33*

The first verse of this passage and the one preceding it give a striking contrast between the actual and the designed burial-place of Absalom. The great pit among the sombre trees, where his bloody corpse was hastily flung, with three darts through his heart, and the rude cairn piled over it, were a very different grave from the ostentatious tomb in the king's dale, which he had built to keep his memory green. This was what all his restless intrigues and unbridled passions and dazzling hopes had come to. He wanted to be remembered, and he got his wish; but what a remembrance! That gloomy pit preaches anew the vanity of vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself, and tells us once more that

Only the actions of the just

Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.

**I.** The first picture here shows a glimpse of the battlefield, and brings before us three men, each in different ways exhibiting how small a thing Absalom's death was to all but the heartbroken father, and each going his own road, heedless of what lay below the heap of stones. The world goes on all the same, though death is busy, and some heart-strings be cracked. The minute details which fill the most part of the story, lead up to, and throw into prominence, David's burst of agony at the close. The three men, Ahimaaz, Joab, and the Cushite (Ethiopian), are types of different kinds of self-engrossment, which is little touched by others sorrows. The first, Ahimaaz, the young priest who had already done good service to David as a spy, is full of the joyous excitement of victory, and eager to run with what he thinks such good tidings. The word in verse 19, bear tidings, always implies good news; and the youthful warrior-priest cannot conceive that the death of the head of the revolt can darken to the king the joy of victory, He is truly loyal, but, in his youthful impetuosity and excitement, cannot sympathise with the desolate father, who sits expectant at Mahanaim. Right feeling and real affection often fail in sympathy, for want of putting oneself in another's place; and, with the best intentions, wound where they mean to cheer. A little imagination; guided by affection, would have taught Ahimaaz that the messenger who told David of Absalom's death would thrust a sharper spear into his heart than Joab had driven into Absalom's.

Joab is a very different type of indifference. He is too much accustomed to battle to be much flushed with victory, and has killed too many men to care much about killing another. He is cool enough to measure the full effect of the news on David; and though he clearly discerns the sorrow, has not one grain of participation in it. He has some liking for Ahimaaz, and so does not wish him to run, but dissuades him on the ground (verse 22, Revised Version) that he will win no reward. That is the true spirit of the mercenary, who cannot conceive of a man taking trouble unless he gets paid for it somehow, and will fight and kill, all in the way of business, without the least spark of enthusiasm for a cause. Hard stolidity and brutal carelessness shielded him from any womanish tenderness. Absalom was dead, and he had killed him. It was a good thing, for it had put out the fire of revolt. No doubt David would be sorry, but that mattered little. Only it was better for the message to go by some one whose fate was of no consequence. So he picks out the Cushite, probably an Ethiopian slave; and if David in his anguish should harm him, nobody will be hurt but a friendless stranger.

The Cushite gets his orders; and he too is, in another fashion, careless of their contents and effect. Without a word, he bows himself to Joab, and runs, as unconcerned as the paper of a letter that may break a heart. Ahimaaz still pleads to go, and, gaining leave, takes the road across the Jordan valley, which was probably easier, though longer; while the other messenger went by the hills, which was a shorter and rougher road.

**II.** The scene shifts to Mahanaim, where David had found refuge. He can scarcely have failed to take an omen from the name, which commemorated how another anxious heart had camped there, and been comforted, when it saw the vision of the encamping angels above its own feeble, undefended tents, and Jacob called the name of that place Mahanaim (that is, Two Camps). How the change of scene in the narrative helps its vividness, and makes us share in the strain of expectancy and the tension of watching the approaching messengers! The king, restless for news, has come out to the space between the outer and inner gates, and planted a lookout on the gate-house roof. The sharp eyes see a solitary figure making for the city, across the plain. David recognises that, since he is alone, he must be a messenger; and now the question is, What has he to tell? We see him coming nearer, and share the suspense. Then the second man appears; and clearly something more had happened, to require two. What was it? They run fast; but the moments are long till they arrive. The watchman recognises Ahimaaz by his style of running; and David wistfully tries to forecast his tidings from his character. It is a pathetic effort, and reveals how anxiously his heart was beating.

