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

**HOSEA-001. THE VALLEY OF ACHOR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I will give her ... the valley of Achor for a door of hope."*

*Hosea 2:15*

The Prophet Hosea is remarkable for the frequent use which he makes of events in the former history of his people. Their past seems to him a mirror in which they may read their future. He believes that which is to be hath already been, the great principles of the divine government living on through all the ages, and issuing in similar acts when the circumstances are similar. So he foretells that there will yet be once more a captivity and a bondage, that the old story of the wilderness will be repeated once more. In that wilderness God will speak to the heart of Israel. Its barrenness shall be changed into the fruitfulness of vineyards, where the purpling clusters hang ripe for the thirsty travellers. And not only will the sorrows that He sends thus become sources of refreshment, but the gloomy gorge through which they journey--the valley of Achor--will be a door of hope.

One word is enough to explain the allusion. You remember that after the capture of Jericho by Joshua, the people were baffled in their first attempt to press up through the narrow defile that led from the plain of Jordan to the highlands of Canaan. Their defeat was caused by the covetousness of Achan, who for the sake of some miserable spoil which he found in a tent, broke God's laws, and drew down shame on Israel's ranks When the swift, terrible punishment on him had purged the camp, victory again followed their assault, and Achan lying stiff and stark below his cairn, they pressed on up the glen to their task of conquest. The rugged valley, where that defeat and that sharp act of justice took place, was named in memory thereof, the valley of Achor, that is, trouble; and our Prophet's promise is that as then, so for all future ages, the complicity of God's people with an evil world will work weakness and defeat, but that, if they will be taught by their trouble and will purge themselves of the accursed thing, then the disasters will make a way for hope to come to them again. The figure which conveys this is very expressive. The narrow gorge stretches before us, with its dark overhanging cliffs that almost shut out the sky; the path is rough and set with sharp pebbles; it is narrow, winding, steep; often it seems to be barred by some huge rock that juts across it, and there is barely room for the broken ledge yielding slippery footing between the beetling crag above and the steep slope beneath that dips so quickly to the black torrent below. All is gloomy, damp, hard; and if we look upwards the glen becomes more savage as it rises, and armed foes hold the very throat of the pass. But, however long, however barren, however rugged, however black, however trackless, we may see if we will, a bright form descending the rocky way with radiant eyes and calm lips, God's messenger, Hope; and the rough rocks are like the doorway through which she comes near to us in our weary struggle. For us all, dear friends, it is true. In all our difficulties and sorrows, be they great or small; in our business perplexities; in the losses that rob our homes of their light; in the petty annoyances that diffuse their irritation through so much of our days; it is within our power to turn them all into occasions for a firmer grasp of God, and so to make them openings by which a happier hope may flow into our souls.

But the promise, like all God's promises, has its well-defined conditions. Achan has to be killed and put safe out of the way first, or no shining Hope will stand out against the black walls of the defile. The tastes which knit us to the perishable world, the yearnings for Babylonish garments and wedges of gold, must be coerced and subdued. Swift, sharp, unrelenting justice must be done on the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, if our trials are ever to become doors of hope. There is no natural tendency in the mere fact of sorrow and pain to make God's love more discernible, or to make our hope any firmer. All depends on how we use the trial, or as I say--first stone Achan, and then hope!

So, the trouble which detaches us from earth gives us new hope. Sometimes the effect of our sorrows and annoyances and difficulties is to rivet us more firmly to earth. The eye has a curious power, which they call persistence of vision, of retaining the impression made upon it, and therefore of seeming to see the object for a definite time after it has really been withdrawn. If you whirl a bit of blazing stick round, you will see a circle of fire though there is only a point moving rapidly in the circle. The eye has its memory like the soul. And the soul has its power of persistence like the eye, and that power is sometimes kindled into activity by the fact of loss. We often see our departed joys, and gaze upon them all the more eagerly for their departure. The loss of dear ones should stamp their image on our hearts, and set it as in a golden glory. But it sometimes does more than that; it sometimes makes us put the present with its duties impatiently away from us. Vain regret, absorbed brooding over what is gone, a sorrow kept gaping long after it should have been healed, like a grave-mound off which desperate love has pulled turf and flowers, in the vain attempt to clasp the cold hand below--in a word, the trouble that does not withdraw us from the present will never be a door of hope, but rather a grim gate for despair to come in at.

