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

**ISAIAH-067. DYING FIRES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that gird yourselves about with firebrands: walk ye in the flame of your fire, and among the brands that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow."*

*Isaiah 50:11*

The scene brought before us in these words is that of a company of belated travellers in some desert, lighting a little fire that glimmers ineffectual in the darkness of the eerie waste. They huddle round its dying embers for a little warmth and company, and they hope it will scare wolf and jackal, but their fuel is all burned, and they have to go to sleep without its solace and security. The prophet's imaginative picture is painted from life, and is a sad reality in the cases of all who seek to warm themselves at any fire that they kindle for themselves, apart from God.

**I. A sad, true picture of human life.**

It does not cover, nor is presented by the prophet as covering, all the facts of experience. Every man has his share of sunshine, but still it is true of all who are not living in dependence on and communion with God, that they are but travellers in the dark.

Scripture uses the image of darkness as symbolic of three sad facts of our experience: ignorance, sin, sorrow. Are not all these the characteristics of godless lives?

As for ignorance--a godless man has no key to the awful problems that front him. He knows not God, who is to him a dread, a name, a mystery. He knows not himself, the depths of his nature, its possibilities for good or evil, whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. He has no solution for the riddle of the universe. It is to him a chaos, and darkness is upon the face of the deep.

As to sin, the darkness of ignorance is largely due to the darkness of sin. In every heart comes sometimes the consciousness that it is thus darkened by sin. The sense of sin is with all men more or less--much perverted, often wrong in its judgments, feeble, easily silenced, but for all that it is there--and it is great part of the cold obstruction that shuts out the light. Sin weaves the pall that shrouds the world.

As for darkness of sorrow--we must beware that we do not exaggerate. God makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and there is gladness in every life, much that arises from fulfilled desires, from accomplished purposes, from gratified affections. But when all this has been freely admitted, still sadness crouches somewhere in all hearts, and over every life the storm sometimes stoops.

We need nothing beyond our own experience and the slightest knowledge of other hearts to know how shallow and one-sided a view of life that is which sees only the joy and forgets the sorrow, which ignores the night and thinks only of the day; which, looking out on nature, is blind to the pain and agony, the horror and the death, which are as real parts of it as brightness and beauty, love and life. Every little valley that lies in lovely loneliness has its scenes of desolation, and tempest has broken over the fairest scenes. Every river has drowned its man. Over every inch of blue sky the thunder cloud has rolled. Every summer has its winter, every day its night, every life its death. All stars set, all moons wane. Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang come after every leafy June.

Sorrow is as deeply embedded in the necessity and constitution of things as joy. God hath set one over against another, and hath made all things double.

**II. The vain attempts at light.**

There is bitter irony in the prophet's description of the poor flickering spot of light in the black waste and of its swift dying out. The travellers without a watch-fire are defenceless from midnight prowlers. How full of solemn truth about godless lives the vivid outline picture is!

Men try to free themselves from the miseries of ignorance, sin, and sorrow.

Think of the insufficiency of all such attempts, the feeble flicker which glimmers for an hour, and then fuel fails and it goes out. Then the travellers can journey no further, but lie down in sorrow, and without a watchfire they become a prey to all the beasts of the field. It is a little picture taken from the life.

It vividly paints how men will try to free themselves from the miseries of their condition, how insufficient all their attempts are, how transient the relief, and how bitter and black the end.

We may apply these thoughts to--

* Men-made grounds of hope before God.
* Men-made attempts to read the mysteries.

We do not say this of all human learning, but of that which, apart from God's revelation, deals with the subjects of that revelation.

* Men-made efforts at self-reformation.
* Men-made attempts at alleviating sorrow.

Scripture abounds in other metaphors for the same solemn spiritual facts as are set before us in this picture of the dying watchfire and the sad men watching its decline. Godless lives draw from broken cisterns out of which the water runs. They build with untempered mortar. They lean on broken reeds that wound the hand pressed on them. They spend money for that which is not bread. But all these metaphors put together do not tell all the vanity, disappointments, and final failure and ruin of such a life. That last glimpse given in the text of the sorrowful sleeper stretched by the black ashes, with darkness round and hopeless heaviness within, points to an issue too awful to be dwelt on by a preacher, and too awful not to be gravely considered by each of us for himself.

**III. The light from God.**

What would the dead fire and the ring of ashes on the sand matter when morning dawned? Jesus is our Sun. He rises, and the spectres of the night melt into thin air, and joy cometh in the morning. He floods our ignorance with knowledge of the Father whose name He declares, with knowledge of ourselves, of the world, of our destiny and our duty, our hopes and our home. He takes away the sin of the world. He gives the oil of joy for mourning. For every human necessity He is enough. Follow Him and your life's pilgrimage shall not be a midnight one, but accomplished in sunshine. I am the light of the world; he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.