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

**GENESIS-040. MAN'S PASSIONS AND GOD'S PURPOSE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood! Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content. Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child is not; and I, whither shall I go? And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him. And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's and captain of the guard."*

*Genesis 37:23-36*

We have left the serene and lofty atmosphere of communion and saintship far above us. This narrative takes us down into foul depths. It is a hideous story of vulgar hatred and cruelty. God's name is never mentioned in it; and he is as far from the actors thoughts as from the writer's words. The crime of the brothers is the subject, and the picture is painted in dark tones to teach large truths about sin.

**I.** The broad teaching of the whole story, which is ever being reiterated in Old Testament incidents, is that God works out His great purposes through even the crimes of unconscious men. There is an irony, if we may so say, in making the hatred of these men the very means of their brother's advancement, and the occasion of blessing to themselves. As coral insects work, not knowing the plan of their reef, still less the fair vegetation and smiling homes which it will one day carry, but blindly building from the material supplied by the ocean a barrier against it; so even evil-doers are carrying on God's plan, and sin is made to counterwork itself, and be the black channel through which the flashing water of life pours. Joseph's words (Gen. 50:20) give the point of view for the whole story: Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good ...to save much people alive. We can scarcely forget the still more wonderful example of the same thing, in the crime of crimes, when his brethren slew the Son of God--like Joseph, the victim of envy--and, by their crime, God's counsel of mercy for them and for all was fulfilled.

**II.** Following the narrative, verses 23, 24, and 25 show us the poisonous fruit of brotherly hatred. The family, not the nation, is the social unit in Genesis. From the beginning, we find the field on which sin works is the family relation. Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and now the other children of Jacob and Joseph, attest the power of sin when it enters there, and illustrate the principle that the corruption of the best is the worst. The children of Rachel could not but be hated by the children of other mothers. Jacob's undisguised partiality for Joseph was a fault too, which wrought like yeast on the passions of his wild sons. The long-sleeved garment which he gave to the lad probably meant to indicate his purpose to bestow on him the right of the first-born forfeited by Reuben, and so the violent rage which it excited was not altogether baseless. The whole miserable household strife teaches the rottenness of the polygamous relation on which it rested, and the folly of paternal favouritism. So it carries teaching especially needed then, but not out of date now.

The swift passage of the purely inward sin of jealous envy into the murderous act, as soon as opportunity offered, teaches the short path which connects the inmost passions with the grossest outward deeds. Like Jonah's gourd, the smallest seed of hate needs but an hour or two of favouring weather to become a great tree, with all obscene and blood-seeking birds croaking in its branches. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer, Therefore the solemn need for guarding the heart from the beginnings of envy, and for walking in love.

The clumsy contrivance for murder without criminality, which Reuben suggested, is an instance of the shallow pretexts with which the sophistry of sin fools men before they have done the wrong thing. Sin's mask is generally dropped very soon after. The bait is useless when the hook is well in the fish's gills. Don't let us kill him. Let us put him into a cistern. He cannot climb up its bottle-shaped, smooth sides. But that is not our fault. Nobody will ever hear his muffled cries from its depths. But there will be no blood on our hands. It was not the first time, nor is it the last, that men have tried to blink their responsibility for the consequences which they hoped would come of their crimes. Such excuses seem sound when we are being tempted; but, as soon as the rush of passion is past, they are found to be worthless. Like some cheap castings, they are only meant to be seen in front, where they are rounded and burnished. Get behind them, and you find them hollow.

They sat down to eat bread, Thomas Fuller pithily says: With what heart could they say grace, either before or after meat? What a grim meal! And what an indication of their rude natures, seared consciences, and deadened affections!

This picture of the moral condition of the fathers of the Jewish tribes is surely a strong argument for the historical accuracy of the narrative. It would be strange if the legends of a race, instead of glorifying, should blacken, the characters of its founders. No motive can be alleged which would explain such a picture; its only explanation is its truth. The ugly story, too, throws vivid light on that thought, which prophets ever reiterated, not for your sakes, but for My name's sake. The divine choice of Israel was grounded, not on merit, but on sovereign purpose. And the undisguised plainness of the narrative of their sins is but of a piece with the tone of Scripture throughout. It never palliates the faults even of its best men. It tells its story without comment. It never indulges in condemnation any more than in praise. It is a perfect mirror; its office is to record, not to criticise. Many misconceptions of Old Testament morality would have been avoided by keeping that simple fact in view.

**III.** The ill-omened meal is interrupted by the sudden appearance, so picturesquely described, of the caravan of Ishmaelites with their loaded camels. Dothan was on or near the great trade route to Egypt, where luxury, and especially the custom of embalming, opened a profitable market for spices. The traders would probably not be particular as to the sort of merchandise they picked up on their road, and such an unconsidered trifle as a slave or two would be neither here nor there. This opportune advent of the caravan sets a thought buzzing in Judah's brain, which brings out a new phase of the crime. Hatred darkening to murder is bad enough; but hatred which has also an eye to business, and makes a profit out of a brother, is a shade or two blacker, because it means cold-blooded calculation and selfish advantage instead of raging passion. Judah's cynical question avows the real motive of his intervention. He prefers the paltry gain from selling Joseph to the unprofitable luxury of killing him. It brings in regard to brotherly ties at the end, as a kind of homage paid to propriety, as if the obligations they involved were not broken as really by his proposal as by murder. Certainly it is strange logic which can say in one breath, Let us sell him; ...for he is our brother, and finds the clause between buffer enough to keep these two contradictories from collision.