The trouble which knits us to God gives us new hope. That bright form which comes down the narrow valley is His messenger and herald--sent before His face. All the light of hope is the reflection on our hearts of the light of God. Her silver beams, which shed quietness over the darkness of earth, come only from that great Sun. If our hope is to grow out of our sorrow, it must be because our sorrow drives us to God. It is only when we by faith stand in His grace, and live in the conscious fellowship of peace with Him, that we rejoice in hope. If we would see Hope drawing near to us, we must fix our eyes not on Jericho that lies behind among its palm-trees, though it has memories of conquests, and attractions of fertility and repose, nor on the corpse that lies below that pile of stones, nor on the narrow way and the strong enemy in front there; but higher up, on the blue sky that spreads peaceful above the highest summits of the pass, and from the heavens we shall see the angel coming to us. Sorrow forsakes its own nature, and leads in its own opposite, when sorrow helps us to see God. It clears away the thick trees, and lets the sunlight into the forest shades, and then in time corn will grow. Hope is but the brightness that goes before God's face, and if we would see it we must look at Him.

The trouble which we bear rightly with God's help, gives new hope. If we have made our sorrow an occasion for learning, by living experience, somewhat more of His exquisitely varied and ever ready power to aid and bless, then it will teach us firmer confidence in these inexhaustible resources which we have thus once more proved, Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope. That is the order. You cannot put patience and experience into a parenthesis, and omitting them, bring hope out of tribulation. But if, in my sorrow, I have been able to keep quiet because I have had hold of God's hand, and if in that unstruggling submission I have found that from His hand I have been upheld, and had strength above mine own infused into me, then my memory will give the threads with which Hope weaves her bright web. I build upon two things--God's unchangeableness, and His help already received; and upon these strong foundations I may wisely and safely rear a palace of Hope, which shall never prove a castle in the air. The past, when it is God's past, is the surest pledge for the future. Because He has been with us in six troubles, therefore we may be sure that in seven He will not forsake us. I said that the light of hope was the brightness from the face of God. I may say again, that the light of hope which fills our sky is like that which, on happy summer nights, lives till morning in the calm west, and with its colourless, tranquil beauty, tells of a yesterday of unclouded splendour, and prophesies a to-morrow yet more abundant. The glow from a sun that is set, the experience of past deliverances, is the truest light of hope to light our way through the night of life.

One of the psalms gives us, in different form, a metaphor and a promise substantially the same as that of this text. Blessed are the men who, passing through the valley of weeping, make it a well. They gather their tears, as it were, into the cisterns by the wayside, and draw refreshment and strength from their very sorrows, and then, when thus we in our wise husbandry have irrigated the soil with the gathered results of our sorrows, the heavens bend over us, and weep their gracious tears, and the rain also covereth it with blessings. No chastisement for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

Then, dear friends, let us set ourselves with our loins girt to the road. Never mind how hard it may be to climb. The slope of the valley of trouble is ever upwards. Never mind how dark is the shadow of death which stretches athwart it. If there were no sun there would be no shadow; presently the sun will be right overhead, and there will be no shadow then. Never mind how black it may look ahead, or how frowning the rocks. From between their narrowest gorge you may see, if you will, the guide whom God has sent you, and that Angel of Hope will light up all the darkness, and will only fade away when she is lost in the sevenfold brightness of that upper land, whereof our God Himself is Sun and Moon--the true Canaan, to whose everlasting mountains the steep way of life has climbed at last through valleys of trouble, and of weeping, and of the shadow of death.