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

**ISAIAH-001. THE GREAT SUIT, JEHOVAH VERSUS JUDAH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. 2. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me. 3. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. 4. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. 5. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. 7. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. 8. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. 9. Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah... . 16. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil; 17. Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. 18. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow: though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. 19. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. 20. But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."*

*Isaiah 1:1-9; 16-20*

The first bars of the great overture to Isaiah's great oratorio are here sounded. These first chapters give out the themes which run through all the rest of his prophecies. Like most introductions, they were probably written last, when the prophet collected and arranged his life's labours. The text deals with the three great thoughts, the leit-motifs that are sounded over and over again in the prophet's message.

First comes the great indictment (vs. 2-4). A true prophet's words are of universal application, even when they are most specially addressed to a particular audience. Just because this indictment was so true of Judah, is it true of all men, for it is not concerned with details peculiar to a long-past period and state of society, but with the broad generalities common to us all. As another great teacher in Old Testament times said, I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt-offerings, to have been continually before me. Isaiah has nothing to say about ritual or ceremonial omissions, which to him were but surface matters after all, but he sets in blazing light the foundation facts of Judah's (and every man's) distorted relation to God. And how lovingly, as well as sternly, God speaks through him! That divine lament which heralds the searching indictment is not unworthy to be the very words of the Almighty Lover of all men, sorrowing over His prodigal and fugitive sons. Nor is its deep truth less than its tenderness. For is not man's sin blackest when seen against the bright background of God's fatherly love? True, the fatherhood that Isaiah knew referred to God's relation to the nation rather than to the individual, but the great truth which is perfectly revealed by the Perfect Son was in part shown to the prophet. The east was bright with the unrisen sun, and the tinted clouds that hovered above the place of its rising seemed as if yearning to open and let him through. Man's neglect of God's benefits puts him below the animals that know the hand that feeds and governs them. Some men think it a token of superior culture and advanced views to throw off allegiance to God. It is a token that they have less intelligence than their dog.

There is something very beautiful and pathetic in the fact that Judah is not directly addressed, but that verses 2-4 are a divine soliloquy. They might rather be called a father's lament than an indictment. The forsaken father is, as it were, sadly brooding over his erring child's sins, which are his father's sorrows and his own miseries. In verse 4 the black catalogue of the prodigal's doings begins on the surface with what we call moral delinquencies, and then digs deeper to disclose the root of these in what we call religious relations perverted. The two are inseparably united, for no man who is wrong with God can be right with duty or with men. Notice, too, how one word flashes into clearness the sad truth of universal experience--that iniquity, however it may delude us into fancying that by it we throw off the burden of conscience and duty, piles heavier weights on our backs. The doer of iniquity is laden with iniquity. Notice, too, how the awful entail of evil from parents to children is adduced--shall we say as aggravating, or as lessening, the guilt of each generation? Isaiah's contemporaries are a seed of evil-doers, spring from such, and in their turn are children that are corrupters. The fatal bias becomes stronger as it passes down. Heredity is a fact, whether you call it original sin or not.

But the bitter fountain of all evil lies in distorted relations to God. They have forsaken the Lord; that is why they do corruptly. They have despised the Holy One of Israel; that is why they are laden with iniquity. Alienated hearts separate from Him. To forsake Him is to despise Him. To go from Him is to go away backward. Whatever may have been our inheritance of evil, we each go further from Him. And this fatherly lament over Judah is indeed a wail over every child of man. Does it not echo in the pearl of parables, and may we not suppose that it suggested that supreme revelation of man's misery and God's love?

After the indictment comes the sentence (vs. 5-8). Perhaps sentence is not altogether accurate, for these verses do not so much decree a future as describe a present, and the deep tone of pitying wonder sounds through them as they tell of the bitter harvest sown by sin. The penetrating question, Why will ye be still stricken, that ye revolt more and more? brings out the solemn truth that all which men gain by rebellion against God is chastisement. The ox that kicks against the pricks only makes its own hocks bleed. We aim at some imagined good, and we get--blows. No rational answer to that stern Why? is possible. Every sin is an act of unreason, essentially an absurdity. The consequences of Judah's sin are first darkly drawn under the metaphor of a man desperately wounded in some fight, and far away from physicians or nurses, and then the metaphor is interpreted by the plain facts of hostile invasion, flaming cities, devastated fields. It destroys the coherence of the verses to take the gruesome picture of the wounded man as a description of men's sins; it is plainly a description of the consequences of their sins. In accordance with the Old Testament point of view, Isaiah deals with national calamities as the punishment of national sins. He does not touch on the far worse results of individual sins on individual character. But while we are not to ignore his doctrine that nations are individual entities, and that righteousness exalteth a nation in our days as well as in his, the Christian form of his teaching is that men lay waste their own lives and wound their own souls by every sin. The fugitive son comes down to be a swine-herd, and cannot get enough even of the swine's food to stay his hunger.

The note of pity sounds very clearly in the pathetic description of the deserted daughter of Zion. Jerusalem stands forlorn and defenceless, like a frail booth in a vineyard, hastily run up with boughs, and open to fierce sunshine or howling winds.

Once beautiful for situation,

the joy of the whole earth,

the city of the great King--and now!

Verse 9 breaks the solemn flow of the divine Voice, but breaks it as it desires to be broken. For in it hearts made soft and penitent by the Voice, breathe out lowly acknowledgment of widespread sin, and see God's mercy in the continuance of a very small remnant of still faithful ones. There is a little island not yet submerged by the sea of iniquity, and it is to Him, not to themselves, that the holy seed owe their being kept from following the multitude to do evil. What a smiting comparison for the national pride that is--as Sodom, like unto Gomorrah!

After the sentence comes pardon. Verses 16 and 17 properly belong to the paragraph omitted from the text, and close the stern special word to the rulers which, in its severe tone, contrasts so strongly with the wounded love and grieved pity of the preceding verses. Moral amendment is demanded of these high-placed sinners and false guides. It is John the Baptist's message in an earlier form, and it clears the way for the evangelical message. Repentance and cleansing of life come first.

But these stern requirements, if taken alone, kindle despair. Wash you, make you clean--easy to say, plainly necessary, and as plainly hopelessly above my reach. If that is all that a prophet has to say to me, he may as well say nothing. For what is the use of saying Arise and walk to the man who has been lame from his mother's womb? How can a foul body be washed clean by filthy hands? Ancient or modern preachers of a self-wrought-out morality exhort to impossibilities, and unless they follow their preaching of an unattainable ideal as Isaiah followed his, they are doomed to waste their words. He cried, Make you clean, but he immediately went on to point to One who could make clean, could turn scarlet into snowy white, crimson into the lustrous purity of the unstained fleeces of sheep in green pastures. The assurance of God's forgiveness which deals with guilt, and of God's cleansing which deals with inclination and habit, must be the foundation of our cleansing ourselves from filthiness of flesh and spirit. The call to repentance needs the promise of pardon and divine help to purifying in order to become a gospel. And the call to repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, is what we all, who are laden with iniquity, and have forsaken the Lord, need, if ever we are to cease to do evil and learn to do well.

As with one thunder-clap the prophecy closes, pealing forth the eternal alternative set before every soul of man. Willing obedience to our Father God secures all good, the full satisfaction of our else hungry and ravenous desires. To refuse and rebel is to condemn ourselves to destruction. And no man can avert that consequence, or break the necessary connection between goodness and blessedness, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it, and what He speaks stands fast for ever and ever.