If any touch of conscience made the brothers prefer the less cruel alternative, one can only see here another illustration of the strange power which men have of limiting the working of conscience, and of the fact that when a greater sin has been resolved on, a smaller one gets to look almost like a virtue. Perhaps Judah and the rest actually thought themselves very kind and brotherly when they put their brother into strangers power, and so went back to their meal with renewed cheerfulness, both because they had gained their end without bloodshed, and because they had got the money. They did not think that every tear and pang which Joseph would shed and feel would be laid at their door.

We do not suppose that Joseph was meant to be, in the accurate sense of the word, a type of Christ. But the coincidence is not to be passed by, that these same powerful motives of envy and of greed were combined in His case too, and that there again a Judah (Judas) appears as the agent of the perfidy.

We may note that the appearance of the traders in the nick of time, suggesting the sale of Joseph, points the familiar lesson that the opportunity to do ill deeds often makes ill deeds done. The path for entering on evil is made fatally easy at first; that gate always stands wide. The Devil knows how to time his approaches. A weak nature, with an evil bias in it, finds everywhere occasions and suggestions to do wrong. But it is the evil nature which makes innocent things opportunities for evil. Therefore we have to be on our guard, as knowing that if we fall it is not circumstances, but ourselves, that made stumbling-blocks out of what might have been stepping-stones.

**IV.** Leaving Joseph to pursue his sad journey, our narrative introduces for the first time Reuben, whose counsel, as the verses before the text tell us, it had been to cast the poor lad into the cistern. His motive had been altogether good; he wished to save life, and as soon as the others were out of the way, to bring Joseph up again and get him safely back to Jacob. In chapter xlii. 22, Reuben himself reminds his brothers of what had passed. There he says that he had besought them not to sin against the child, which naturally implies that he had wished them to do nothing to him, and that they would not hear. In the verses before the text he proposes the compromise of the pit, and the others hear. So there seem to have been two efforts made by him--first, to shield Joseph from any harm, and then that half-and-half measure which was adopted. He is absent, while they carry out the plan, and from the cruel merriment of the feast--perhaps watching his opportunity to rescue, perhaps in sickness of heart and protest against the deed. Well meant and kindly motived as his action was--and self-sacrificing too, if, as is probable, Joseph was meant by Jacob as his successor in the forfeited birthright--his scheme breaks down, as attempts to mitigate evil by compliance and to make compromises with sinners usually do. The only one of the whole family who had some virtue in him, was too timid to take up a position of uncompromising condemnation. He thought it more polite to go part of the way, and to trust to being able to prevent the worst. That is always a dangerous experiment. It is often tried still; it never answers. Let a man stand to his guns, and speak out the condemnation that is in his heart; otherwise, he will be sure to go farther than he meant, he will lose all right of remonstrance, and will generally find that the more daring sinners have made his well-meant schemes to avert the mischief impossible.

**V.** The cruel trick by which Jacob was deceived is perhaps the most heartless bit of the whole heartless crime. It came as near an insult as possible. It was maliciously meant. The snarl about the coat, the studied use of thy son as if the brothers disowned the brotherhood, the unfeeling harshness of choosing such a way of telling their lie--all were meant to give the maximum of pain, and betray their savage hatred of father and son, and its causes. Was Reuben's mouth shut all this time? Evidently. From his language in chapter xlii., His blood is required, he seems to have believed until then that Joseph had been killed in his absence. But he dared not speak. Had he told what he did know, the brothers had but to add, And he proposed it himself, and his protestations of his good intentions would have been unheeded. He believed his brother dead, and perhaps thought it better that Jacob should think him slain by wild beasts than by brothers hands, as Reuben supposed him to be. But his shut mouth teaches again how dangerous his policy had been, and how the only road, which it is safe, in view of the uncertainties of the future, to take, is the plain road of resistance to evil and non-fellowship with its doers.

**VI.** And what of the poor old father? His grief is unworthy of God's wrestler. It is not the part of a devout believer in God's providence to refuse to be comforted. There was no religious submission in his passionate sorrow. How unlike the quiet resignation which should have marked the recognition that the God who had been his guide was working here too! No doubt the hypocritical condolences of his children were as vinegar upon nitre. No doubt the loss of Joseph had taken away the one gentle and true son on whom his loneliness rested since his Rachel's death, while he found no solace in the wild, passionate men who called him father and brought him no honour. But still his grief is beyond the measure which a true faith in God would have warranted; and we cannot but see that the dark picture which we have just been looking at gets no lighter or brighter tints from the demeanour of Jacob.

There are few bitterer sorrows than for a parent to see the children of his own sin in the sins of his children. Jacob might have felt that bitterness, as he looked round on the lovelessness and dark, passionate selfishness of his children, and remembered his own early crimes against Esau. He might have seen that his unwise fondness for the son of his Rachel had led to the brothers hatred, though he did not know that that hatred had plunged the arrow into his soul. Whether he knew it or not, his own conduct had feathered the arrow. He was drinking as he had brewed; and the heart-broken grief which darkened his later years had sprung from seed of his own sowing. So it is always. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

It is a miserable story of ignoble jealousy and cruel hate; and yet, over all this foaming torrent, God's steadfast bow of peace shines. These crimes and this affliction of Joseph were the direct path to the fulfilment of His purposes. As blind instruments, even in their rebellion and sin, men work out His designs. The lesson of Joseph's bondage will one day be the summing up of the world's history. Thou makest the wrath of man to praise Thee: and with the remainder thereof Thou girdest Thyself.