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

**ECCLESIASTES-010. FENCES AND SERPENTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him."*

*Ecclesiastes 10:8*

What is meant here is, probably, not such a hedge as we are accustomed to see, but a dry-stone wall, or, perhaps, an earthen embankment, in the crevices of which might lurk a snake to sting the careless hand. The connection and purpose of the text are somewhat obscure. It is one of a string of proverb-like sayings which all seem to be illustrations of the one thought that every kind of work has its own appropriate and peculiar peril. So, says the Preacher, if a man is digging a pit, the sides of it may cave in and he may go down. If he is pulling down a wall he may get stung. If he is working in a quarry there may be a fall of rock. If he is a woodman the tree he is felling may crush him. What then? Is the inference to be, Sit still and do nothing, because you may get hurt whatever you do? By no means. The writer of this book hates idleness very nearly as much as he does what he calls folly, and his inference is stated in the next verse--Wisdom is profitable to direct. That is to say, since all work has its own dangers, work warily, and with your brains as well as your muscles, and do not put your hand into the hollow in the wall, until you have looked to see whether there are any snakes in it. Is that very wholesome maxim of prudence all that is meant to be learned? I think not. The previous clause, at all events, embodies a well-known metaphor of the Old Testament. He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it, often occurs as expressing the retribution in kind that comes down on the cunning plotter against other men's prosperity, and the conclusion that wisdom suggests in that application of the sentence is, Dig judiciously, but Do not dig at all. And so in my text the wall may stand for the limitations and boundary-lines of our lives, and the inference that wisdom suggests in that application of the saying is not Pull down judiciously, but Keep the fence up, and be sure you keep on the right side of it. For any attempt to pull it down--which being interpreted is, to transgress the laws of life which God has enjoined--is sure to bring out the hissing snake with its poison.

Now it is in that aspect that I want to look at the words before us.

**I. First of all, let us take that thought which underlies my text--that all life is given us rigidly walled up.**

The first thing that the child learns is, that it must not do what it likes. The last lesson that the old man has to learn is, you must do what you ought. And between these two extremes of life we are always making attempts to treat the world as an open common, on which we may wander at our will. And before we have gone many steps, some sort of keeper or other meets us and says to us, Trespassers, back again to the road! Life is rigidly hedged in and limited. To live as you like is the prerogative of a brute. To live as you ought, and to recognise and command by obeying the laws and limitations stamped upon our very nature and enjoined by our circumstances, is the freedom and the glory of a man. There are limitations, I say--fences on all sides. Men put up their fences; and they are often like the wretched wooden hoardings that you sometimes see limiting the breadth of a road. But in regard to these conventional limitations and regulations, which own no higher authority or lawgiver than society and custom, you must make up your mind even more certainly than in regard of loftier laws, that if you meddle with them, there will be plenty of serpents coming out to hiss and bite. No man that defies the narrow maxims and petty restrictions of conventional ways, and sets at nought the opinions of the people round about him, but must make up his mind for backbiting and slander and opposition of all sorts. It is the price that we pay for obeying at first hand the laws of God and caring nothing for the conventionalities of men.

But apart from that altogether, let me just remind you, in half a dozen sentences, of the various limitations or fences which hedge up our lives on every side. There are the obligations which we owe, and the relations in which we stand, to the outer world, the laws of physical life, and all that touches the external and the material. There are the relations in which we stand, and the obligations which we owe, to ourselves. And God has so made us as that obviously large tracts of every man's nature are given to him on purpose to be restrained, curbed, coerced, and sometimes utterly crushed and extirpated. God gives us our impulses under lock and key. All our animal desires, all our natural tendencies, are held on condition that we exercise control over them, and keep them well within the rigidly marked limits which He has laid down, and which we can easily find out. There are, further, the relations in which we stand, and the obligations and limitations, therefore, under which we come, to the people round about us. High above them all, and in some sense including them all, but loftier than these, there is the all-comprehending relation in which we stand to God, who is the fountain of all obligations, the source and aim of all duty, who encompasses us on every side, and whose will makes the boundary walls within which alone it is safe for a man to live.

