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

**ACTS-088. A PLOT DETECTED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12. And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they bad killed Paul. 13. And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy. 14. And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. 15. Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to-morrow, as though ye would inquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him. 16. And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul. 17. Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him. 18. So he took him, and brought him to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee. 19. Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, What is that thou hast to tell me? 20. And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to-morrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly. 21. But do not thou yield unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee. 22. So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me."*

*Acts 23:12-22*

The wicked plotteth against the just... . The Lord will laugh at him. The Psalmist's experience and his faith were both repeated in Paul's case. His speech before the Council had set Pharisees and Sadducees squabbling, and the former had swallowed his Christianity for the sake of his being a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee. Probably, therefore, the hatchers of this plot were Sadducees, who hated Pharisees even more than they did Christians. The Apostle himself was afterwards not quite sure that his skilful throwing of the apple of discord between the two parties was right (Acts 24:21), and apparently it was the direct occasion of the conspiracy. A Christian man's defence of himself and his faith gains nothing by clever tactics. It is very doubtful whether what Paul spoke in that hour was taught him by the Spirit.

The corruption of the best is the worst. There is a close and strange alliance between formal religion and murderous hatred and vulpine craft, as the history of ecclesiastical persecution shows; and though we have done with fire and faggot now, the same evil passions and tempers do still in modified form lie very near to a Christianity which has lost its inward union with Jesus and lives on surface adherence to forms. In that sense too the letter killeth. We lift up our hands in horror at these fierce fanatics, ready to kill Paul, because he believed in resurrection, angel, and spirit. We need to guard ourselves lest something of their temper should be in us. There is a devilish ingenuity about the details of the plot, and a truly Oriental mixture of murderous passion and calculating craft. The serpent's wisdom and his poison fangs are both apparent. The forty conspirators must have been ready, not only to kill Paul, but to die in the attempt, for the distance from the castle to the council-chamber was short, and the detachment of legionaries escorting the prisoner would have to be reckoned with.

**I.** The pretext of desiring to inquire more fully into Paul's opinions derived speciousness from his ambiguous declaration, which had set the Council by the ears and had stopped his examination. Luke does not tell us what the Council said to the conspirators, but we learn from what Paul's nephew says in verse 20 that it agreed to ask thee to bring down Paul. So once more the tail drove on the head, and the Council became the tool of fierce zealots. No doubt most of its members would have shrunk from themselves killing Paul, but they did not shrink from having a hand in his death. They were most religious and respectable men, and probably soothed their consciences with thinking that, after all, the responsibility was on the shoulders of the forty conspirators. How men can cheat themselves for a while as to the criminality of indirectly contributing to criminal acts, and how rudely the thin veil will be twitched aside one day!

**II.** The abrupt introduction of Paul's nephew into the story piques curiosity, but we cannot say more about him than is told us here. We do not know whether he was moved by being a fellow-believer in Jesus, or simply by kindred and natural affection. Possibly he was, as his uncle had been, a student under some distinguished Rabbi. At all events, he must have had access to official circles to have come on the track of the plot, which would, of course, be covered up as much as possible. The rendering in the margin of the Revised Version gives a possible explanation of his knowledge of it by suggesting that he had come in upon them; that is, upon the Council in their deliberations. But probably the rendering preferred in the text is preferable, and we are left to conjecture his source of information, as almost everything else about him. But it is more profitable to note how God works out His purposes and delivers His servants by natural means, which yet are as truly divine working as was the sending of the angel to smite off Peter's chains, or the earthquake at Philippi.

This lad was probably not an inhabitant of Jerusalem, and that he should have been there then, and come into possession of the carefully guarded secret, was more than a fortunate coincidence. It was divinely ordered, and God's finger is as evident in the concatenation of co-operating natural events as in any miracle. To co-ordinate these so that they concur to bring about the fulfilment of His will may be a less conspicuous, but is not a less veritable, token of a sovereign Will at work in the world than any miracle is. And in this case how wonderfully separate factors, who think themselves quite independent, are all handled like pawns on a chessboard by Him who makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and girds Himself with the remainder thereof! Little did the fiery zealots who were eager to plunge their daggers into Paul's heart, or the lad who hastened to tell him the secret he had discovered, or the Roman officer who equally hastened to get rid of his troublesome prisoner, dream that they were all partners in bringing about one God-determined result--the fulfilment of the promise that had calmed Paul in the preceding night: So must thou bear witness also at Rome.

**III.** Paul had been quieted after his exciting day by the vision which brought that promise, and this new peril did not break his peace. With characteristic clear-sightedness he saw the right thing to do in the circumstances, and with characteristic promptitude he did it at once. Luke wastes no words in telling of the Apostle's emotions when this formidable danger was sprung on him, and the very reticence deepens the impression of Paul's equanimity and practical wisdom. A man who had had such a vision last night might well possess his soul in patience, even though such a plot was laid bare this morning; and each servant of Jesus may be as well assured, as was Paul the prisoner, that the Lord shall keep him from all evil, and that if his life is witness it will not end till his witness is complete. Our faith should work in us calmness of spirit, clearness of perception of the right thing to do, swift seizing of opportunities. Paul trusted Jesus' word that he should be safe, whatever dangers threatened, but that trust stimulated his own efforts to provide for his safety.

**IV.** The behaviour of the captain is noteworthy, as showing that he had been impressed by Paul's personal magnetism, and that he had in him a strain of courtesy and kindliness. He takes the lad by the hand to encourage him, and he leads him aside that he may speak freely, and thereby shows that he trusted him. No doubt the youth would be somewhat flustered at being brought into the formidable presence and by the weight of his tidings, and the great man's gentleness would be a cordial. A superior's condescension is a wonderful lip-opener. We all have some people who look up to us, and to whom small kindlinesses from us are precious. We do not render to all their dues, unless we give gracious courtesy to those beneath, as well as honour to those above, us. But the captain could clothe himself too with official reserve and keep up the dignity of his office. He preserved an impenetrable silence as to his intentions, and simply sealed the young man's lips from tattling about the plot or the interview with him. Promptly he acted, without waiting for the Council's application to him. At once he prepared to despatch Paul to Caesarea, glad enough, no doubt, to wash his hands of so troublesome a charge. Thus he too was a cog in the wheel, an instrument to fulfil the promise made in vision, God's servant though he knew it not.