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

**ISAIAH-009. THE MAKING OF A PROPHET by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."*

*Isaiah 6:5*

In previous pages we have seen how Isaiah's vision of Jehovah throned in the Temple, high and lifted up, derived significance from the time of its occurrence. It was in the year that the earthly King died that the heavenly King was revealed. The passing of the transient prepared the way for the revelation of the Eternal, and the revelation of the Eternal more than compensated for the passing of the transient. But strengthening and calming as these thoughts are, they by no means exhaust the purpose of the vision, nor do they describe all its effects on the recipient. These were, first and immediately, the consciousness of unworthiness and sin, expressed in the words that I have taken for my text. Then came the touch of the live coal from the altar, laid on the unclean lips by the seraph; and on that followed willing surrender for a perilous service.

These three stages flowing from the vision of God, recognition of sin, experience of purging, abandonment to obedience and service, must be repeated in us all, if we are to live worthy lives. There may be much that is beautiful and elevating and noble without these; but unless in some measure we pass through the prophet's experience, we shall fail to reach the highest possibilities of beauty and of service that open before us. So I wish to consider, very simply, these three stages in my remarks now.

**I. If we see God we shall see our sin.**

There came on the prophet, as in a flash, the two convictions, one which he learned from the song of the seraphs, ringing in music through the Temple, and one which rose up, like an answering note from the voice of conscience within. They sang Holy! holy! holy! Lord God Almighty. And what was the response to that, in the prophet's heart?--I am unclean. Each major note has a corresponding minor, and the triumphant doxology of the seraph wakes in the hearer's conscience the lowly confession of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God. It was not joy that sprang in Isaiah's heart when he saw the throned King, and heard the proclamation of His name. It was not reverence merely that bowed his head in the dust, but it was the awakened consciousness, Thou art holy; and now that I understand, in some measure, what Thy holiness means, I look on myself and I say, "unclean! unclean!"

The prophet's confession assumes a form which may strike us as somewhat singular. Why is it that he speaks of unclean lips, rather than of an unclean heart? I suppose partly because, in a very deep sense, a man's words are more accurately a cast, as it were, from a man's character than even his actions, and partly because the immediate occasion of his confession was the words of the seraphim, and he could not but contrast what came burning from their pure lips with what had trickled from, and soiled, his own.

But, however expressed, the consciousness of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God is the first result, and the instantaneous result, of any real apprehension of that holiness, and of any true vision of Him. Like some search-light flung from a ship over the darkling waters, revealing the dark doings of the enemy away out yonder in the night, the thought of God and His holiness streaming in upon a man's soul, if it does so in any adequate measure, is sure to disclose the heaving waters and the skulking foes that are busy in the dark.

But it was not only the consciousness of sinfulness and antagonism that woke up instantaneously in response to that vision of the holy God. It was likewise a shrinking apprehension of personal evil from contact of God's light with Isaiah's darkness. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart. What is to become, then, of the man that has neither the one nor the other? The experience of all the world witnesses that whenever there comes, in reality, or in a man's conceptions or fancy, the contact of the supernatural, as it is called, with the natural, there is a shrinking, a sense of eerieness, an apprehension of vague possibilities of evil. The sleeping snake that is coiled in every soul stirs and begins to heave in its bulk, and wake, when the thought of a holy God comes into the heart. Now, I do not suppose that consciousness of sin is the whole explanation of that universal human feeling, but I am very sure it is an element in it, and I suspect that if there were no sin, there would be no shrinking.

At all events, be that as it may, these are the two thoughts that, involuntarily and spontaneously and immediately, sprang in this man's heart when his purged eyes saw the King on His throne. He did not leap up with gladness at the vision. Its consolatory and its strengthening aspects were not the first that impinged upon his eye, or upon his consciousness, but the first thing was an instinctive recoil, Woe is me; I am undone. Now, brethren, I venture to think that one main difference between shallow religion and real is to be found here, that the dim, far-off vision, if we may venture to call it so, which serves the most of us for a sight of God, leaves us quite complacent, and with very slight and superficial conceptions of our own evil, and that if once we saw, in so far as it is possible for humanity to-day to see, God as He is, and heard in the depths of our hearts that Holy! holy! holy! from the burning seraphim, the easy-going, self-satisfied judgment of ourselves which too many of us cherish would be utterly impossible; and would disappear, shrivelled up utterly in the light of God. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, said Job, but now mine eye seeth Thee; therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes. A hearsay God and a self-complacent beholder--a God really seen, and a man down in the dust before Him! Has that vision ever blazed in on you? And if it has, has not the light shown you the seaminess of much in which a dimmer light detects no flaws or stains? Thank God if, having seen Him, you see yourselves. If you have not felt, I am unclean and undone, depend upon it, your knowledge of God is faint and dim, and He is rather One heard of from the lips of others than realised in your own experience.

**II. Again, note the second stage here, in the education of a soul for service--the sin, recognised and repented, is burned away.**

Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo! this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.

Now, I would notice as to this stage of the process, first, that Isaiah singularly passes beyond all the old ritual in which he had been brought up, and recognises another kind of cleansing than that which it embodied. He had got beyond the ritual to what the ritual meant. We have passed beyond the ritual, too, by another process; and, though I would by no means read full, plain, articulate Christian thought into the vision of Isaiah--which would be an anachronism, and unfaithful to the gradual historical development of the idea and means of redemption--yet I cannot help pointing to the fact that, even although this vision is located as seen in the Temple, there is not a single reference (except that passing allusion to the altar) to the ritual of the Temple, but the cleansing comes in another fashion altogether.

