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

**ISAIAH-042. THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*14. "And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord. 15. And Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord, saying, 16. O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, Thou art the God, even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: Thou hast made heaven and earth. 17. Incline Thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open Thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God. 18. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries, 19. And have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them. 20. Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art the Lord, even Thou only. 21. Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah, saying. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Whereas thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib king of Assyria... . 33. Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it. 34. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord. 35. For I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake. 36. Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. 37. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 38. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his you reigned in his stead."*

*Isaiah 37:14-21; 33-38*

Is trust in Jehovah folly or wisdom? That was the question raised by Sennacherib's invasion. A glance at the preceding chapters will show how the high military official, the rabshakeh, or chief of the officers, shaped all his insolent and yet skilful mixture of threats and promises so as to demonstrate the vanity of trust in Egypt or in Jehovah, or in any but the great king. Isaiah had been labouring to lift his countrymen to the height of reliance on Jehovah alone, and now the crucial test of the truth of his contention had come. On the one hand were Sennacherib and his host, flushed with victory, and sure of crushing this puny kinglet Hezekiah and his obstinate little city, perched on its rock. On the other was nothing but a prophet's word. Where is the stronger force? And does political prudence dictate reliance on the Unseen or on the visible? The moment is the crisis of Isaiah's work, and this narrative has been placed, with true insight into its importance, at the close of the first half of this book.

To grasp the significance of the text the preceding events have to be remembered. Hezekiah's kingdom had been overrun, and tribute exacted from him. The rabshakeh had been sent from the main body of the Assyrian army, which was down at Lachish in the Philistine low country on the road to Egypt, in order to try to secure Jerusalem by promises and threats, since it was too important a post to leave in the rear, if Egypt was to be invaded. That attempt having failed, and the Egyptian forces being in motion, this new effort was made to induce Hezekiah to surrender. A letter was sent, whether accompanied by any considerable armed force or no does not appear. At this point the narrative begins. It may be best studied as an illustration of the trial of faith, its refuge, its pleading, and its deliverance.

**I. Note the trial of faith.**

Rabshakeh had derided the obstinate confidence in Jehovah, which kept these starving men on the walls grimly silent in spite of his coaxing. The letter of Sennacherib harps on the same string. It is written in a tone of assumed friendly remonstrance, and lays out with speciousness the apparent grounds for calling trust in Jehovah absurdity. There are no threats in it. It is all an appeal to common sense and political prudence. It marshals undeniable facts. Experience has shown the irresistible power of Assyria. There have been plenty of other little nations which have trusted in their local deities, and what has become of them? Barbarous names are flourished in Hezekiah's face, and their wasted dominions are pointed to as warnings against his committing a parallel folly. There is nothing in the letter which might not have been said by a friend, and nothing which was not said by the Jews who had lost their faith in their God. It was but the putting into plain words of what common-sense and faint faith had often whispered to Hezekiah. The very absence of temper or demand in the letter gives it an aspect of that sweet reasonableness so dear to sense-bound souls.

Mutatis mutandis, the letter may stand for a specimen of the arguments which worldly prudence brings to shake faith, in all ages. We, too, are assailed by much that sounds most forcible from the point of view of mere earthly calculation. Sennacherib does not lie in boasting of his victories. He and his shoals of soldiers are very real and potent. It does seem madness for one little kingdom to stand out, and all the more so because its king is cooped up in his city, as the cuneiform inscription proudly tells, like a bird in a cage, and all the rest of his land is in the conqueror's grip. They who look only at the things seen cannot but think the men of faith mad. They who look at the things unseen cannot but know that the men of sense are fools. The latter elaborately prove that the former are impotent, but they have left out one factor in their calculations, and that is God. One man and God at his back are stronger than Sennacherib and all his mercenaries.

**II. Note the refuge of tempted faith.**

What was Hezekiah to do with the crafty missive? It was hoped that he would listen to reason, and come down from his perch. But he neither yielded nor took counsel with his servants, but, like a devout man, went into the house of the Lord, and spread the letter before the Lord. It would have gone hard with him if he had not been to the house of the Lord many a time before. It is not easy to find our way thither for the first time, when our eyes are blinded by tears or our way darkened by calamities. But faith instinctively turns to God when anything goes wrong, because it has been accustomed to turn to Him when all was right, according to the world's estimate of right and wrong. Whither should the burdened heart betake itself but to Him who daily bears our burdens? The impulse to tell God all troubles is as truly a mark of the faithful soul as the impulse to tell everything to the beloved is the life-breath of love.

The act of spreading the letter before the Lord is an eloquent symbol, which some prosaic and learned commentators have been dull enough to call gross, and to compare to Buddhist praying-mills! Its meaning is expressed in the prayer which follows. It is faith's appeal to His knowledge. It is faith's casting of its burden on the Lord. Our faith is of little power to bless, unless it impels us to take God into confidence in regard to everything which troubles us. If the letter is not grave enough to be spread before Him, it is too small to annoy us. If we truly live in fellowship with God, we shall find ourselves in His house, with the cause of our trouble in our hands, before we have time to think. Instinct acts more quickly than reason, and, if our faith be vital, it will not need to be argued into speaking to God of all that weighs upon us.

