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

**GENESIS-049. A CALM EVENING, PROMISING A BRIGHT MORNING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Joseph returned into Egypt, he, and his brethren, and all that went up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father. And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command before he died, saying, So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him. And his brethren also went and fell down before his face; and they said, Behold, we be thy servants. And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them. And Joseph dwelt in Egypt, he, and his father's house: and Joseph lived an hundred and ten years. And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation: the children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were brought up upon Joseph's knees. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence. So Joseph died, being an hundred and ten years old: and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt."*

*Genesis 50:14-26*

Joseph's brothers were right in thinking that he loved Jacob better than he did them; and they knew only too well that he had reasons for doing so. But their fear that Jacob's death would be followed by an outbreak of long-smothered revenge betrayed but too clearly their own base natures. They thought him like themselves, and they knew themselves capable of nursing wrath to keep it warm through long years of apparent kindliness. They had no room in their hearts for frank, full forgiveness. So they had lived on through numberless signs of their brother's love and care, and still kept the old dread, and, probably, not a little of the old envy. How much happiness they had lost by their slowness to believe in Joseph's love!

Is there nothing like this in our thoughts of God? Do men not live for years on His bounty, and all the while cherish suspicions of His heart? Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself. It is hard to believe in a love which has no faintest trace of desire for vengeance for all past slights. It is hard for hearts conscious of their own slowness to pardon, to realise undoubtingly God's infinite placability.

The brothers procedure is marked by unwarrantable lack of trust in Joseph. Why did they not go to him at once, and appeal to his brotherly affection? Their roundabout way of going to work by sending a messenger was an insult to their brother, though it may have been meant as honour to the viceroy. The craft which was their father's by nature seems to have been amply transmitted. The story of Jacob's dying wish looks very apocryphal. If he had been afraid of Joseph's behaviour when he was gone, he was much more likely to have spoken to Joseph about it before he went, than to have left the gun loaded and bid them fire it after his death. Jacob knew his son better, and trusted him more than his brothers did.

We note, too, the ingenious way of slipping in motives for forgiving, first in putting the mention of their relationship into Jacob's mouth, and then claiming to be worshippers of thy (not our) father's God. They had proved how truly they were both, when they sold him to the Midianites!

Joseph's tears were a good answer. No doubt they were partly drawn out by the shock of finding that he had been so misunderstood, but they were omens of his pardon. So, when they were reported to the brothers, they came themselves, and fulfilled the old dream by falling down before him in abjectness. They do not call themselves his brethren, but his slaves, as if grovelling was the way to win love or to show it. A little affection would have gone farther than much submission. If their attitude truly expressed their feelings, their hearts were as untouched by Joseph's years of magnanimous kindness as a rock by falling rain. If it was a theatrical display of feigned subjection, it was still worse. Our Brother, against whom we have sinned, wants love, not cowering; and if we believe in His forgiveness, we shall give Him the hearts which He desires, and after that shall render the unconditional submission which only trust and love can yield.

Joseph's answer is but the reiteration of his words at his first making himself known. He soothes unworthy fears, says not a word of reproach for their misunderstanding of him, waives all pretension to deal out that retribution which God alone sends, and shows that he has lost all bitterness in thinking of the past, since he sees in it, not the working of their malice, but of God's providence, and is ready to thank, if not them, at any rate Him, for having, by even so painful a way, made him the instrument of widespread good. A man who sees God's hand in his past, and thinks lightly of his sorrows and nobly of the opportunities of service which they have brought him, will waste no feeling on the men who were God's tools. If we want to live high above low hatreds and revenges, let us cultivate the habit of looking behind men to God. So we shall be saved from many fruitless pangs over irrevocable losses and from many disturbing feelings about other people.

