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

**ISAIAH-023. THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine! 2. Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one, which, as a tempest of hail, and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand. 3. The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet: 4. And the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up. 5. In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of His people. 6. And for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate. 7. But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way: the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. 8. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean. 9. Whom shall He teach knowledge? and whom shall He make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. 10. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: 11. For with stammering lips, and another tongue, will He speak to this people. 12. To whom He said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. 13. But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken."*

*Isaiah 28:1-13*

This prophecy probably falls in the first years of Hezekiah, when Samaria still stood, and the storm of war was gathering black in the north. The portion included in the text predicts the fall of Samaria (verses 1-6) and then turns to Judah, which is guilty of the same sins as the northern capital, and adds to them mockery of the prophet's message. Isaiah speaks with fiery indignation and sharp sarcasm. His words are aflame with loathing of the moral corruption of both kingdoms, and he fastens on the one common vice of drunkenness--not as if it were the only sin, but because it shows in the grossest form the rottenness underlying the apparent beauty.

**I. The woe on Samaria (verses 1-6).**

Travellers are unanimous in their raptures over the fertility and beauty of the valley in which Samaria stood, perched on its sunny, fruitful hill, amid its vineyards. The situation of the city naturally suggests the figure which regards it as a sparkling coronet or flowery wreath, twined round the brows of the hill; and that poetical metaphor is the more natural, since revellers were wont to twist garlands in their hair, when they reclined at their orgies. The city is the crown of pride--that is, the object of boasting and foolish confidence--and is also the fading flower of his sparkling ornament; that is, the flower which is the ornament of Ephraim, but is destined to fade.

The picture of the city passes into that of the drunken debauch, where the chief men of Samaria sprawl, smitten down by wine, and with the innocent flowers on their hot temples drooping in the fumes of the feast. But bright and sunny as the valley is, glittering in the light as the city sits on her hill, careless and confident as the revellers are, a black cloud lies on the horizon, and one of the terrible sudden storms which such lands know comes driving up the valley. The Lord hath a mighty and strong one--the conqueror from the north, who is God's instrument, though he knows it not.

The swift, sudden, irresistible onslaught of the Assyrian is described, in harmony with the figure of the flowery coronal, as a tempest which beats down the flowers and flings the sodden crown to the ground. The word rendered tempest is graphic, meaning literally a downpour. First comes hail, which batters the flowers to shreds; then the effect of the storm is described as destruction, and then the hurrying words turn back to paint the downpour of rain, mighty from its force in falling, and overflowing from its abundance, which soon sets all the fields swimming with flood water. What chance has a poor twist of flowers in such a storm? Its beauty will be marred, and all the petals beaten off, and nothing remains but that it should be trampled into mud. The rush of the prophet's denunciation is swift and irresistible as the assault it describes, and it flashes from one metaphor to another without pause. The fertility of the valley of Samaria shapes the figures. As the picture of the flowery chaplet, so that which follows of the early fig, is full of local colour. A fig in June is a delicacy, which is sure to be plucked and eaten as soon as seen. Such a dainty, desirable morsel will Samaria be, as sweet and as little satisfying to the all-devouring hunger of the Assyrian.

But storms sweep the air clear, and everything will not go down before this one. The flower fadeth, but there is a chaplet of beauty which men may wreathe round their heads, which shall bloom for ever. All sensuous enjoyment has its limits in time, as well as in nobleness and exquisiteness; but when it is all done with, the beauty and festal ornament which truly crowns humanity shall smell sweet and blossom. The prophecy had regard simply to the issue of the historical disaster to which it pointed, and it meant that, after the storm of Assyrian conquest, there would still be, for the servants of God, the residue of the people, both in Israel and in Judah, a fuller possession of the blessings which descend on the men who make God their portion. But the principle involved is for ever true. The sweeping away of the perishable does draw true hearts nearer to God.

So the two halves of this prophecy give us eternal truths as to the certain destruction awaiting the joys of sense, and the permanence of the beauty and strength which belong to those who take God for their portion.

