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

**GENESIS-008. THE SAINT AMONG SINNERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. And Noah begat three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted His way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch. And this is the fashion which thou shalt make it of: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits. A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it. And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die. But with thee will I establish My covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons wives with thee. And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female. Of fowls after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after his kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive. And take thou unto thee of all food that is eaten, and thou shalt gather it to thee; and it shall be for food for thee, and for them. Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he."*

*Genesis 6:9-22*

**I.** Notice here, first, the solitary saint. Noah stands alone in his generations like some single tree, green and erect, in a forest of blasted and fallen pines. Among the faithless, faithful only he. His character is described, so to speak, from the outside inwards. He is righteous, or discharging all the obligations of law and of his various relationships. He is perfect. His whole nature is developed, and all in due symmetry and proportion; no beauty wanting, no grace cultivated at the expense of others. He is a full man; not a one-sided and therefore a distorted one. Of course we do not take these words to imply sinlessness. They express a relative, not an absolute, completeness. Hence we may learn both a lesson of stimulus and of hope. We are not to rest satisfied with partial goodness, but to seek to attain an all-round perfectness, even in regard to the graces least natural to our dispositions. And we can rejoice to believe that God is generous in His acceptance and praise. He does not grudge commendation, but takes account of the deepest desires and main tendencies of a life, and sees the germ as a full-blown flower, and the bud as a fruit.

Learn, too, that solitary goodness is possible. Noah stood uninfected by the universal contagion; and, as is always the case, the evil around, which he did not share, drove him to a more rigid abstinence from it. A Christian who is alone in his generations, like a lily among nettles, has to be, and usually is, a more earnest Christian than if he were among like-minded men. The saints in Caesar's household needed to be very unmistakable saints, if they were not to be swept away by the torrent of godlessness. It is hard, but it is possible, for a boy at school, or a young man in an office, or a soldier in a barrack, to stand alone, and be Christlike; but only on condition that he yields to no temptation to drop his conduct to the level around him, and is never guilty of compromise. Once yield, and all is over. Flowers grow on a dunghill, and the very reeking rottenness may make the bloom finer.

Learn, too, that the true place for the saint is in his generations. If the mass is corrupt, so much the more need to rub the salt well in. Disgust and cowardice, and the love of congenial society, keep Christian people from mixing with the world, which they must do if they are to do Christ's work in it. There is a great deal too much union with the world, and a great deal too much separation from it, nowadays, and both are of the wrong sort. We cannot keep too far away from it, by abstinence from living by its maxims, and tampering with its pleasures. We cannot mix too much with it if we take our Christianity with us, and remember our vocation to be its light.

Notice, again, the companion of the solitary saint. What beauty there is in that description of the isolated man, passing lonely amid his contemporaries, like a stream of pure water flowing through some foul liquid, and untouched by it, and yet not alone in his loneliness, because he walked with God! The less he found congenial companionship on earth, the more he realised God as by his side. The remarkable phrase, used only of Enoch and of Noah, implies a closer relation than the other expression, To walk before God. Communion, the habitual occupation of mind and heart with God, the happy sense of His presence making every wilderness and solitary place glad because of Him. the child's clasping the father's hand with his tiny fingers, and so being held up and lifted over many a rough place, are all implied. Are we lonely in outward reality? Here is our unfailing companion. Have we to stand single among companions, who laugh at us and our religion? One man, with God to back him, is always in the majority. Though surrounded by friends, have we found that, after all, we live and suffer, and must die alone? Here is the all-sufficient Friend, if we have fellowship with whom our hearts will be lonely no more.

Observe that this communion is the foundation of all righteousness in conduct. Because Noah walked with God, he was just and perfect. If we live habitually in the holy of holies, our faces will shine when we come forth. If we desire to be good and pure, we must dwell with God, and His Spirit will pass into our hearts, and we shall bear the fragrance of his presence wherever we go. Learn, also, that communion with God is not possible unless we are fighting against our sin, and have some measure of holiness. We begin communion with Him, indeed, not by holiness, but by faith. But it is not kept up without the cultivation of purity. Sin makes fellowship with God impossible. Can two walk together, except they be agreed? What communion hath light with darkness? The delicate bond which unites us in happy communion with God shrivels up, as if scorched, at the touch of sin. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie.

**II.** Notice the universal apostasy. Two points are brought out in the sombre description. The first is moral corruption; the second, violence. Bad men are cruel men. When the bonds which knit society to God are relaxed, selfishness soon becomes furious, and forcibly seizes what it lusts after, regardless of others rights. Sin saps the very foundations of social life, and makes men into tigers, more destructive to each other than wild beasts. All our grand modern schemes for the reformation of society will fail unless they begin with the reformation of the individual. To walk with God is the true way to make men gentle and pitying.

