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

**ECCLESIASTES-011. THE WAY TO THE CITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city."*

*Ecclesiastes 10:15*

On the surface this seems to be merely a piece of homely, practical sagacity, conjoined with one of the bitter things which Ecclesiastes is fond of saying about those whom he calls fools. It seems to repeat, under another metaphor, the same idea which has been presented in a previous verse, where we read: If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength; but wisdom is profitable to direct. That is to say, skill is better than strength; brain saves muscle; better sharpen your axe than put yourself into a perspiration, hitting fierce blows with a blunt one. The prerogative of wisdom is to guide brute force. And so in my text the same general idea comes under another figure. Immense effort may end in nothing but tired feet if the traveller does not know his road. A man lost in the woods may run till he drops, and find himself at night in the place from which he started in the morning. The path must be known, and the aim clear, if any good is to come of effort.

That phrase, how to go to the city, seems to be a kind of proverbial comparison for anything that is very plain and conspicuous, just as our forefathers used to say about any obvious truth, that it was as plain as the road to London town. The road to the capital is sure to be a well-marked one, and he must be a fool indeed who cannot see that. So our text, though on the surface, as I say, is simply a sarcasm and a piece of homely, practical sagacity, yet, like almost all the sayings in this Book of Ecclesiastes, it has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface; and may be applied in higher and more important directions. It carries with it large truths, and enshrines in a vivid metaphor bitter experiences which, I suppose, we can all confirm.

**I. We consider, first, the toil that tires.**

The labour wearies every one of them. The word translated labour seems to carry with it both the idea of effort and of trouble. Or to recur to a familiar distinction in modern English, the word really covers both the ground of work and of worry. And it is a sad and solemn thought that a word with that double element in it should be the one which is most truly applicable to the efforts of a large majority of men. I suppose there never was a time in the world's history when life went so fast as it does in these great centres of civilisation and commerce in which you and I live. And it is awful to have to think that the great mass of it all ends in nothing else but tired limbs and exhaustion. That is a truth to be verified by experience, and I am bold to believe that every man and woman in this chapel now can say more or less distinctly Amen! to the assertion that every life, except a distinctly and supremely religious one, is worry and work without adequate satisfying result, and with no lasting issue but exhaustion.

Let us begin at the bottom. For instance, take a man who has avowedly flung aside the restraints of right and wrong and conscience, and does things habitually that he knows to be wrong. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. No man who aims at an end through the smoke of hell gets the end that he aims at. Or if he does, he gets something that takes all the gilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the success. They put a very evil-tasting ingredient into spirits of wine to prevent its being drunk. The cup that sin reaches to a man, though the wine moveth itself aright and is very pleasant to look at before being tasted, cheats with methylated spirits. Men and women take more pains and trouble to damn themselves than ever they do to have their souls saved. The end of all work, which begins with tossing conscience on one side, is simply this--The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them.

Take a step higher--a respectable, well-to-do Manchester man, successful in business. He has made it his aim to build up a large concern, and has succeeded. He has a fine house, carriages, greenhouses; he has J.P. to his name; he stands high in credit and on Change. His name is one that gives respectability to anything that it is connected with. Has he come to the city? Has he got what he thought he would get when he began his career? He has succeeded in his immediate and smaller purpose; has that immediate and smaller purpose succeeded in bringing him what he thought it would bring him? Or has he fallen a victim to those--

Juggling fiends ...

That palter with us in a double sense;

That keep the word of promise to the ear,

And break it to the hope?

They tell us that if you put down in one column the value of the ore that has been extracted from all the Australian gold-mines, and in another the amount that it has cost to get it, the latter sum will exceed the former. There are plenty of people in Manchester who have put more down into the pit from which they dig their wealth than ever they will get out of it. And their labour, too, leaves a very dark and empty aching centre in their lives, and wearieth every one of them. And so I might go the whole round. We students, so long as our pursuit of knowledge has not in it as supreme, directing motive, and ultimate aim and issue, the glory and the service of God, come under the lash of the same condemnation as those grosser and lower forms of life of which I have been speaking. But wherever we look, if there be not in the heart and in the life a supreme regard to God and a communion with Him, then this characteristic is common to all the courses, that, whilst they may each meet some immediate and partial necessity of our natures, none of them is adequate for the whole circumference of a man's being, nor any of them able, during the whole duration of that being, to be his satisfaction and his rest. Therefore, I say, all toil, however successful to the view of a shorter range of vision, and however noble--excluding the noblest of all--all toil that ends only in securing that which perishes with the using, or that which we leave behind us here when we pass hence, is condemned for folly and labour that wearies the men who are fools enough to surrender themselves to it.

