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

**ECCLESIASTES-013. THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; 2. While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain; 3. In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, 4. And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; 5. Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: 6. Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. 7. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.... 13. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. 14. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."*

*Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, 13-14*

The Preacher has passed in review all the works that are done under the sun, and has now reached the end of his long investigation. It has been a devious path. He has announced many provisional conclusions, which are not intended for ultimate truths, but rather represent the progress of the soul towards the final, sufficient ground and object of belief and aim of all life, even God Himself. Vanity of vanities is a cheerless creed and a half-truth. Its completion lies in being driven, by recognising vanity as stamped on all creatures, to clasp the one reality. All is vanity apart from God, but He is fullness, and possessed and enjoyed and endured in Him, life is not a striving after wind. Leave out this last section, and this book of so-called Wisdom is one-sided and therefore error, as is modern pessimism, which only says more feebly what the Preacher had said long ago. Take the rest of the book as the autobiography of a seeker after reality, and this last section as his declaration of where he had found it, and all the previous parts fall into their right places.

Our passage omits the first portion of the closing section, which is needed in order to set the counsel to remember the Creator in its right relation. Observe that, properly rendered, the advice in verse 1 is remember also, and that takes us back to the end of the preceding chapter. There the young are exhorted to enjoy the bright, brief blossom-time of their youth, withal keeping the consciousness of responsibility for its employment. In earlier parts of the book similar advice had been given, but based on different grounds. Here religion and full enjoyment of youthful buoyancy and delight in fresh, unhackneyed, homely pleasures are proclaimed to be perfectly compatible. The Preacher had no idea that a devout young man or woman was to avoid pleasures natural to their age. Only he wished their joy to be pure, and the stern law that whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap to be kept in mind. Subject to that limitation, or rather that guiding principle, it is not only allowable, but commanded, to put away sorrow and evil. Young people are often liable to despondent moods, which come over them like morning mists, and these have to be fought against. The duty of joy is the more imperative on the young because youth flies so fast, or, as the Preacher says, is vanity.

Now these advices sound very like the base incitements to sensual and unworthy delight which poets of the meaner sort, and some, alas! of the nobler in their meaner moments, have presented. But this writer is no teacher of Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, and wicked trash of that sort. Therefore he brings side by side with these advices the other of our passage. That also saves the former from being misused, just as the thought of judgment did.

That possible combination of hearty, youthful glee and true religion is the all-important lesson of this passage. The word for Creator is in the plural number, according to the Hebrew idiom, which thereby expresses supremacy or excellence. The name of Creator carries us back to Genesis, and suggests one great reason for the injunction. It is folly to forget Him on whom we depend for being; it is ingratitude to forget, in the midst of the enjoyments of our bright, early days, Him to whom we owe them all. The advice is specially needed; for youth has so much, that is delightful in its novelty, to think about, and the world, on both its innocent and its sinful side, appeals to it so strongly, that the Creator is only too apt to be crowded out of view by His works. The temptation of the young is to live in the present. Reflection belongs to older heads; spontaneous action is more characteristic of youth. Therefore, they specially need to make efforts to bring clearly to their thoughts both the unseen future and Him who is invisible. The advice is specially suitable for them; for what is begun early is likely to last and be strong.

It is hard for older men, stiffened into habits, and with less power and love of taking to new courses, to turn to God, if they have forgotten Him in early days. Conversion is possible at any age, but it is less likely as life goes on. The most of men who are Christians have become so in the formative period between boyhood and thirty. After that age, the probabilities of radical change diminish rapidly. So, Remember ... in the days of thy youth, or the likelihood is that you will never remember. To say, I mean to have my fling, and I shall turn over a new leaf when I am older, is to run dreadful risk. Perhaps you will never be older. Probably, if you are, you will not want to turn the leaf. If you do, what a shame it is to plan to give God only the dregs of life! You need Him, quite as much, if not more, now in the flush of youth as in old age. Why should you rob yourself of years of blessing, and lay up bitter memories of wasted and polluted moments? If ever you turn to God in your older days, nothing will be so painful as the remembrance that you forgot Him so long.

The advice is further important, because it presents the only means of delivering life from the vanity which the Preacher found in it all. Therefore he sets it at the close of his meditations. This is the practical outcome of them all. Forget God, and life is a desert. Remember Him, and the desert will rejoice and blossom as the rose.

