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

**EZEKIEL-002. A COMMON MISTAKE AND LAME EXCUSE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... He prophesieth of the times that are far off."*

*Ezekiel 12:27*

Human nature was very much the same in the exiles that listened to Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar and in Manchester to-day. The same neglect of God's message was grounded then on the same misapprehension of its bearings which profoundly operates in the case of many people now. Ezekiel had been proclaiming the fall of Jerusalem to the exiles whose captivity preceded it by a few years; and he was confronted by the incredulity which fancied that it had a great many facts to support it, and so it generalised God's long-suffering delay in sending the threatened punishment into a scoffing proverb which said, The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth. To translate it into plain English, the prophets had cried Wolf! wolf! so long that their alarms were disbelieved altogether.

Even the people that did not go the length of utter unbelief in the prophetic threatening took the comfortable conclusion that these threatenings had reference to a future date, and they need not trouble themselves about them. And so they said, according to my text, They of the house of Israel say, The vision that he sees is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off. It may be all quite true, but it lies away in the distant future there; and things will last our time, so we do not need to bother ourselves about what he says.

So the imagined distance of fulfilment turned the edge of the plainest denunciations, and was like wool stuffed in the people's ears to deaden the reverberations of the thunder.

I wonder if there is anybody here now whom that fits, who meets the preaching of the gospel with a shrug, and with this saying, He prophesies of the times that are far off. I fancy that there are a few; and I wish to say a word or two about this ground on which the widespread disregard of the divine message is based.

**I. First, then, notice that the saying of my text--in the application which I now seek to make of it--is a truth, but it is only half a truth.**

Of course, Ezekiel was speaking simply about the destruction of Jerusalem. If it had been true, as his hearers assumed, that that was not going to happen for a good many years yet, the chances were that it had no bearing upon them, and they were right enough in neglecting the teaching. And, of course, when I apply such a word as this in the direction in which I wish to do now, we do bring in a different set of thoughts; but the main idea remains the same. The neglect of God's solemn message by a great many people is based, more or less consciously, upon the notion that the message of Christianity--or, if you like to call it so, of the gospel; or, if you like to call it more vaguely, religion--has to do mainly with blessings and woes beyond the grave, and that there is plenty of time to attend to it when we get nearer the end.

Now is it true that he prophesies of times that are far off? Yes! and No! Yes! it is true, and it is the great glory of Christianity that it shifts the centre of gravity, so to speak, from this poor, transient, contemptible present, and sets it away out yonder in an august and infinite future. It brings to us not only knowledge of the future, but certitude, and takes the conception of another life out of the region of perhapses, possibilities, dreads, or hopes, as the case may be, and sets it in the sunlight of certainty. There is no more mist. Other faiths, even when they have risen to the height of some contemplation of a future, have always seen it wrapped in nebulous clouds of possibilities, but Christianity sets it clear, definite, solid, as certain as yesterday, as certain as to-day.

It not only gives us the knowledge and the certitude of the times that are afar off, and that are not times but eternities, but it gives us, as the all-important element in that future, that its ruling characteristic is retribution. It brings life and immortality to light, and just because it does, it brings the dark orb which, like some of the double stars in the heavens, is knit to the radiant sphere by a necessary band. It brings to light, with life and immortality, death and woe. It is true--he prophesies of times that are far off and it is the glory of the gospel of Christ's revelation, and of the religion that is based thereon, that its centre is beyond the grave, and that its eye is so often turned to the clearly discerned facts that lie there.

But is that all that we have to say about Christianity? Many representations of it, I am free to confess, from pulpits and books and elsewhere, do talk as if that was all, as if it was a magnificent thing to have when you came to die. As the play has it, I said to him that I hoped there was no need that he should think about God yet, because he was not going to die. But I urge you to remember, dear brethren, that all that prophesying of times that are far off has the closest bearing upon this transient, throbbing moment, because, for one thing, one solemn part of the Christian revelation about the future is that Time is the parent of Eternity, and that, in like manner as in our earthly course the child is father of the man, so the man as he has made himself is the author of himself as he will be through the infinite spaces that lie beyond the grave. Therefore, when a Christian preacher prophesies of times that are afar off, he is prophesying of present time, between which and the most distant eternity there is an iron nexus--a band which cannot be broken.

