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

**EZEKIEL-003. THE HOLY NATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. 26. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. 27. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments, and do them. 28. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people, and I will be your God. 29. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you. 30. And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen. 31. Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations. 32. Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel. 33. Thus saith the Lord God; In the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities I will also cause you to dwell in the cities, and the wastes shall be builded. 34. And the desolate land shall be tilled, whereat; it lay desolate in the sight of all that passed by. 35. And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are become fenced, and are inhabited. 36. Then the heathen that are left round about you shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places, and plant that that was desolate: I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it. 37. Thus saith the Lord God; I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock. 38. As the holy flock, as the flock of Jerusalem in her solemn feasts; so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of men: and they shall know that I am the Lord."*

*Ezekiel 36:25-38*

This great prophecy had but a partial fulfilment, though a real one, in the restored Israel. The land was given back, the nation was multiplied, fertility again blessed the smiling fields and vineyards, and, best of all, the people were cleansed from all their idols by the furnace of affliction. Nothing is more remarkable than the transformation effected by the captivity, in regard to the idolatrous propensities of the people. Whereas before it they were always hankering after the gods of the nations, they came back from Babylon the resolute champions of monotheism, and never thereafter showed the smallest inclination for what had before been so irresistible.

But the fulness of Ezekiel's prophecy is not realised until Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant is brought to pass. Nor does the state of the militant church on earth exhaust it. Future glories gleam through the words. They have a springing accomplishment in the Israel of the restoration, a fuller in the New Testament church, and their ultimate realisation in the New Jerusalem, which shall yet descend to be the bride, the Lamb's wife. The principles involved in the prophecy belong to the region of purely spiritual religion, and are worth pondering, apart from any question of the place and manner of fulfilment.

First comes the great truth that the foundation, so far as concerns the history of a soul or of a community, of all other good is divine forgiveness (v. 25). Ezekiel, the priest, casts the promise into ceremonial form, and points to the sprinklings of the polluted under the law, or to the ritual of consecration to the priesthood. That cleansing is the removal of already contracted defilement, especially of the guilt of idolatry. It is clearly distinguished from the operation on the inward nature which follows; that is to say, it is the promise of forgiveness, or of justification, not of sanctification.

From what deep fountains in the divine nature that clean water was to flow, Ezekiel does not know; but we have learned that a more precious fluid than water is needed, and have to think of Him who came not by water only, but by water and blood, in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of our sins. But the central idea of this first promise is that it must be God's hand which sprinkles from an evil conscience. Forgiveness is a divine prerogative. He only can, and He will, cleanse from all filthiness. His pardon is universal. The most ingrained sins cannot be too black to melt away from the soul. The dye-stuffs of sin are very strong, but there is one solvent which they cannot resist. There are no fast colours which God's clean water cannot move. This cleansing of pardon underlies all the rest of the blessings. It is ever the first thing needful when a soul returns to God.

Then follows an equally exclusively divine act, the impartation of a new nature, which shall secure future obedience (vs. 26, 27). Who can thrust his hand into the depths of man's being, and withdraw one life-principle and enshrine another, while yet the individuality of the man remains untouched? God only. How profound the consciousness of universal obstinacy and insensibility which regards human nature, apart from such renewal, as possessing but a heart of stone! There are no sentimental illusions about the grim facts of humanity here. Superficial views of sin and rose-tinted fancies about human nature will not admit the truth of the Scripture doctrine of sinfulness, alienation from God. They diagnose the disease superficially, and therefore do not know how to cure it. The Bible can venture to give full weight to the gravity of the sickness, because it knows the remedy. No surgery but God's can perform that operation of extracting the stony heart and inserting a heart of flesh. No system which cannot do that can do what men want. The gospel alone deals thoroughly with man's ills.

And how does it effect that great miracle? I will put My Spirit within you. The new life-principle is the effluence of the Spirit of God. The promise does not merely offer the influence of a divine spirit, working on men as from without, or coming down upon them as an afflatus, but the actual planting of God's Spirit in the deep places of theirs. We fail to apprehend the most characteristic blessing of the gospel if we do not give full prominence to that great gift of an indwelling Spirit, the life of our lives. Cleansing is much, but is incomplete without a new life-principle which shall keep us clean; and that can only be God's Spirit, enshrined and operative within us; for only thus shall we walk in His statutes, and keep His judgments. When the Lawgiver dwells in our hearts, the law will be our delight; and keeping it will be the natural outcome and expression of our life, which is His life.