As soon as Ahimaaz is within earshot, though panting with running, no doubt, he shouts, with what breath is left, the one word, Peace! and then, at David's feet, tells the victory, Blessed be the Lord thy God; the triumph was Jehovah's gift, and in it He had shown Himself David's God, and vindicated His servant's trust. But Ahimaaz is more devout and thankful than David. The king has neither praise and thankfulness to God nor to man. He has no pleasure in the victory; no interest in the details of the fight; no thankfulness for a restored kingdom; no word of eulogium for his soldiers; nothing but devouring anxiety for his unworthy son. How chilling to Ahimaaz, all flushed with eagerness, and proud of victory, and panting with running, and hungry for some word of praise, it must have been, to get for sole answer the question about Absalom! He shrinks from telling the whole truth, which, indeed, the Cushite was officially despatched to tell; but his enigmatic story of a great tumult as he left the field, of which he did not know the meaning, was meant to prepare for the bitter news. So he is bid to stand aside, and no words more vouchsafed to him. A cool reception, unworthy of David! As Ahimaaz stood there, neglected, he would think that the politic Joab was right after all.

The Cushite must have been close behind him, for he comes up as soon as the brief conversation is over. A deeper anxiety must have waited his tidings; for he must have something more to tell than victory. His first words add nothing to Ahimaaz's information. What, then, had he come for? David forebodes evil, and, with the monotony of a man absorbed in one anxiety, repeats verbatim his former question. Poor king! He more than half knew the answer, before it was given. The Cushite with some tenderness veils the fate of Absalom in the wish that all the king's enemies may be as that young man is. But the veil was thin, and the attempt to console by reminding of the fact that the dead man was an enemy as well as a son, was swept away like a straw before the father's torrent of grief.

**III.** The sobs of a broken heart cannot be analysed; and this wail of almost inarticulate agony, with its infinitely pathetic reiteration, is too sacred for many words. Grief, even if passionate, is not forbidden by religion; and David's sensitive poet-nature felt all emotions keenly. We are meant to weep; else wherefore is there calamity? But there were elements in David's mourning which were not good. It blinded him to blessings and to duties. His son was dead; but his rebellion was dead with him, and that should have been more present to his mind. His soldiers had fought well, and his first task should have been to honour and to thank them. He had no right to sink the king in the father, and Joab's unfeeling remonstrance, which followed, was wise and true in substance, though rough almost to brutality in tone. Sorrow which sees none of the blue because of one cloud, however heavy and thunderous, is sinful. Sorrow which sits with folded hands, like the sisters of Lazarus, and lets duties drift, that it may indulge in the luxury of unrestrained tears, is sinful. There is no tone of It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth Him good, in this passionate plaint; and so there is no soothing for the grief. The one consolation lies in submission. Submissive tears wash the heart clean; rebellious ones blister it.

David's grief was the bitter fruit of his own sin. He had weakly indulged Absalom, and had probably spared the rod, in the boy's youth, as he certainly spared the sword when Absalom had murdered his brother. His own immorality had loosened the bonds of family purity, and made him ashamed to punish his children. He had let Absalom flaunt and swagger and live in luxury, and put no curb on him; and here was the end of his foolish softness. How many fathers and mothers are the destroyers of their children to-day in the very same fashion! That grave in the wood might teach parents how their fatal fondness may end. Children, too, may learn from David's grief what an unworthy son can do to stuff his father's pillow with thorns, and to break his heart at last.

But there is another side to this grief. It witnesses to the depth and self-sacrificing energy of a father's love. The dead son's faults are all forgotten and obliterated by death's effacing fingers. The headstrong, thankless rebel is, in David's mind, a child again, and the happy old days of his innocence and love are all that remain in memory. The prodigal is still a son. The father's love is immortal, and cannot be turned away by any faults. The father is willing to die for the disobedient child. Such purity and depth of affection lives in human hearts. So self-forgetting and incapable of being provoked is an earthly father's love. May we not see in this disclosure of David's paternal love, stripping it of its faults and excesses, some dim shadow of the greater love of God for His prodigals,--a love which cannot be dammed back or turned away by any sin, and which has found a way to fulfil David's impossible wish, in that it has given Jesus Christ to die for His rebellious children, and so made them sharers of His own kingdom?