We sometimes foolishly feel that a life thus hedged up, limited by these high boundaries on either side, must be uninteresting, monotonous, or unfree. It is not so. The walls are blessings, like the parapet on a mountain road, that keeps the travellers from toppling over the face of the cliff. They are training-walls, as our hydro-graphical engineers talk about, which, built in the bed of a river, wholesomely confine its waters and make a good scour which gives life, instead of letting them vaguely wander and stagnate across great fields of mud. Freedom consists in keeping willingly within the limits which God has traced, and anything else is not freedom but licence and rebellion, and at bottom servitude of the most abject type.

**II. So, secondly, note that every attempt to break down the limitations brings poison into the life.**

We live in a great automatic system which, by its own operation, largely avenges every breach of law. I need not remind you, except in a word, of the way in which the transgression of the plain physical laws stamped upon our constitutions avenges itself; but the certainty with which disease dogs all breaches of the laws of health is but a type in the lower and material universe of the far higher and more solemn certainty with which the soul that sinneth, it shall die. Wherever a man sets himself against any of the laws of this material universe, they make short work of him. We command them, as I said, by obeying them; and the difference between the obedience and the breach of them is the difference between the engineer standing on his engine and the wretch that is caught by it as it rushes over the rails. But that is but a parable of the higher thing which I want to speak to you about.

The grosser forms of transgression of the plain laws of temperance, abstinence, purity, bring with them, in like manner, a visible and palpable punishment in the majority of cases. Whoso pulls down the wall of temperance, a serpent will bite him. Trembling hands, broken constitutions, ruined reputations, vanished ambitions, wasted lives, poverty, shame, and enfeebled will, death--these are the serpents that bite, in many cases, the transgressor. I have a man in my eye at this moment that used to sit in one of these pews, who came into Manchester a promising young man, a child of many prayers, with the ball at his foot, in one of your great warehouses, the only hope of his house, professedly a Christian. He began to tamper with the wall. First a tiny little bit of stone taken out that did not show the daylight through; then a little bigger, and a bigger. And the serpent struck its fangs into him, and if you saw him now, he is a shambling wreck, outside of society, and, as we sometimes tremblingly think, beyond hope. Young men! whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.

In like manner there are other forms of sins of the flesh avenged in kind, which I dare not speak about more plainly here. I see many young men in my congregation, many strangers in this great city, living, I suppose, in lodgings, and therefore without many restraints. If you were to take a pair of compasses and place one leg of them down at the Free Trade Hall, and take a circle of half a mile round there, you would get a cavern of rattlesnakes. You know what I mean. Low theatres, low music-halls, casinos, haunts of yet viler sorts--there the snakes are, hissing and writhing and ready to bite. Do not put your hand on the hole of the asp. Take care of books, pictures, songs, companions that would lead you astray. Oh for a voice to stand at some doors that I know in Manchester, and peal this text into the ears of the fools, men and women, that go in there!

I heard only this week of one once in a good position in this city, and in early days, I believe, a member of my own congregation, begging in rags from door to door. And the reason was, simply, the wall had been pulled down and the serpent had struck. It always does; not with such fatal external effects always, but be ye sure of this, God is not mocked; "whatsoever a man," or a woman either, "soweth, that shall he also reap." For remember that there are other ways of pulling down walls than these gross and palpable transgressions with the body; and there are other sorts of retributions which come with unerring certainty besides those that can be taken notice of by others. I do not want to dwell upon these at any length, but let me just remind you of one or two of them.

Some serpents bites inflame, some paralyse; and one or other of these two things--either an inflamed conscience or a palsied conscience--is the result of all wrongdoing. I do not know which is the worst. There are men and women now in this chapel, sitting listening to me, perhaps half interested, without the smallest suspicion that I am talking about them. The serpent's bite has led to the torpor of their consciences. Which is the worse--to loathe my sin and yet to find its slimy coils round about me, so that I cannot break it, or to have got to like it and to be perfectly comfortable in it, and to have no remonstrance within when I do it? Be sure of this, that every transgression and disobedience acts immediately upon the conscience of the doer, sometimes to stir that conscience into agonies of gnawing remorse, more often to lull it into a fatal slumber.

