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

**DEUTERONOMY-014. A DEATH IN THE DESERT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. 6. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, ... but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day."*

*Deuteronomy 34:5-6*

A fitting end to such a life! The great law-giver and leader had been all his days a lonely man; and now, surrounded by a new generation, and all the old familiar faces vanished, he is more solitary than ever. He had lived alone with God, and it was fitting that alone with God he should die.

How the silent congregation must have watched, as, alone, with natural strength unabated, he breasted the mountain, and went up to be seen no more! With dignified reticence our chapter tells us no details. He died there, in that dreary solitude, and in some cleft he was buried, and no man knows where. The lessons of that solitary death and unknown tomb may best be learned by contrast with another death and another grave--those of the Leader of the New Covenant, the Law-giver and Deliverer from a worse bondage, and Guide into a better Canaan, the Son who was faithful over His own house, as Moses was faithful in all his house, as a servant. That lonely and forgotten grave among the savage cliffs was in keeping with the whole character and work of him who lay there.

Here,--here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,

Lightnings are loosened,

Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,

Peace let the dew send!

Lofty designs must close in like effects;

Loftily lying,

Leave him--still loftier than the world suspects,

Living and dying.

Contrast that grave with the sepulchre in the garden where Jesus lay, close by a city wall, guarded by foes, haunted by troops of weeping friends, visited by a great light of angel faces. The one was hidden and solitary, as teaching the loneliness and mystery of death; the other revealed light in the darkness, and companionship in the loneliness. The one faded from men's memory because it was nothing to any man; no impulses, nor hopes, nor gifts, could come from it. The other forever draws hearts and memories, because in it was wrought out the victory in which all our hopes are rooted. An endured cross, an empty grave, an occupied throne, are as the threefold cord on which all our hopes hang. Moses was solitary as God's servant in life and death, and oblivion covered his mountain grave. Christ's delights were with the sons of men. He lived among them, and all men know his sepulchre to this day.

**I. Note, then, first, as a lesson gathered from this lonely death, the penalty of transgression.**

One of the great truths which the old law and ordinances given by Moses were intended to burn in on the conscience of the Jew, and through him on the conscience of the world, was that indissoluble connection between evil done and evil suffered, which reaches its highest exemplification in the death which is the wages of sin. And just as some men that have invented instruments for capital punishment have themselves had to prove the sharpness of their own axe, so the lawgiver, whose message it had been to declare, the soul that sinneth it shall die, had himself to go up alone to the mountain-top to receive in his own person the exemplification of the law that had been spoken by his own lips. He sinned when, in a moment of passion (with many palliations and excuses), he smote the rock that he was bidden to address, and forgot therein, and in his angry words to the rebels, that he was only an instrument in the divine hand. It was a momentary wavering in a hundred and twenty years of obedience. It was one failure in a life of self-abnegation and suppression. The stern sentence came.

People say, A heavy penalty for a small offence. Yes; but an offence of Moses could not be a small offence. Noblesse oblige! The higher a man rises in communion with God, and the more glorious the message and office which are put into his hands, the more intolerable in him is the slightest deflection from the loftiest level. A splash of mud, that would never be seen on a navvy's clothes, stains the white satin of a bride or the embroidered garment of a noble. And so a little sin done by a loftily endowed and inspired man ceases to be small.

Nor are we to regard that momentary lapse only from the outside and the surface. One little mark under the armpit of a plague-sufferer tells the physician that the fatal disease is there. A tiny leaf above ground may tell that, deep below, lurks the root of a poison plant. That little deflection, coming as it did at the beginning of the resumption of his functions by the Lawgiver after seven-and-thirty years of comparative abeyance, and on his first encounter with the new generation that he had to lead, was a very significant indication that his character had begun to yield and suffer from the strain that had been put upon it; and that, in fact, he was scarcely fit for the responsibilities that the new circumstances brought. So the penalty was not so disproportionate to the fault as it may seem.

And was the penalty such a very great one? Do you think that a man who had been toiling for eighty years at a very thankless task would consider it a very severe punishment to be told, Go home and take your wages? It did not mean the withdrawal of the divine favour. Moses and Aaron among his priests... Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions. The penalty of a forgiven sin is never hard to bear, and the penalty of a forgiven sin is very often punctually and mercifully exacted.

But still we are not to ignore the fact that this lonely death, with which we are now concerned, is of the nature of a penal infliction. And so it stands forth in consonance with the whole tone of the Mosaic teaching. I admit, of course, that the mere physical fact of the separation between body and spirit is simply the result of natural law. But that is not the death that you and I know. Death as we know it, the ugly thing that flings its long shadows across all life, and that comes armed with terrors for conscience and spirit, is the wages of sin, and is only experienced by men who have transgressed the law of God. So far Moses in his life and in his death carries us--that no transgression escapes the appropriate punishment; that the smallest sin has in it the seeds of mortal consequences; that the loftiest saint does not escape the law of retribution.

And no further does Moses with his Law and his death carry us. But we turn to the other death. And there we find the confirmation, in an eminent degree, of that Law, and yet the repeal of it. It is confirmed and exhausted in Jesus Christ. His death was the wages of sin. Whose? Not His. Mine, yours, every man's. And because He died, surrounded by men, outside the old city wall, pure and sinless in Himself, He therein both said Amen to the Law of Moses, and swept it away. For all the sins of the world were laid upon His head, He bore the curse for us all, and has emptied the bitter cup which men's transgressions have mingled. Therefore the solitary death in the desert proclaims the wages of sin; that death outside the city wall proclaims the gift of God, which is eternal life.

**II. Another of the lessons of our incident is the withdrawal, by a hard fate, of the worker on the very eve of the completion of his work.**

For all these forty years there had gleamed before the fixed and steadfast spirit of the sorely tried leader one hope that he never abandoned, and that was that he might look upon and enter into the blessed land which God had promised. And now he stands on the heights of Moab. Half a dozen miles onwards, as the crow flies, and his feet would tread its soil. He lifts his eyes, and away up yonder, in the far north, he sees the rolling uplands of Gilead, and across the deep gash where the Jordan runs, he catches a glimpse of the blue hills of Naphtali or of Galilee, and the central mountain masses of Ephraim and Manasseh, where Ebal and Gerizim lift their heads; and then, further south, the stony summits of the Judaean hills, where Jerusalem and Bethlehem lie, and, through some gap in the mountains, a gleam as of sunshine upon armour tells where the ocean is. And then his eye falls upon the waterless plateau of the South, and at his feet the fertile valley of Jordan, with Jericho glittering amongst its palm trees like a diamond set in emeralds, and on some spur of the lower hill bounding the plain, the little Zoar. This was the land which the Lord had promised to the fathers, for which he had been yearning, and to which all his work had been directed all these years; and now he is to die, as my text puts it, with such pathetic emphasis, there in Moab, and to have no part in the fair inheritance.

It is the lot of all epoch-making men, of all great constructive and reforming geniuses, whether in the Church or in the world, that they should toil at a task, the full issues of which will not be known until their heads are laid low in the dust. But if, on the one hand, that seems hard, on the other hand there is the compensation of the vision of the future and all the wonder that shall be, which is granted many a time to the faithful worker ere he closes his eyes. But that is not the fate of epoch-making and great men only; it is the law for our little lives. If these are worth anything, they are constructed on a scale too large to bring out all their results here and now. It is easy for a man to secure immediate consequences of an earthly kind; easy enough for him to make certain that he shall have the fruit of his toil. But quick returns mean small profits; and an unfinished life that succeeds in nothing may be far better than a completed one, that has realised all its shabby purposes and accomplished all its petty desires. Do you, my brother, live for the far-off; and seek not for the immediate issues and fruits that the world can give, but be contented to be of those whose toil waits for eternity to disclose its significance. Better a half-finished temple than a finished pigstye or huckster's shop. Better a life, the beginning of much and the completion of nothing, than a life directed to and hitting an earthly aim. He that soweth to the spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting, and his harvest and garner are beyond the grave.

**III. Again, notice here the lesson of the solitude and mystery of death.**

Moses dies alone, with no hand to clasp his, none to close his eyes; but God's finger does it. The outward form of his death is but putting into symbol and visibility the awful characteristics of that last moment for us all. However closely we have been twined with others, each of us has to unclasp dear hands, and make that journey through the narrow, dark tunnel by himself. We live alone in a very real sense, but we each have to die as if there were not another human being in the whole universe but only ourselves. But the solitude may be a solitude with God. Up there, alone with the stars and the sky and the everlasting rocks and menacing death, Moses had for companion the supporting God. That awful path is not too desolate and lonely to be trodden if we tread it with Him.