Nor is that all. Not only is the truth in my text but a half truth, if it is supposed that the main business of the gospel is to talk to us about heaven and hell, and not about the earth on which we secure and procure the one or the other; but also it is a half truth because, large and transcendent, eternal in their duration, and blessed beyond all thought in their sweetness as are the possibilities, the certainties that are opened by the risen and ascended Christ, and tremendous beyond all words that men can speak as are the alternative possibilities, yet these are not all the contents of the gospel message; but those blessings and penalties, joys and miseries, exaltations and degradations, which attend upon righteousness and sin, godliness and irreligion to-day are a large part of its theme and of its effects. Therefore, whilst on the one hand it is true, blessed be Christ's name! that he prophesies of times that are far off; on the other hand it is an altogether inadequate description of the gospel message and of the Christian body of truth to say that the future is its realm, and not the present.

**II. So, then, in the second place, my text gives a very good reason for prizing and attending to the prophecy.**

If it is true that God, speaking through the facts of Christ's death and Resurrection and Ascension, has given to us the sure and certain hope of immortality, and has declared to us plainly the conditions upon which that immortality may be ours, and the woful loss and eclipse into the shadow of which we shall stumble darkling if it is not ours, then surely that is a reason for prizing and laying to heart, and living by the revelation so mercifully made. People do not usually kick over their telescopes, and neglect to look through them, because they are so powerful that they show them the craters in the moon and turn faint specks into blazing suns. People do not usually neglect a word of warning or guidance in reference to the ordering of their earthly lives because it is so comprehensive, and covers so large a ground, and is so certain and absolutely true. Surely there can be no greater sign of divine loving-kindness, of a Saviour's tenderness and care for us, than that He should come to each of us, as He does come, and say to each of us, Thou art to live for ever; and if thou wilt take Me for thy Life, thou shalt live for ever, blessed, calm, and pure. And we listen, and say, He prophesies of times that are far off! Oh! is that not rather a reason for coming very close to, and for grappling to our hearts and living always by the power of, that great revelation? Surely to announce the consequences of evil, and to announce them so long beforehand that there is plenty of time to avoid them and to falsify the prediction, is the token of love.

Now I wish to lay it on the hearts of you people who call yourselves Christians, and who are so in some imperfect degree, whether we do at all adequately regard, remember, and live by this great mercy of God, that He should have prophesied to us of the times that are far off. Perhaps I am wrong, but I cannot help feeling that, for this generation, the glories of the future rest with God have been somewhat paled, and the terrors of the future unrest away from God have been somewhat lightened. I hope I am wrong, but I do not think that the modern average Christian thinks as much about heaven as his father did. And I believe that his religion has lost something of its buoyancy, of its power, of its restraining and stimulating energy, because, from a variety of reasons, the bias of this generation is rather to dwell upon, and to realise, the present social blessings of Christianity than to project itself into that august future. The reaction may be good. I have no doubt it was needed, but I think it has gone rather too far, and I would beseech Christian men and women to try and deserve more the sarcasm that is flung at us that we live for another world. Would God it were true--truer than it is! We should see better work done in this world if it were. So I say, that he prophesieth of times that are far off is a good reason for prizing and obeying the prophet.

**III. Lastly, this is a very common and a very bad reason for neglecting the prophecy.**

It does operate as a reason for giving little heed to the prophet, as I have been saying. In the old men-of-war, when an engagement was impending, they used to bring up the hammocks from the bunks and pile them into the nettings at the side of the ship, to defend it from boarders and bullets. And then, after these had served their purpose of repelling, they were taken down again and the crew went to sleep upon them. That is exactly what some of my friends do with that misconception of the genius of Christianity which supposes that it is concerned mainly with another world. They put it up as a screen between them and God, between them and what they know to be their duty--viz., the acceptance of Christ as their Saviour. It is their hammock that they put between the bullets and themselves; and many a good sleep they get upon it!