I do not speak of the retributions which we heap upon ourselves in loading our memories with errors and faults, in polluting them often with vile imaginations, or in laying up there a lifelong series of actions, none of which have ever had a trace of reference to God in them. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the retribution which comes from the habit of evil which weighs upon men, and makes it all but impossible for them ever to shake off their sin. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the perverted relations to God, the incapacity of knowing Him, the disregard, and even sometimes the dislike, of the thought of Him which steal across the heart of the man that lives in evil and sin; but I put all into two words--every sin that I do tells upon myself, inasmuch as its virus passes into my blood as guilt and as habit. And then I remind you of what you say you believe, that beyond this world there lies the solemn judgment-seat of God, where you and I have to give account of our deeds. O brother, be sure of this, whoso breaketh an hedge--here and now, and yonder also--a serpent shall bite him!

That is as far as my text carries me. It has nothing more to say. Am I to shut the book and have done? There is only one system that has anything more to say, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**III. And so, passing from my text, I have to say, lastly, All the poison may be got out of your veins if you like.**

Our Lord used this very same metaphor under a different aspect, and with a different historical application, when He said, As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

There is Christ's idea of the condition of this world of ours--a camp of men lying bitten by serpents and drawing near to death. What I have been speaking about, in perhaps too abstract terms, is the condition of each one of us. It is hard to get people, when they are gathered by the hundred to listen to a sermon flung out in generalities, to realise it. If I could get you one by one, and buttonhole you; and instead of the plural you use the singular thou, perhaps I could reach you. But let me ask you to try and realise each for himself that this serpent bite, as the issue of pulling down the wall, is true about each soul in this place, and that Christ endorsed the representation. How are we to get this poison out of the blood? Reform your ways? Yes; I say that too; but reforming the life will deliver from the poison in the character, when you cure hydrophobia by washing the patient's skin, and not till then. It is all very well to repaper your dining-rooms, but it is very little good doing that if the drainage is wrong. It is the drainage that is wrong with us all. A man cannot reform himself down to the bottom of his sinful being. If he could, it does not touch the past. That remains the same. If he could, it does not affect his relation to God. Repentance--if it were possible apart from the softening influence of faith in Jesus Christ--repentance alone would not solve the problem. So far as men can see, and so far as all human systems have declared, What I have written I have written. There is no erasing it. The irrevocable past stands stereotyped for ever. Then comes in this message of forgiveness and cleansing, which is the very heart of all that we preachers have to say, and has been spoken to most of you so often that it is almost impossible to invest it with any kind of freshness or power. But once more I have to preach to you that Christ has received into His own inmost life and self the whole gathered consequences of a world's sin; and by the mystery of His sympathy, and the reality of His mysterious union with us men, He, the sinless Son of God, has been made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The brazen serpent lifted on the pole was in the likeness of the serpent whose poison slew, but there was no poison in it. Christ has come, the sinless Son of God, for you and me. He has died on the Cross, the Sacrifice for every man's sin, that every man's wound might be healed, and the poison cast out of his veins. He has bruised the malignant, black head of the snake with His wounded heel; and because He has been wounded, we are healed of our wounds. For sin and death launched their last dart at Him, and, like some venomous insect that can sting once and then must die, they left their sting in His wounded heart, and have none for them that put their trust in Him.

So, dear brother, here is the simple condition--namely, faith. One look of the languid eye of the poisoned man, howsoever bloodshot and dim it might be, and howsoever nearly veiled with the film of death, was enough to make him whole. The look of our consciously sinful souls to that dear Christ that has died for us will take away the guilt, the power, the habit, the love of evil; and, instead of blood saturated with the venom of sin, there will be in our veins the Spirit of life in Christ, which will make us free from the law of sin and death. Look unto Him and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth!