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

**2 SAMUEL-018. THE DYING KING'S LAST VISION AND PSALM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, 2. The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue. 3. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. 4. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. 5. Although my house be not so with God; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although He make it not to grow. 6. But the sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands: 7. But the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place."*

*2 Samuel 23:1-7*

It was fitting that the last words of David should be a prophecy of the true King, whom his own failures and sins, no less than his consecration and victories, had taught him to expect. His dying eyes see on the horizon of the far-off future the form of Him who is to be a just and perfect Ruler, before the brightness of whose presence and the refreshing of whose influence, verdure and beauty shall clothe the world. As the shades gather round the dying monarch, the radiant glory to come brightens. He departs in peace, having seen the salvation from afar, and stretched out longing hands of greeting toward it. Then his harp is silent, as if the rapture which thrilled the trembling strings had snapped them.

**I.** We have first a prelude extending to the middle of verse 3. In it there is first a fourfold designation of the personality of the Psalmist-prophet, and then a fourfold designation of the divine oracle spoken through him. The word rendered in verse 1 saith is really a noun, and usually employed with the Lord following, as in the familiar phrase saith the Lord. It is used, as here, with the genitive of the human recipient, in Balaam's prophecy, on which this is evidently modelled. It distinctly claims a divine source for the oracle following, and declares, at the outset, that these last words of David were really the faithful sayings of Jehovah. The human and divine elements are smelted together. Note the description of the human personality. First, the natural David the son of Jesse, like Balaam the son of Beor in the earlier oracle. The aged king looks back with adoring thankfulness to his early days and humble birth, as if he were saying, Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should proclaim the coming King. Then follow three clauses descriptive of what the son of Jesse had been made by the grace of God, in that he had been raised on high from his low condition of a shepherd boy, and anointed as ruler, not only by Samuel and the people, but by the God of their great ancestor, whose career had presented so many points of resemblance to his own, the God who still wrought among the nation which bore the patriarch's name, as He had wrought of old; and that, besides his royalty, he had been taught to sing the sweet songs which already were the heritage of the nation. This last designation shows what David counted God's chief gift to him,--not his crown, but his harp. It further shows that he regarded his psalms as divinely inspired, and it proves that already they had become the property of the nation. This first verse heightens the importance of the subsequent oracle by dwelling on the claims of the recipient of the revelation to be heard and heeded.

Similarly, the fourfold designation of the divine source has the same purpose, and corresponds with the four clauses of verse 1, The Spirit of the Lord spake in [or "into"] me. That gives the Psalmist's consciousness that in his prophecy he was but the recipient of a message. It wonderfully describes the penetrating power of that inward voice which clearly came to him from without, and as clearly spoke to him within. Words could not more plainly declare the prophetic consciousness of the distinction between himself and the Voice which he heard in the depths of his spirit. It spoke in him before he spoke his lyric prophecy. His word was upon my tongue. There we have the utterance succeeding the inward voice, and the guarantee that the Psalmist's word was a true transcript of the inward voice. The God of Israel said, and therefore Israel is concerned in the divine word, which is not of private reference, but meant for all. The Rock of Israel spake, and therefore Israel may trust the Word, which rests on His immutable faithfulness and eternal being.

**II.** The divine oracle thus solemnly introduced and guaranteed must be worthy of such a prelude. Abruptly, and in clauses without verbs, the picture of the righteous Ruler is divinely flashed before the seer's inward eye. The broken construction may perhaps indicate that he is describing what he beholds in vision. There is no need for any supplement such as There shall be, which, however true in meaning, mars the vividness of the presentation of the Ruler to the prophet's sight. David sees him painted on the else blank wall of the future. When and where the realisation may be he knows not. What are the majestic outlines? A universal sovereign over collective humanity, righteous and God-fearing. In the same manner as he described the vision of the King, David goes on, as a man on some height telling what he saw to the people below, and paints the blessed issues of the King's coming.

It had been night before He came,--the night of ignorance, sorrow, and sin,--but His coming is like one of these glorious Eastern sunrises without a cloud, when everything laughs in the early beams, and, with tropical swiftness, the tender herbage bursts from the ground, as born from the dazzling brightness and the fertilising rain. So all things shall rejoice in the reign of the King, and humanity be productive, under His glad and quickening influences, of growths of beauty and fruitfulness impossible to it without these.