Learn from this dark outline that God gazes in silence on the evil. That is a grand, solemn expression, Corrupt before God. All this mad riot of pollution and violence is holding its carnival of lust and blood under the very eye of God, and He says never a word. So is it ever. Like some band of conspirators in a dark corner, bad men do deeds of darkness, and fancy they are unseen, and that God forgets them, because they forget God; and all the while His eye is fixed on them, and the darkness is light about them. Then comes a further expression of the same thought: God looked upon the earth. As a sudden beam of sunshine out of a thunder-cloud, His eye flashes down, not as if He then began to know, but that His knowledge then began, as it were, to act.

**III.** What does the stern sentence on the rotten world teach us? A very profound truth, not only of the certain divine retribution, but of the indissoluble connection of sin with destruction. The same word is thrice employed in verses 11 and 12 to express corruption and in verse 13 to express destruction. A similar usage is found in 1 Corinthians 3:17, where the same Greek word is translated defile and destroy. This teaches us that, in deepest reality, corruption is destruction, that sin is death, that every sinner is a suicide. God's act in punishment corresponds to, and is the inevitable outcome of, our act in transgression. So fatal is all evil, that one word serves to describe both the poison-secreting root and the poisoned fruit. Sin is death in the making; death is sin finished.

The promise of deliverance, which comes side by side with the stern sentence, illustrates the blessed truth that God's darkest threatenings are accompanied with a revelation of the way of escape. The ark is always shown along with the flood. Zoar is pointed out when God foretells Sodom's ruin. We are no sooner warned of the penalties of sin, than we are bid to hear the message of mercy in Christ. The brazen serpent is ever reared where the venomous snakes bite and burn.

**IV.** We pass by the details of the construction of the ark to draw the final lesson from the exact obedience of Noah. We have the statement twice over, He did according to all that God commanded him. It was no easy thing for him to build the ark, amidst the scoffing of his generations. Smart witticisms fell around him like hail. All the practical men thought him a dreamy fool, wasting his time, while they prospered and made something of life. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us the secret of his obedience: By faith, Noah, etc. He realised the distant unseen, because he believed Him who warned him of it. The immediate object of his faith was the things not seen as yet; but the real, deepest object was God, whose word showed him these. So faith is always trust in a divine Person, whether it lays hold of the past sacrifice, the present indwelling Spirit, or the future heaven.

Noah's example teaches us the practical effects of faith. Moved with godly fear, says Hebrews; by which is meant, not a mere dread of personal evil, for Noah was assured of safety--but that godly reverence and happy fear which dwells with faith, and secures precise obedience. Learn that a faith which does not work on the feelings is a very poor thing. Some Christian people have a great horror of emotional religion. Unemotional religion is a great deal worse. The road by which faith gets at the hands is through the heart. And he who believes but feels nothing, will do exactly as much as he feels, and probably does not really believe much more.

So after Noah's emotion followed his action. He was bid to prepare his ark, we have only to take refuge in the ark which God has prepared in Christ; but the principle of Noah's obedience applies to us all. He realised so perfectly that future, with its double prospect of destruction and deliverance, that his whole life was moulded by the conduct which should lead to his escape. The far-off flood was more real to him than the shows of life around him. Therefore he could stand all the gibes, and gave himself to a course of life which was sheer folly unless that future was real. Perhaps a hundred and twenty years passed between the warning and the flood; and for all that time he held on his way, nor faltered in his faith. Does our faith realise that which lies before us with anything like similar clearness? Do we see that future shining through all the trivial, fleeting present? Does it possess weight and solidity enough to shape our lives? Noah's creed was much shorter than ours; but I fear his faith was as much stronger.

**V.** We may think, finally, of the vindication of his faith. For a hundred and twenty years the wits laughed, and the common-sense people wondered, and the patient saint went on hammering and pitching at his ark. But one morning it began to rain; and by degrees, somehow, Noah did not seem quite such a fool. The jests would look rather different when the water was up to the knees of the jesters; and their sarcasms would stick in their throats as they drowned. So is it always. So it will be at the last great day. The men who lived for the future, by faith in Christ, will be found out to have been the wise men when the future has become the present, and the present has become the past, and is gone for ever; while they who had no aims beyond the things of time, which are now sunk beneath the dreary horizon, will awake too late to the conviction that they are outside the ark of safety, and that their truest epitaph is Thou fool!