The verses from the middle of verse 1 to the end of verse 7 enforce the exhortation by the consideration of what will certainly follow youth, and advise remembrance of the Creator before that future comes. So much is clear, but the question of the precise meaning of these verses is much too large for discussion here. The older explanation takes them for an allegory representing the decay of bodily and mental powers in old age, whilst others think that in them the advance of death is presented under the image of an approaching storm. Wright, in his valuable commentary, regards the description of the gradual waning away of life in old age, in the first verses, as being set forth under images drawn from the closing days of the Palestinian winter, which are dreaded as peculiarly unhealthy, while verse 4b and verse 5 present the advent of spring, and contrast the new life in animals and plants with the feebleness of the man dying in his chamber and unable to eat. Still another explanation is that the whole is part of a dirge, to be taken literally, and describing the mourners in house and garden. I venture, though with some hesitation, to prefer, on the whole, the old allegorical theory, for reasons which it would be impossible to condense here. It is by no means free from difficulty, but is, as I think, less difficult than any of its rivals.

Interpreters who adopt it differ somewhat in the explanation of particular details, but, on the whole, one can see in most of the similes sufficient correspondence for a poet, however foreign to modern taste such a long-drawn and minute allegory may be. The keepers of the house are naturally the arms; the strong men, the legs; the grinding women, the teeth; the women who look out at the windows, the eyes; the doors shut towards the street, either the lips or, more probably, the ears. The sound of the grinding, which is low, is by some taken to mean the feeble mastication of toothless gums, in which case the doors are the lips, and the figure of the mill is continued. Arising at the voice of the bird may describe the light sleep or insomnia of old age; but, according to some, with an alteration of rendering (The voice riseth into a sparrow's), it is the childish treble of Shakespeare. The former is the more probable rendering and reference. The allegory is dropped in verse 5a, which describes the timid walk of the old, but is resumed in the almond trees shall flourish; that is, the hair is blanched, as the almond blossom, which is at first delicate pink, but fades into white. The next clause has an appropriate meaning in the common translation, as vividly expressing the loss of strength, but it is doubtful whether the verb here used ever means to be a burden. The other explanations of the clause are all strained. The next clause is best taken, as in the Revised Version, as describing the failure of appetite, which the stimulating caper-berry is unable to rouse. All this slow decay is accounted for, because the man is going to his long home, and already the poet sees the mourners gathering for the funeral procession.

The connection of the long-drawn-out picture of senile decay with the advice to remember the Creator needs no elucidation. That period of failing powers is no time to begin remembering God. How dreary, too, it will be, if God is not the strength of the heart, when heart and flesh fail! Therefore it is plain common sense, in view of the future, not to put off to old age what will bless youth, and keep the advent of old age from being wretched.

Verses 6 and 7 still more stringently enforce the precept by pointing, not to the slow approach, but to the actual arrival of death. If a future of possible weakness and gradual creeping in on us of death is reason for the exhortation, much more is the certainty that the crash of dissolution will come. The allegory is partially resumed in these verses. The golden bowl is possibly the head, and, according to some, the silver cord is the spinal marrow, while others think rather of the bowl or lamp as meaning the body, and the cord the soul which, as it were, holds it up. The pitcher is the heart, and the wheel the organs of respiration. Be this as it may, the general thought is that death comes, shivering the precious reservoir of light, and putting an end to drawing of life from the Fountain of bodily life. Surely these are weighty reasons for the Preacher's advice. Surely it is well for young hearts sometimes to remember the end, and to ask, What will ye do in the end? and to do before the end what is so hard to begin doing at the end, and so needful to have done if the end is not to be worse than vanity.

The collapse of the body is not the end of the man, else the whole force of the argument in the preceding verses would disappear. If death is annihilation, what reason is there for seeking God before it comes? Therefore verse 7 is no interpolation to bring a sceptical book into harmony with orthodox Jewish belief, as some commentators affirm. The contradiction between it and Ecclesiastes iii. 21 is alleged as proof of its having been thus added. But there is no contradiction. The former passage is interrogative, and, like all the earlier part of the book, sets forth, not the Preacher's ultimate convictions, but a phase through which he passed on his way to these. It is because man is twofold, and at death the spirit returns to its divine Giver, that the exhortation of verse 1 is pressed home with such earnestness.

The closing verses are confidently asserted to be, like verse 7, additions in the interests of Jewish orthodoxy. But Ecclesiastes is made out to be a sceptical book by expelling these from the text, and then the character thus established is taken to prove that they are not genuine. It is a remarkably easy but not very logical process.

The end of the matter when all is heard, is, to fear God and keep His commandments. The inward feeling of reverent awe which does not exclude love, and the outward life of conformity to His will, is the whole duty of man, or the duty of every man. And that plain summary of all that men need to know for practical guidance is enforced by the consideration of future judgment, which, by its universal sweep and all-revealing light, must mean the judgment in another life.

Happy they who, through devious mazes of thought and act, have wandered seeking for the vision of any good, and having found all to be vanity, have been led at last to rest, like the dove in the ark, in the broad simplicity of the truth that all which any man needs for blessedness in the buoyancy of fresh youthful strength and in the feebleness of decaying age, in the stress of life, in the darkness of death, and in the day of judgment, is to fear God and keep His commandments!