I need not remind you of the wonderful variety of metaphor under which that threadbare thought, which yet it is so hard for us to believe and make operative in our lives, is represented to us in Scripture. Just let me recall one or two of them in the briefest way. Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which profiteth not? They have hewn for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Their webs shall not become garments. That may want a word of explanation. The metaphor is this. You are all like spiders spinning carefully and diligently your web. There is not substance enough in it to make a coat out of. You will never cover yourselves with the product of your own brains or your own efforts. There is no clothing in the spider's webs of a godless life.

Ah! brother, all these earthly aims which some of my friends listening to me now have for the sole aims of their lives, are as foolish and as inadequate to accomplish that which is sought for by them, as it would be to seek to quench raging thirst by lifting to the lips a golden cup that is empty. Some of us have a whole sideboard full of such, and vary our pursuits according to inclination and task. Some of us have only one such, but they are all empty, and the lip is parched after the cup has been lifted to it as it was before.

**II. And so, consider now, secondly, the foolish ignorance that makes the toil tiresome.**

The metaphor of my text says that the reason why the fool is so wearied after the day's march is that he does not in the morning settle where he is going, and how he is to get there; and so, having started to go nowhither, he has got where he started for. He does not know how to go to the city--which, being translated into plain and unmetaphorical English, is just this, that many men wreck their lives for want of a clear sight of their true aim, and of the way to secure it.

There is nothing more tragical than the absence, in the great bulk of men, of anything like deliberate, definite views as to their aim in life, and the course to be taken to secure it. There are two things obviously necessary for success in any enterprise. One is, that there shall be the most definite and clear conception of what is aimed at; and the other, that there shall be a wisely considered plan to get at it. Unless there be these, if you go at random, running a little way for a moment in this direction, and then heading about and going in the other, you cannot expect to get to the goal.

Now, what I want to ask some of my friends here is, Did you ever give ten deliberate minutes to try to face for yourselves, and put into plain words, what you are living for, and how you mean to secure it? Of course I know that you have given thought and planning in plenty to the nearer aims, without which material life cannot be lived at all. I do not suppose that anybody here is chargeable with not having thought enough about how to get on in business, or in their chosen walk of life. It is not that kind of aim which I mean at all; but it is a point beyond it that I want to press upon you. You are like men who would carefully victual a ship and take the best information for their guide as to what course to lie, and had never thought what they were going to do when they got to the port. So you say, I am going to be such-and-such a thing. Well, what then? Well, I am going to lay myself out for success. Be it commercial, be it intellectual, be it social, be it in the sphere of the affections, or whatever it may be. Well, what then? Well, then I am going to advance in material prosperity, I hope, or in wisdom, or to be surrounded by loving faces of children and those that are dear to me. What then? Then I am going to die. What then?

It is not till you get to that last question, and have faced it and answered it, that you can be said to have taken the whole sweep of the circumstances into view, and regulated your course according to the dictates of common sense and right reason. And a terribly large number of us live with careful adaptation of means to ends in regard of all the smaller and more immediately to be realised aims of life, but have never faced the larger question which reduces all these smaller aims to insignificance. The simple child's interrogation which in the well-known ballad ripped the tinsel off the skeleton, and showed war in its hideousness, strips many of your lives of all pretence to be reasonable. What good came of it at the last? Can you answer the question that the infant lips asked, and say, This good will come of it at last. That I shall have God for my own, and Jesus Christ in my heart?

Brother! if I could only get you to this point, that you would take half an hour now to think over what you ought to be, and to ask yourself whether your aims in life correspond to what your aims should be, I should have done more than I am afraid I shall do with some of you. The naturalist can tell when he picks up a skeleton something of the habits and the element of the creature to which it belonged. If it has a hollow sternum he knows it is meant to fly. On your nature is impressed unmistakably that your destiny is not to creep, but to soar. Not in vain does the Westminster Catechism lay the foundation of everything in this, the prime question for all men, What is the chief end of man? Ask that, and do not rest till you have answered it.