But far more important than that thought is the human condition that is required ere this cleansing can be realised. I am a man of unclean lips. I am undone! It was because that conviction and confession sprang in the prophet's consciousness that the seraph winged his way with the purifying fire in his hands. Which being translated is just this: faith alone will not bring cleansing. There must go with it what we call, in our Christian phraseology, repentance, which is but the recognition of my own antagonism to the holiness of God, and the resolve to turn my back on my own past self. Now, it seems to me that a great deal of what is called, and in a sense is, Evangelical teaching, fails to represent the full counsel of God, in the matter of man's redemption, because it puts a one-sided emphasis on faith, and slurs over the accompanying idea of repentance. And I am here to say that a trust in Jesus Christ, which is unaccompanied by a profound penitent consciousness and abhorrence of one's own sins, and a resolve to turn away from them for the time to come, is not a faith which will bring either pardon or cleansing. We do not need to have less said about trust; we need to have a great deal more said about repentance. You have to learn what it is to say, I abhor myself; you have to learn what it is to say, I will turn right round, and leave all that past behind me; and go in the opposite direction; or the faith which you say you are exercising will neither save nor cleanse your souls nor your lives.

Again, note that we have here set forth most strikingly the other great truth that, side by side, and as closely synchronous as the flash and the peal, as soon as the consciousness of sin and the aversion from it spring in a man's heart, the seraph's wings are set in motion. Remember that beautiful old story in the historical books, of how the erring king, brought to sanity and repentance by Nathan's apologue, put all his acknowledgments in these words, I have sinned against the Lord; and how the confession was not out of his lips, nor had died in its vibration in the atmosphere, before the prophet, with divine authority, replied with equal brevity and completeness, and as if the two sayings were parts of one sentence, And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin. That is all. Simultaneous are the two things. To confess is to be forgiven, and the moment that the consciousness of sin rises in the heart, that moment does the heavenly messenger come to still and soothe.

Still further, notice how the cleansing comes as a divine gift. It is purifying, much more than pardon, that is set forth in the symbolical incident before us. The seraph is the divine messenger, and he brings a coal from the altar, and lays that upon the prophet's lips, which is but the symbolical way of saying that the man who is conscious of his own evil will find in himself a blessed despair of being his own healer, and that he has to turn to the divine source, the vision of which has kindled the consciousness, to find there that which will take away the evil. The Lord is He that healeth us.

But, further, the cleansing is by fire. By which, as I suppose, in the present context, and at Isaiah's stage of religious knowledge and experience, we are to understand that great thought that God burns away our sins, as you put a piece of foul clay into the fire, and the stain melts from the surface like a dissipating cloud as the heat finds its way into the substance. He will baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire--a fire that quickens. A new impulse will be granted, which will become the life of the sinful man's life, and will emancipate him from the power of his own darkness and evil.

Now, let us remember that we have the fulness of all that was shadowed to the prophet in this vision, and that the reality of every one of these emblems is gathered together--if I may so say--not with confusion, but with abundance and opulence in Jesus Christ Himself. Is He not the seraph? Is He not Himself the burning coal? Is He not the altar from which it is taken? All that is needed to make the foulest clean is given in Christ's great work. Brethren, we shall never understand the deepest secret of Christ and of Christianity until we learn and hold fast by the conviction that the central work of Jesus is to deal with man's sin; and that whatever else Christianity is, it is first and foremost God's way of redeeming the world, and making it possible for the unholy to dwell with His holy self.

**III. Lastly, and only a word, the third stage here is--the purged spirit is ready for service.**

God did not bid the prophet go on His mission till the prophet had voluntarily accepted the mission. He said, Who will go for us? He wants no pressed men in His army. He does not work with reluctant servants. There is, first, the yielding of the will, and then there is the enduement with the privilege of service. The prophet, having passed through the preceding experiences, had thereby received a quick ear to hear God's calling for volunteers. And we shall not hear Him asking Who will go? unless we have, in our measure, passed through similar experiences. It will be a test of having done so, of our having been purged from our evil, if, when other people think that it is only Eli speaking, we know that it is the Lord that has called us, and say, Here am I.

For such experiences as I have been describing do influence the will, and mould the heart, and make it a delight to do God's commandments, and to execute His purpose, and to be the ministers of His great Word. Some of us are willing to say that we have learned God's holiness; that we have seen and confessed our sins; that we have received pardon and cleansing. Have these experiences made you ready for any service? Have they made your will flexible--made you dethrone yourself, and enthrone the King whom the prophet saw? If they have, they are genuine; if they have not, they are not. Submission of will; glorying in being the instrument of the divine purpose; ears sharpened to catch His lowest whisper; eyes that, like those of a dog fixed on his master, watch for the faintest indication from his guiding eye--these are the infallible tests and signs of having had lips and heart touched with the live coal that burns away our uncleanness.

So, friends, would that I could flash upon every conscience that vision! But you can do so for yourselves. Let me beseech you to bring yourselves honestly into that solemn light of the character of God, and to ask yourselves, How can two walk together except they be agreed? Do not put away such thoughts with any shallow, easy-going talk about how God is good and will not be hard upon a poor fellow that has tried to do his best. God is good; God is love. But divine goodness and love cannot find a way by which the unclean shall dwell with the clean. What then? This then--Jesus Christ has come. We may be made clean if we trust in Him, and forsake our sins. He will touch the heart and lips with the fire of His own Spirit, and then it will be possible to dwell with the everlasting burnings of that flaming fire which is a holy God. Blessed are they that have seen the vision; blessed they that have felt it disclosing their own sins; blessed they whose hearts have been purged. Blessed most of all they who, educated and trained through these experiences, have taken this as the motto of their lives, Here am I; send me.