Now, that strange capacity that men have of ignoring a certain future is seen at work all round about us in every region of life. I wonder how many young men there are in Manchester to-day that have begun to put their foot upon the wrong road, and who know just as well as I do that the end of it is disease, blasted reputation, ruined prospects, perhaps an early death. Why! there is not a drunkard in the city that does not know that. Every man that takes opium knows it. Every unclean, unchaste liver knows it; and yet he can hide the thought from himself, and go straight on as if there was nothing at all of the sort within the horizon of possibility. It is one of the most marvellous things that men have that power; only beaten by the marvel that, having it, they should be such fools as to choose to exercise it. The peasants on the slopes of Vesuvius live very careless lives, and they have their little vineyards and their olives. Yes, and every morning when they come out, they can look up and see the thin wreath of smoke going up in the dazzling blue, and they know that some time or other there will be a roar and a rush, and down will come the lava. But a short life and a merry one is the creed of a good many of us, though we do not like to confess it. Some of you will remember the strange way in which ordinary habits survived in prisons in the dreadful times of the French Revolution, and how ladies and gentlemen, who were going to have their heads chopped off next morning, danced and flirted, and sat at entertainments, just as if there was no such thing in the world as the public prosecutor and the tumbril, and the gaoler going about with a bit of chalk to mark each door where were the condemned for next day.

That same strange power of ignoring a known future, which works so widely and so disastrously round about us, is especially manifested in regard to religion. The great bulk of English men and women who are not Christians, and the little sample of such that I have in my audience now, as a rule believe as fully as we do the truths which they agree to neglect. Let me speak to them individually. You believe that death will introduce you into a world of two halves--that if you have been a good, religious man, you will dwell in blessedness; that if you have not, you will not--yet you never did a single thing, nor refrained from a single thing, because of that belief. And when I, and men of my profession, come and plead with you and try to get through that strange web of insensibility that you have spun round you, you listen, and then you say, with a shrug, He prophesies of things that are far off. and you turn with relief to the trivialities of the day. Need I ask you whether that is a wise thing or not?

Surely it is not wise for a man to ignore a future that is certain simply because it is distant. So long as it is certain, what in the name of common-sense has the time when it begins to be a present to do with our wisdom in regard to it? It is the uncertainty in future anticipations which makes it unwise to regulate life largely by them, and if you can eliminate that element of uncertainty--which you can do if you believe in Jesus Christ--then the question is not when is the prophecy going to be fulfilled, but is it true and trustworthy? The man is a fool who, because it is far off, thinks he can neglect it.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future which is so incomparably greater than this present, and which also is so connected with this present as that life here is only intelligible as the vestibule and preparation for that great world beyond.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future because you fancy it is far away, when it may burst upon you at any time. These exiles to whom Ezekiel spoke hugged themselves in the idea that his words were not to be fulfilled for many days to come; but they were mistaken, and the crash of the fall of Jerusalem stunned them before many months had passed by. We have to look forward to a future which must be very near to some of us, which may be nearer to others than they think, which at the remotest is but a little way from us, and which must come to us all. Oh, dear friends, surely it is not wise to ignore as far off that which for some of us may be here before this day closes, which will probably be ours in some cases before the fresh young leaves now upon the trees have dropped yellow in the autumn frosts, which at the most distant must be very near us, and which waits for us all.

What would you think of the crew and passengers of some ship lying in harbour, waiting for its sailing orders, who had got leave on shore, and did not know but that at any moment the blue-peter might be flying at the fore--the signal to weigh anchor--if they behaved themselves in the port as if they were never going to embark, and made no preparations for the voyage? Let me beseech you to rid yourselves of that most unreasonable of all reasons for neglecting the gospel, that its most solemn revelations refer to the eternity beyond the grave.

There are many proofs that man on the whole is a very foolish creature, but there is not one more tragical than the fact that believing, as many of you do, that the wages of sin is death, and the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, you stand aloof from accepting the gift, and risk the death.

The times far off have long since come near enough to those scoffers. The most distant future will be present to you before you are ready for it, unless you accept Jesus Christ as your All, for time and for eternity. If you do, the time that is near will be pure and calm, and the times that are far off will be radiant with unfading bliss.