Then follows the picture of the blessed effects of obedience (vs. 28-30). These are cast into the form appropriate to the immediate purpose of the prophecy, and received fulfilment in the actual restoration to the land, which fulfilment, however, was imperfect, inasmuch as the obedience and renewal of the people's hearts were incomplete. These can only be complete under the gospel, and, in the fullest sense, only in another order than the present. When men fully keep God's judgments, they shall dwell permanently in a good land. Israel's hold on its country was its obedience, not its prowess. Our real hold on even earthly good is the choosing of God for our supreme good. In the measure in which we can say Thy law is within my heart, all things are ours; and we may possess all things while having nothing in the vulgar world's sense of having. Similarly that obedience, which is the fruit of the new life of God's Spirit in our spirits, is the condition of close mutual possession in the blessed reciprocity of trust and faithfulness, love bestowing and love receiving, by which the quiet heart knows that God is its, and it is God's. If stains and interruptions still sometimes break the perfectness of obedience and continuity of reciprocal ownership, there will be a further cleansing for such sins. If we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin (v. 29).

The lovely picture of the blessed dwellers in their good land is closed by the promise of abundant harvests from corn and fruit-tree; that is, all that nourishes or delights. The deepest truth taught thereby is that he who lives in God has no unsatisfied desires, but finds in Him all that can sustain, strengthen, and minister to growth, and all that can give gladness and delight. If we make God our heritage, we dwell secure in a good land; and the dust of that land is gold, and its harvests ever plenteous.

Very profoundly and beautifully does Ezekiel put as the last trait in his picture, and as the upshot of all this cornucopia of blessings, the penitent remembrance of past evils. Undeserved mercies steal into the heart like the breath of the south wind, and melt the ice. The more we advance in holiness and consequent blessed communion with God, the more clearly shall we see the evil of our past. Forgiven sin looks far blacker because it is forgiven. When we are not afraid of sin's consequences, we see more plainly its sinfulness. When we have tasted God's sweetness, we think with more shame of our ingratitude and folly. If God forgets, the more reason for us to remember our transgressions. The man who has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins is in danger of finding out that he is not purged from them. There is no gnawing of conscience, nor any fearful looking for of judgment in such remembrance, but a wholesome humility passing into thankful wonder that such sin is pardoned, and such a sinner made God's friend.

The deep foundation of all the blessedness is finally laid bare (v. 32) as being God's undeserved mercy. For Mine holy name (v. 22) is God's reason. He is His own motive, and He wills that the world should know His name,--that is, His manifested character,--and understand how loving and long-suffering He is. So He wills, not because such knowledge adds to His glory, but because it satisfies His love, since it will make the men who know His name blessed. The truth that God's motive is His own name's sake may be so put as to be hideous and repellent; but it really proclaims that He is love, and that His motive is His poor creatures blessing.

To this great outline of the blessings of the restored nations are appended two subsidiary prophecies, marked by the recurring Thus saith the Lord. The former of these (vs. 33-36) deals principally with the new beauty that was to clothe the land. The day in which the inhabitants were cleansed from their sins was to be the day in which the land was to be raised from its ruin. Cities are to be rebuilt, the ground that had lain fallow and tangled with briers and thorns is to be tilled, and to bloom like Eden, a restored paradise. How far the fulfilment has halted behind the promise, the melancholy condition of Palestine to-day may remind us. Whether the literal fulfilment is to be anticipated or no seems less important than to note that the experience of forgiveness (and of the consequent blessings described above) is the precursor of this fair picture. Therefore, the Church's condition of growth and prosperity is its realisation in the persons of its individual members, of pardon, the renewal of the inner man by the indwelling Spirit, faithful obedience, communion with God, and lowly remembrance of past sins. Where churches are marked by such characteristics, they will grow. If they are not, all their evangelistic efforts will be as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

The second appended prophecy (vs. 37, 38) is that of increase of population. The picture of the flocks of sheep for sacrifice, which thronged Jerusalem at the feasts, is given as a likeness of the swarms of inhabitants in the waste cities. The point of comparison is chiefly the number. One knows how closely a flock huddles and seems to fill the road in endless procession. But the destination as well as the number comes into view. All these patient creatures, crowding the ways, are meant for sacrifices. So the inhabitants of the land then shall all yield themselves to God, living sacrifices. The first words of our text point to the priesthood of all believers; the last words point to the sacrifice of themselves which they have to offer.

For this moreover will I be inquired of by the house of Israel. The blessings promised do not depend on our merits, as we have heard, but yet they will not be given without our co-operation in prayer. God promises, and that promise is not a reason for our not asking the gifts from Him, but for our asking. Faith keeps within the lines of God's promise, and prayers which do not foot themselves on a promise are the offspring of presumption, not of faith. God lets Himself be inquired of for that which is in accordance with His will; and, accordant with His will though it be, He will not do it for them, unless His flock ask of Him the accomplishment of His own word.