Moses lonely death leads to a society yonder. If you refer to the thirty-second chapter you will find that, when he was summoned to the mountain, God said to him, Die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered to thy people. He was to be buried there, up amongst the rocks of Moab, and no man was ever to visit his sepulchre to drop a tear over it. How, then, was he gathered to his people? Surely only thus, that, dying in the desert alone, he opened his eyes in the City, surrounded by solemn troops and sweet societies of those to whom he was kindred. So the solitude of a moment leads on to blessed and eternal companionship.

So far the death of Moses carries us. What does the other death say? Moses had none but God with him when he died. There is a drearier desolation than that, and Jesus Christ proved it when He cried, My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? That was solitude indeed, and in that hour of mysterious, and to us unfathomable, desertion and misery, the lonely Christ sounded a depth, of which the lawgiver in His death but skimmed the surface. Christ was parted from God in His death, because He bore on Him the sins that separate us from our Father, and in order that none of us may ever need to tread that dark passage alone, but may be able to say, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me--Thou, who hast trodden every step in its rough and dreary path, uncheered by the presence which cheers us and millions more. Christ died that we might live. He died alone that, when we come to die, we may hold His hand and the solitude may vanish.

Then, again, our incident teaches us the mystery that wrapped death to that ancient world, of which we may regard that unknown and forgotten sepulchre as the visible symbol. Deep darkness lies over the Old Testament in reference to what is beyond the grave, broken by gleams of light, when the religious consciousness asserted its indestructibility, in spite of all appearance to the contrary; but never growing to the brightness of serene and continuous assurance of immortal life and resurrection. We may conceive that mysteriousness as set forth for us by that grave that was hidden away in the defiles of Moab, unvisited and uncared for by any.

We turn to the other grave, and there, as the stone is rolled away, and the rising sunshine of the Easter morning pours into it, we have a visible symbol of the life and immortality which Jesus Christ then brought to light by His Gospel. The buried grave speaks of the inscrutable mystery that wrapped the future: the open sepulchre proclaims the risen Lord of life, and the sunlight certainty of future blessedness which we owe to Him. Death is solitary no more, though it be lonely as far as human companionship is concerned; and a mystery no more, though what is beyond is hidden from our view, and none but Christ has ever returned to tell the tale, and He has told us little but the fact that we shall live with Him.

We rejoice that we have not to turn to a grave hid amongst the hills where our dead Leader lies, but to an open sepulchre by the city wall in the sunshine, from whence has come forth the ever-living Captain of our salvation.

**IV. The last lesson is the uselessness of a dead leader to a generation with new conflicts.**

Commentators have spent a great deal of ingenuity in trying to assign reasons why God concealed the grave of Moses. The text does not say that God concealed it at all. The ignorance of the place of his sepulchre does not seem to have been part of the divine design, but simply a consequence of the circumstances of his death, and of the fact that he lay in an enemy's land, and that they had had something else to do than go to look for the grave of a dead commander. They had to conquer the land, and a living Joshua was what they wanted, not a dead Moses.

So we may learn from this how easily the gaps fill. Thirty days mourning, and says my text, with almost a bitter touch, so the days of mourning for Moses were ended. A month of it, that was all; and then everybody turned to the new man that was appointed for the new work. God has many tools in His tool-chest, and He needs them all before the work is done. Joshua could no more have wielded Moses rod than Moses could have wielded Joshua's sword. The one did his work, and was laid aside. New circumstances required a new type of character--the smaller man better fitted for the rougher work. And so it always is. Each generation, each period, has its own men that do some little part of the work which has to be done, and then drop it and hand over the task to others. The division of labour is the multiplication of joy at the end, and he that soweth and he that reapeth rejoice together. But whilst the one grave tells us, This man served his generation by the will of God, and was laid asleep and saw corruption, the other grave proclaims One whom all generations need, whose work is comprehensive and complete, who dies never. He liveth and was dead, and is alive for evermore. Christ, and Christ alone, can never be antiquated. This day requires Him, and has in Him as complete an answer to all its necessities as if no other generation had ever possessed Him. He liveth for ever, and for ever is the Shepherd of men.

So Aaron dies and is buried on Hor, and Moses dies and is buried on Pisgah, and Joshua steps into his place, and, in turn, he disappears. The one eternal Word of God worked through them all, and came at last Himself in human flesh to be the Everlasting Deliverer, Redeemer, Founder of the Covenant, Lawgiver, Guide through the wilderness, Captain of the warfare, and all that the world or a single soul can need until the last generation has crossed the flood, and the wandering pilgrims are gathered in the land of their inheritance. The dead Moses pre-supposes and points to the living Christ. Let us take Him for our all-sufficing and eternal Guide.