Then there is another idea connected with this ignorance of my text--viz. that it is the result of folly. Now the words folly and foolish and foolishness, and their opposites, wisdom and wise, in this Book of Ecclesiastes, as in the Book of Proverbs, do not mean merely dull stupidity intellectually, which is a thing for which a man is to be pitied rather than to be blamed, but they always carry besides the idea of intellectual defect, also the idea of moral obliquity. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and, conversely, the absence of that fear is the foundation of that which this writer stigmatises as folly He is not merely sneering at men with small brains and little judgments. There may be plenty of us who are so, and yet are wise unto salvation and possessed of a far higher wisdom than that of this world. But he tells us that so strangely intertwined are the intellectual and moral parts of our nature, that wheresoever there is the obscuration of the latter there is sure to be the perversion of the former, and the man knows not how to go to the city because he is foolish.

That is to say, you go wrong in your judgment about your conduct because you have gone wrong morally. And your blunders about life, and your ignorance of its true end and aim, and your mistakes as to how to secure happiness and blessedness, are your own faults, and are owing to the aversion of your nature from that which is highest and noblest, even God and His service. Therefore you are not only to be pitied because you are out of the road, but to be blamed because you have darkened the eyes of your mind by loving the darkness rather than the light. And you do not know how to go to the city, because you do not want to go to the city, and would rather huddle here in the wilderness, and live upon its poor supplies, than pass within the golden gates. My brethren! the folly which blinds a man to his true aim and mission in life is a folly which has in it the darker aspect of sin, and is punishable as such.

**III. Lastly, note the plain path which the foolish miss.**

He does not know how to go to the city. What on earth will he be able to see if he cannot see that broad highway, beaten and white, stretching straight before him, over hill and dale, and going right to the gates? A man must be a fool who cannot find the way to London.

The principles of moral conduct are trite and obvious. It is plain that it is better to be good than bad. It is better to be unselfish than selfish. It is better not to live for things that perish, seeing that we are going to last for ever. It is better not to make the flesh our master here, seeing that the spirit will have to live without the flesh some day. It is better to get into training for the world to coma, seeing that we are all drifting thither. All these things are plain and obvious.

Man's destiny for God is unmistakable. Whose image and superscription hath it? said Christ about the coin. Caesar's! Then give it to Caesar. Whose image and superscription hath my heart, this restless heart of mine, this spirit that wanders on through space and time, homeless and comfortless, until it can grasp the Eternal? Who are you meant for? God! And every fibre of your nature has a voice to say so to you if you listen to it. So, then, a godless life such as some of you, my hearers, are contentedly living, ignores facts that are most patent to every man's experience. And while before you, huge as a mountain, open, palpable, are the commonplaces and undeniable verities which declare that every man who is not a God-fearing man is a fool, you admit them all, and, bowing your heads in reverence, let them all go over you and produce no effect.

The road is clearer than ever since Jesus Christ came. He has shown us the city, for He has brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel. He has shown us the road, for His life is the pattern of all that men ought to aim at and to be. The motto of the eternal Son of God, if I may venture upon such a metaphor, is like the motto of the heir-apparent of the English throne, I serve. Lo! I come to do Thy will--and that is the only word which will make a human life peaceful and strong and beautiful. In the presence of His radiant and solitary perfection, men no longer need to wonder, What is the ideal to which conduct and character should be conformed? And Jesus Christ has come to make it possible to go to the city, by that cross on which He bore the burden of all sin, and takes away the sin of the world, and by that Spirit of life which He will impart to our weakness, and which makes our sluggish feet run in the way of His commandments, and not be weary, and walk and not faint.

Take that dear Lord for your revelation of duty, for your Pattern of conduct, for the forgiveness of your sins, for the Inspirer with power to do His will, and then you will see stretching before you, high up above the surrounding desert, so that no lion nor ravenous beast shall go up there, the highway on which the ransomed of the Lord shall walk, and the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein. Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may enter in through the gates into the City.