The sweet little picture of the great minister's last days is very tenderly touched. Surrounded by his kindred, probably finding in a younger generation the reverence and affection which the elder had failed to give, he wears away the calm evening of the life which had opened so stormily. It came in like a lion, it goes out like a lamb. The strong domestic instincts so characteristic of the Hebrew race had full gratification. Honours and power at court and kingdom probably continued, but these did not make the genial warmth which cheered the closing years. It was that he saw his children's children's children, and that they gathered round his knees in confidence, and received from him his benediction.

But it is in his death that the flame shoots up most brightly at the last. By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones. He had been an Egyptian to all appearance all his life from the day of his captivity, filling his place at court, marrying an Egyptian woman, and bearing an Egyptian name, but his dying words show how he had been a stranger in the midst of it all. As truly as his fathers who dwelt in tents, he too felt that he here had no continuing city. He lived by faith in God's promises, and therefore his heart was in the unseen future far more than in the present.

He died with the ancestral assurance on his lips. Jacob, dying, had said to him, Behold, I die; but God shall be with you, and bring you again unto the land of your fathers (Gen. xlviii. 21). Joseph hands on the hope to his descendants. It is a grand instance of indomitable confidence in God's word, not nonplussed, bewildered, or weakened, though the man who cherishes it dies without seeing even a beginning of fulfilment. Such a faith bridges the gulf of death as a very small matter. In the strength of it we may drop our unfinished tasks, and, needful as we may seem to wider or narrower circles, may be sure that God and His word live, though we die. No man is necessary. Israel was safe in Egypt, and sure to come out of it, though Joseph's powerful protection was withdrawn.

His career may teach another lesson; namely, that true faith does not detach us from strenuous interest and toil in the present. Though the great hope burned in his heart, he did all his work as prime minister all the better because of it. It should always be so. Life here is not worth living if there is not another. The distance dignifies the foreground. The highest importance and nobleness of the life that now is, lie in its being preparation or apprenticeship for the greater future. The Egyptian vizier, with Canaan written on his heart, and Egypt administered by his hands, is a type of what every Christian should be.

Possibly Joseph's commandment concerning his bones may have been somewhat influenced by the Egyptian belief which underlies their practice of embalming the body. He, too, may have thought that, in some mysterious way, he would share in the possession of the land in which his bones were to be laid. Or he may simply have been yielding to natural sentiment. It is noteworthy that Jacob desired to be laid beside his ancestors, and Joseph to be kept in Egypt for a time. Both had the same assurance as to future possession of Canaan, but it led to different wishes as to burial. Perhaps Joseph felt that his position in Egypt required that his embalmed body should for a while remain there. Perhaps he wished to leave with his people a silent witness of his own hope, and a preacher, eloquent in its dumbness, of the duty of their keeping alive that hope, whatever might come upon them.

In a coffin in Egypt--so the book ends. It might seem that that mummy-case proclaimed rather the futility of the hope of restoration to the land, and, as centuries rolled away, and the bondage became heavier, no doubt many a wondering and doubting look was turned to it. But there it lay, perhaps neglected, for more than three hundred years, the visible embodiment of a hope which smiled at death and counted centuries as nothing. At last the day came which vindicated the long-deferred confidence; and, as the fugitives in their haste shouldered the heavy sarcophagus, and set out with it for the Land of Promise, surely some thrill of trust would pass through their ranks, and in some hearts would sound the exhortation, If the vision tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.

We have not a dead Joseph to bid us wait with patience and never lose our firm grip of God's promises, but we have a living Jesus. Our march to the land of rest is headed, not by the bones of a departed leader, but by the Forerunner, who is for us entered whither He will bring all who trust in Him. Therefore we should live, as Joseph lived, with desires and trust reaching out beyond things seen to the land assured to us by God's promise, doing our day's task all the more vigorously because we do not belong to the order of things in the midst of which we live; and then, when we lie down at the end of our life's work, we shall not be saddened by disappointed hopes, nor reluctantly close our eyes on good to come, when we shall not be there to share it, but be sure that we shall see the good of Thy chosen, and rejoice in the gladness of Thy nation.