Drunkenness seems to have been a national sin in Israel; for Micah rebukes it as vehemently as Isaiah, and it is a clear bit of Christian duty in England to-day to set the trumpet to thy mouth and show the people this sin. But the lessons of the prophecy are wider than the specific form of evil denounced. All setting of affection and seeking of satisfaction in that which, in all the pride of its beauty, is a fading flower, is madness and sin. Into every life thus turned to the perishable will come the crash of the destroying storm, the mutterings of which might reach the ears of the feasters, if they were not drunk with the fumes of their deceiving delights. Only one kind of life has its roots in that which abides, and is safe from tempest and change. Amaranthine flowers bloom only in heaven, and must be brought thence, if they are to garland earthly foreheads. If we take God for ours, then whatever tempests may howl, and whatever fragile though fragrant joys may be swept away, we shall find in Him all that the world fails to give to its votaries. He is a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty. Our humanity is never so fair as when it is made beautiful by the possession of Him. All that sense vainly seeks in earth, faith finds in God. Not only beauty, but a spirit of judgment, in its narrower sense and in its widest, is breathed into those to whom God is the master light of all their seeing; and, yet more, He is strength to all who have to fight. Thus the close union of trustful souls with God, the actual inspiration of these, and the perfecting of their nature from communion with God, are taught us in the great words, which tell how beauty, justice, and strength are all given in the gift of Jehovah Himself to His people.

**II. The prophet turns to Judah (vs. 7-13), and charges them with the same disgusting debauchery.**

His language is vehement in its loathing, and describes the filthy orgies of those who should have been the guides of the people with almost painful realism. Note how the words reel and stagger are repeated, and also the words wine and strong drink. We see the priests and prophets unsteady gait, and then they stumble or fall. There they lie amid the filth, like hogs in a sty. It is very coarse language, but fine words are the Devil's veils for coarse sins; and it is needful sometimes to call spades spades, and not to be ashamed to tell men plainly how ugly are the vices which they are not ashamed to commit. No doubt some of the drunken priests and false prophets in Jerusalem thought Isaiah extremely vulgar and indelicate, in talking about staggering teachers and tables swimming in vomit. But he had to speak out. So deep was the corruption that the officials were tipsy even when engaged in their official duties, the prophets reeled while they were seeing visions; the judges could not sit upright even when pronouncing judgment.

Verses 9 and 10 are generally taken as a sarcastic quotation of the drunkards scoffs at the prophet. They might be put in inverted commas. Their meaning is, Does he take us grave and reverend seigniors, priests and prophets, to be babies just weaned, that he pesters us with these monotonous petty preachings, fit only for the nursery, which he calls his "message"? In verse 10, the original for precept upon precept, etc., is a series of short words, which may be taken as reproducing the babbling tones of the drunken mockers.

The loose livers of all generations talk in the same fashion about the stern morality which rebukes their vice. They call it weak, commonplace, fit for children, and they pretend that they despise it. They are much too enlightened for such antiquated teaching. Old women and children may take it in, but men of the world, who have seen life, and know what is what, are not to be fooled so. What will this babbler say? was asked by the wise men of Athens, who were but repeating the scoffs of the prophets and priests of Jerusalem, and the same jeers are bitter in the mouth of many a profligate man to-day. It is the fate of all strict morality to be accounted childish by the people whom it inconveniently condemns.

In verse 11 and onwards the prophet speaks. He catches up the mockers words, and retorts them. They have scoffed at his message as if it were stammering speech. They shall hear another kind of stammerers when the fierce invaders harsh and unintelligible language commands them. The reason why these foreign voices would have authority, was the national disregard of God's voice. Ye would not hear Him when, by His prophet, He spoke gracious invitations to rest, and to give the nation rest, in obedience and trust. Therefore they shall hear the battle-cry of the conqueror, and have to obey orders spoken in a barbarous tongue.

Of course, the language meant is the Assyrian, which, though cognate with Hebrew, is so unlike as to be unintelligible to the people. But is not the threat the statement of a great truth always being fulfilled towards the disobedient? If we will not listen to that loving Voice which calls us to rest, we shall be forced to listen to the harsh and strident tones of conquering enemies who command us to slavish toil. If we will not be guided by His eye and voice, we shall be governed by whip and bridle. Our choice is either to hearken to the divine call, which is loving and gentle, and invites to deep repose springing from faith, or to have to hear the voice of the taskmasters. The monotony of despised moral and religious teaching shall give place to a more terrible monotony, even that of continuous judgments.

The mills of God grind slowly. Bit by bit, with gradual steps, with dismal persistence, like the slow drops on the rock, the judgments of God trickle out on the mocking heart. It takes a long time for a child to learn a pageful when he gets his lesson a sentence at a time. So slowly do His chastisements fall on men who have despised the continuous messages of His love. The word of the Lord, which was laughed at when it clothed itself in a prophet's speech, will be heard in more formidable shape, when it is wrapped in the long-drawn-out miseries of years of bondage. The warning is as needful for us as for these drunken priests and scornful rulers. The principle embodied is true in this day as it was then, and we too have to choose between serving God in gladness, hearkening to the voice of His word, and so finding rest to our souls, and serving the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so experiencing the perpetual dropping of the fiery rain of His judgments.