**III. Note the pleading of faith.**

Hezekiah's address to God is no mere formal recapitulation of divine names, but is the effort of faith to grasp firmly the truths which the enemy denies, and on which it builds. So considered, the accumulation of titles in verse 16 is very instructive, and shows how a trustful soul puts forth the energy of its faith in summoning to mind the great aspects of the divine name as bulwarks against suggested fears, and bases of supplication. Hezekiah appeals to the God of Hosts, the Ruler of all the embattled forces of the universe, as well as of the armies of angels. What is Sennacherib's array compared with these? He appeals to the God of Israel, as pleading the ancient relationship, which binds the unchangeable Guardian of the people to be still what He has been, and casts the responsibility of Israel's preservation upon Him. He appeals to Him who sits between the cherubim, as thence defending and filling the threatened city. He grasps the thought that Jehovah is God alone with a vividness which is partly due no doubt to Isaiah's teaching, but is also the indignant recoil of faith from the assumption of the letter, that Jehovah was but as the beaten deities of Gozan and the rest. Faith clings the more tenaciously to truths denied, as a dog will hold on to the stick that one tries to pull from it.

Thus, having heartened himself and pled with God by all these names, Hezekiah comes to his petition. It is but translating into words the symbol of spreading the letter before God. He asks God to behold and to hear the defiant words. Prayer tells God what it knows that He knows already, for it relieves the burdened heart to tell Him. It asks Him to see and hear what it knows that He does see and hear. But the prayer is not for mere observance followed by no divine act, but for taking knowledge as the precursor of the appropriate help. Of such seeing and hearing by God, believing prayer is the appointed condition. Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him; but that is not a reason for silence, but for supplication.

Hezekiah rightly regarded Sennacherib's words as meant to reproach the living God, for the point of the letter was to dissuade from trust in Him, as no more powerful than the petty deities of already conquered cities. The prayer, therefore, pleads that God would take care of His own honour, and by delivering Jerusalem, show His sole sovereignty. It is a high and wonderful level for faith to reach, when it regards personal deliverance mainly in its aspect as vindicating God and warranting faith. We may too easily conclude that God's honour is involved in our deliverance, and it is well to be on our guard against that.

But it is possible to die to self so fully as to feel that our cause is His, because His is so entirely ours; and then we may come to that heroic faith which seeks even personal good more for God's sake than for our own. It was noble that this man should have no word to say about self but Save us, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art God alone. Like him, we may each feel that our defence is more God's affair than ours, in proportion as we feel we are His rather than our own. That siege of Jerusalem was indeed as a duel between faith and unbelief on the one hand, and between Jehovah and the gods who were no gods on the other. Sennacherib's letter was a defiant challenge to Jehovah to do His best for this people, and when faith repeated in prayer the insolence of unbelief only one result was possible. It came.

**IV. Note the deliverance of faith.**

Isaiah's grand prophecy tempts us to linger over its many beauties and magnificent roll of triumphant scorn, but it falls outside our purpose. As for the catastrophe, it should be noted that its place and time are not definitely stated, and that probably the notion that the Assyrian army was annihilated before Jerusalem is a mistake. Sennacherib and his troops were at Libnah, on their way to meet the Egyptian forces. If there were any of them before Jerusalem, they would at most be a small detachment, sufficient to invest it. Probably the course of events was that, at some time not specified, soon after the dismissal of the messengers who brought the letter, the awful destruction fell, and that, when the news of the disaster reached the detachment at Jerusalem, as the psalm which throbs with the echoes of the triumph says, They were troubled, and hasted away.

How complete was the crushing blow the lame record of this campaign in the inscriptions shows, in which the failure of the attempt to capture the city is covered up by vapouring about tribute and the like. If it had not failed, however, the success would certainly have been told, as all similar cases are told, with abundant boasting. The other fact is also to be remembered, that Sennacherib tried no more conclusions with Jerusalem and Jehovah, and though he lived for some twenty years afterwards, never again ventured on to the soil where that mighty God fought for His people.

The appended notice of Sennacherib's death has been added by some narrator, since it probably occurred after Isaiah's martyrdom. All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Such a career as his could not but give taste for violence and bloodshed, and dimmish regard for human life. Retribution comes slowly, for twenty years intervened between the catastrophe to the army and the murder of the king. Its penalties increase as its fall delays; for first came the blotting out of the army, and then, when that had no effect, at last the sword in his own heart. He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

But the great lesson of that death is the same as that of the other king's deliverance. Hezekiah went unto the house of the Lord, and found Him a very present help in trouble. Sennacherib was slain in the house of his god. The two pictures of the worshippers and their fates are symbolic of the meaning of the whole story. Sennacherib had dared Jehovah to try His strength against him and his deities. The challenge was accepted, and that bloody corpse before the idol that could not help preaches a ghastly sermon on the text, They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. O Israel, trust thou in the Lord: He is their help and their shield.