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

**GENESIS-025. THE INTERCOURSE OF GOD AND HIS FRIEND by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And when the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot, saying, Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters, which are here; lest them be consumed in the iniquity of the city. And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the Lord being merciful unto him: and they brought him forth, and set him without the city. And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that He said, Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed. And Lot said unto them, Oh, not so, my Lord: Behold now, Thy servant hath found grace in Thy sight, and Thou hast magnified Thy mercy, which Thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die: Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one: Oh, let me escape thither, (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live. And He said unto him, See, I have accepted thee concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city, for the which thou hast spoken. Haste thee, escape thither; for I cannot do any thing till thou be come thither. Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar. The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; And He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.."*

*Genesis 19:15-26*

We have seen that the fruit of Abraham's faith was God's entrance into close covenant relations with him; or, as James puts it, It was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God. This incident shows us the intercourse of the divine and human friends in its familiarity, mutual confidence, and power. It is a forecast of Christ's own profound teachings in His parting words in the upper chamber, concerning the sweet and wondrous intercourse between the believing soul and the indwelling God.

**I.** The friend of God catches a gleam of divine pity and tenderness. Abraham has no relations with the men of Sodom. Their evil ways would repel him; and he would be a stranger among them still more than among the Canaanites, whose iniquity was not yet full. But though he has no special bonds with them, he cannot but melt with tender compassion when he hears their doom. Communion with the very Source of all gentle love has softened his heart, and he yearns over the wicked and fated city. Where else than from his heavenly Friend could he have learned this sympathy? It wells up in this chapter like some sudden spring among solemn solitudes--the first instance of that divine charity which is the best sign that we have been with God, and have learned of Him. All that the New Testament teaches of love to God, as necessarily issuing in love to man, and of the true love to man as overleaping all narrow bounds of kindred, country, race, and ignoring all questions of character, and gushing forth in fullest energy towards the sinners in danger of just punishment, is here in germ. The friend of God must be the friend of men; and if they be wicked, and he sees the frightful doom which they do not see, these make his pity the deeper. Abraham does not contest the justice of the doom. He lives too near his friend not to know that sin must mean death. The effect of friendship with God is not to make men wish that there were no judgments for evil-doers, but to touch their hearts with pity, and to stir them to intercession and to effort for their deliverance.

**II.** The friend of God has absolute trust in the rectitude of His acts. Abraham's remonstrance, if we may call it so, embodies some thoughts about the government of God in the world which should be pondered.

His first abrupt question, flung out without any reverential preface, assumes that the character of God requires that the fate of the righteous should be distinguished from that of the wicked. The very brusqueness of the question shows that he supposed himself to be appealing to an elementary and indubitable law of God's dealings. The teachings of the Fall and of the Flood had graven deep on his conscience the truth that the same loving Friend must needs deal out rewards to the good and chastisement to the bad. That was the simple faith of an early time, when problems like those which tortured the writers of the seventy-third Psalm, or of Job and Ecclesiastes, had not yet disturbed the childlike trust of the friend of God, because no facts in his experience had forced them on him. But the belief which was axiomatic to him, and true for his supernaturally shaped life with its special miracles and visible divine guard, is not the ultimate and irrefragable principle which he thought it. In widespread calamities the righteous are blended with the wicked in one bloody ruin; and it is the very misery of such judgments that often the sufferers are not the wrongdoers, but that the fathers eat the sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. The whirlwind of temporal judgments makes no distinctions between the dwellings of the righteous and the wicked, but levels them both. No doubt, the fact that the impending destruction was to be a direct Divine interposition of a punitive kind made it more necessary that it should be confined to the actual culprits. No doubt, too, Abraham's zeal for the honour of God's government was right. But his first plea belongs to the stage of revelation at which he stood, not to that of the New Testament, which teaches that the eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell were not sinners above all men in Jerusalem. Abraham's confidence in God's justice, not Abraham's conceptions of what that justice required, is to be imitated. A friend of God will hold fast by the faith that His way is perfect, and will cherish it even in the presence of facts more perplexing than any which met Abraham's eyes.

Another assumption in his prayer is that the righteous are sources of blessing and shields for the wicked. Has he there laid hold of a true principle? Certainly, it is indeed the law that every man shall bear his own burden, but that law is modified by the operation of this other, of which God's providence is full. Many a drop of blessing trickles from the wet fleece to the dry ground. Many a stroke of judgment is carried off harmlessly by the lightning conductor. Where God's friends are inextricably mixed up with evil-doers, it is not rare to see diffused blessings which are destined indeed primarily for the former, but find their way to the latter. Christians are the salt of the earth in this sense too, that they save corrupt communities from swift destruction, and for their sakes the angels delay their blow. In the final resort, each soul must reap its own harvest from its own deeds; but the individualism of Christianity is not isolation. We are bound together in mysterious community, and a good man is a fountain of far-flowing good. The truest saviours of society are the servants of God.

A third principle is embodied in the solemn question, Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? This is not meant in its bearing here, as we so often hear it quoted, to silence man's questionings as to mysterious divine acts, or to warn us from applying our measures of right and wrong to these. The very opposite thought is conveyed; namely, the confidence that what God does must approve itself as just to men. He is Judge of all the earth, and therefore bound by His very nature, as by His relations to men, to do nothing that cannot be pointed to as inflexibly right. If Abraham had meant, What God does, must needs be right, therefore crush down all questions of how it accords with thy sense of justice, he would have been condemning his own prayer as presumptuous, and the thought would have been entirely out of place. But the appeal to God to vindicate His own character by doing what shall be in manifest accord with His name, is bold language indeed, but not too bold, because it is prompted by absolute confidence in Him. God's punishments must be obviously righteous to have moral effect, or to be worthy of Him.

But true as the principle is, it needs to be guarded. Abraham himself is an instance that men's conceptions of right do not completely correspond to the reality. His notion of right was, in some particulars, as his life shows, imperfect, rudimentary, and far beneath New Testament ideas. Conscience needs education. The best men's conceptions of what befits divine justice are relative, progressive; and a shifting standard is no standard. It becomes us to be very cautious before we say to God, This is the way. Walk Thou in it, or dismiss any doctrine as untrue on the ground of its contradicting our instincts of justice.

**III.** The friend of God has power with God. Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do? The divine Friend recognises the obligation of confidence. True friendship is frank, and cannot bear to hide its purposes. That one sentence in its bold attribution of a like feeling to God leads us deep into the Divine heart, and the sweet reality of his amity. Insight into His will ever belongs to those who live near Him. It is the beginning of the long series of disclosures of the secret of the Lord to them that fear Him, which is crowned by henceforth I call you not servants; but ...friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you. So much for the divine side of the communion.

On the human side, we are here taught the great truth, that God's friends are intercessors, whose voice has a mysterious but most real power with God. If it be true, that, in general terms, the righteous are shields and sources of blessing to the unholy, it is still more distinctly true that they have access to God's secret place with petitions for others as well as for themselves. The desires which go up to God, like the vapours exhaled to heaven, fall in refreshing rain on spots far away from that whence they rose. In these days we need to keep fast hold of our belief in the efficacy of prayer for others and for ourselves. God knows Himself and the laws of His government a great deal better than any one besides does; and He has abundantly shown us in His Word, and by many experiences, that breath spent in intercession is not wasted. In these old times, when worship was mainly sacrificial, this wonderful instance of pure intercession meets us, an anticipation of later times. And from thence onwards there has never failed proof to those who will look for it, that God's friends are true priests, and help their brethren by their prayers. Our voices should rise like a fountain night and day for men. But there is a secret distrust of the power, and a flagrantly plain neglect of the duty, of intercession nowadays, which need sorely the lesson that God remembered Abraham and delivered Lot. Luther, in his rough, strong way, says: If I have a Christian who prays to God for me, I will be of good courage, and be afraid of nothing. If I have one who prays against me, I had rather have the Grand Turk for my enemy.

The tone of Abraham's intercession may teach us how familiar the intercourse with the Heavenly Friend may be. The boldest words from a loving heart, jealous of God's honour, are not irreverent in His eyes. This prayer is abrupt, almost rough. It sounds like remonstrance quite as much as prayer. Abraham appeals to God to take care of His name and honour, as if he had said, If Thou doest this, what will the world say of Thee, but that Thou art unmerciful? But the grand confidence in God's character, the eager desire that it should be vindicated before the world, the dread that the least film should veil the silvery whiteness or the golden lustre of His name, the sensitiveness for His honour--these are the effects of communion with Him; and for these God accepts the bold prayer as truer reverence than is found in many more guarded and lowly sounding words. Many conventional proprieties of worship may be broken just because the worship is real. The frequent sputter shows that the soul's depths boil in earnest. We may learn, too, that the most loving familiarity never forgets the fathomless gulf between God and it. Abraham remembers that he is dust and ashes; he knows that he is venturing much in speaking to God. His pertinacious prayers have a recurring burden of lowly recognition of his place. Twice he heralds them with I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord; twice with Oh let not the Lord be angry. Perfect love casts out fear and deepens reverence. We may come with free hearts, from which every weight of trembling and every cloud of doubt has been lifted. But the less the dread, the lower we shall bow before the Loftiness which we love. We do not pray aright until we tell God everything. The boldness which we as Christians ought to have, means literally a frank speaking out of all that is in our hearts. Such boldness and access with confidence will often make short work of so-called seemly reverence, but it will never transgress by so much as a hair s-breadth the limits of lowly, trustful love.

Abraham's persistency may teach us a lesson. If one might so say, he hangs on God's skirt like a burr. Each petition granted only encourages him to another. Six times he pleads, and God waits till he has done before He goes away; He cannot leave His friend till that friend has said all his say. What a contrast the fiery fervour and unwearying pertinacity of Abraham's prayers make to the stiff formalism of the intercessions one is familiar with! The former are like the successive pulses of a volcano driving a hot lava stream before it; the latter, like the slow flow of a glacier, cold and sluggish. Is any part of our public or private worship more hopelessly formal than our prayers for others? This picture from the old world may well shame our languid petitions, and stir us up to a holy boldness and persistence in prayer. Our Saviour Himself teaches that men ought always to pray, and not to faint, and Himself recommends to us a holy importunity, which He teaches us to believe is, in mysterious fashion, a power with God. He gives room for such patient continuance in prayer by sometimes delaying the apparent answer, not because He needs to be won over to bless, but because it is good for us to draw near, and to keep near, the Lord. He is ever at the door, ready to open, and if sometimes, like Rhoda to Peter, He does not open immediately, and we have to keep knocking, it is that our desires may increase by delay, and so He may be able to give a blessing, which will be the greater and sweeter for the tarrying.

So the friendship is manifested on both sides: on God's, by disclosure of His purpose and compliance with His friend's request; on Abraham's, by speech which is saved from irreverence by love, and by prayer which is acceptable to God by its very importunity. Jesus Christ has promised us the highest form of such friendship, when He has said, I have called you friends: for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you; and again, If ye abide in Me, ...ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.