The abrupt form of the prophecy has led some interpreters to construe it as, When a king over men is righteous... then it is as a morning, etc. But surely such a platitude is not worthy of being David's last word, nor did it need divine inspiration to disclose to him that a just king is a great blessing. The only worthy meaning is that which sees here, in words so solemnly marked as a special revelation closing the life of David, the vision of the future and all the wonder that should be, when a real Person should thus reign over men. The explanation that we have here simply the ideal of the collective Davidic monarchy is a lame attempt to escape from the recognition of prophecy properly so called. It is the work of poetry to paint ideals, of prophecy to foretell, with God's authority, their realisation. The picture here is too radiant to be realised in any mere human king, and, as a matter of fact, never was so in any of David's successors, or in the whole of them put together. It either swings in vacuo, a dream unrealised, or it is a distinct prophecy from God of the reign of the coming Messiah, of whom David and all his sons, as anointed kings, were living prophecies. The Messianic idea entered on a new stage of development with the monarchy, and that not as if the history stimulated men's imaginations, but that God used the history as a means of further revelation by His prophetic Spirit.

**III.** The difficult verse 5, whether its first and last clauses be taken interrogatively or negatively, in its central part bases the assurance of the coming of the king on God's covenant (2 Samuel vii.), which is glorified as being everlasting, provided with all requisites for its realisation, and therefore sure, or perhaps preserved, as if guarded by God's inviolable sanctity and faithfulness. The fulfilment of the dying saint's hopes depends on God's truth. Whatever sense might say, or doubt whisper, he silences them by gazing on that great Word. So we all have to do. If we found our hopes and forecasts on it, we can go down to the grave calmly, though they be not fulfilled, sure that no good thing can fail us of all that He hath spoken. Living or dying, faith and hope must stay themselves on God's word. Happy they whose closing eyes see the form of the King, and whose last thoughts are of God's faithful promise! Happy they whose forecasts of the future, nearer or more remote, are shaped by His word! Happy they who, in the triumphant energy of such a faith, can with dying lips proclaim that His promises overlap, and contain, all their salvation and all their desire!

If we read the first and last clauses negatively, with Revised Version and others, they, as it were, surround the kernel of clear-eyed faith, in the middle of the verse, with a husk, not of doubt, but of consciousness how far the present is from fulfilling the great promise. The poor dying king looks back on the scandals of his later reign, on his own sin, on his children's lust, rebellion, and tragic deaths, and feels how far from the ideal he and they have been. He sees little token of growth toward realisation of that promise; but yet in spite of a stained past and a wintry present, he holds fast his confidence. That is the true temper of faith, which calls things that are not as though they were, and is hindered by no sense of unworthiness nor by any discouragements born of sense, from grasping with full assurance the promise of God. But the consensus of the most careful expositors inclines to take both clauses as questions, and then the meaning would be, Does not my house stand in such a relation to God that the righteous king will spring from it? It is, in this view, a triumphant question, expressing the strongest assurance, and the next clause would then lay bare the foundation of that relation of David's house as not its goodness, but God's covenant (for He hath made). Similarly the last clause would be a triumphant question of certainty, asserting in the strongest manner that God would cause that future salvation for the world, which was wrapped up in the coming of the king, and in which the dying man was sure that he should somehow have a share, dead though he were, to blossom and grow, though he had to die as in the winter, before the buds began to swell. The assurance of immortality, and of a share in all the blessings to come, bursts from the lips that are so soon to be silent.

**IV.** But the oracle cannot end with painting only blessings as flowing from the king's reign. If he is to rule in righteousness and the fear of the Lord, then he must fight against evil. If his coming causes the tender grass to spring, it will quicken ugly growths too. The former representation is only half the truth; and the threatening of destruction for the evil is as much a part of the divine oracle as the other. Strictly, it is wickedness--the abstract quality rather than the concrete persons who embody it--which is spoken of. May we recall the old distinction that God loves the sinner while He hates the sin? The picture is vivid. The wicked--and all the enemies of this King are wicked, in the prophet's view--are like some of these thorn-brakes, that cannot be laid hold of, even to root them out, but need to be attacked with sharp pruning-hooks on long shafts, or burned where they grow. There is a destructive side to the coming of the King, shadowed in every prophecy of him, and brought emphatically to prominence in his own descriptions of his reign and its final issues. It is a poor kindness to suppress that side of the truth. Thorns as well as tender grass spring up in the quickening beams; and the best commentary on the solemn words which close David's closing song is the saying of the King himself: In the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them.