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

**ISAIAH-069. A PARADOX OF SELLING AND BUYING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money."*

*Isaiah 52:3*

THE first reference of these words is of course to the Captivity. They come in the midst of a grand prophecy of freedom, all full of leaping gladness and buoyant hope. The Seer speaks to the captives; they had sold themselves for nought. What had they gained by their departure from God?--bondage. What had they won in exchange for their freedom?-- only the hard service of Babylon. As Deuteronomy puts it: Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness... by reason of the abundance of all things, therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies... in want of all things. A wise exchange! a good market they had brought their goods to! In striking ironical parallel the prophet goes on to say that so should they be redeemed. They had got nothing by bondage, they should give nothing for liberty. This text has its highest application in regard to our captivity and our redemption.

**I. The reality of the captivity.**

The true idea of bondage is that of coercion of will and conscience, the dominance and tyranny of what has no right to rule. So men are really in bondage when they think themselves most free. The only real slavery is that in which we are tied and bound by our own passions and lusts. He that committeth sin is the slave of sin. He thinks himself master of himself and his actions, and boasts that he has broken away from the restraints of obedience, but really he has only exchanged masters. What a Master to reject--and what a master to prefer!

**II. The voluntariness of the captivity.**

Ye have sold yourselves, and become authors of your own bondage. No sin is forced upon any man, and no one is to blame for it but himself. The many excuses which people make to themselves are hollow. Now-a-days we hear a great deal of heredity, how a man is what his ancestors have made him, and of organisation, how a man is what his body makes him, and of environment, how a man is what his surroundings make him. There is much truth in all that, and men's guilt is much diminished by circumstances, training, and temperament. The amount of responsibility is not for us to settle, in regard to others, or even in regard to ourselves. But all that does not touch the fact that we ourselves have sold ourselves. No false brethren have sold us as they did Joseph.

The strong tendency of human nature is always to throw the blame on some one else; God or the devil, the flesh or the world, it does not matter which. But it remains true that every man sinning is drawn away of his own lust and enticed.

After all, conscience witnesses to the truth, and by that mysterious sense of guilt and gnawing of remorse which is quite different from the sense of mistake, tears to tatters the sophistries. Nothing is more truly my own than my sin.

**III. The profitlessness of the captivity.**

For nought; that is a picturesque way of putting the truth that all sinful life fails to satisfy a man. The meaning of one of the Hebrew words for sin is missing the mark. It is a blunder as well as a crime. It is trying to draw water from broken cisterns. It is as when a hungry man dreameth and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul is empty. Sin buys men with fairy money, which looks like gold, but in the morning is found to be but a handful of yellow and faded leaves. Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread? It cannot but be so, for only God can satisfy a man, and only in doing His will are we sure of sowing seed which will yield us bread enough and to spare, and nothing but bread. In all other harvests, tares mingle and they yield poisoned flour. We never get what we aim at when we do wrong, for what we aim at is not the mere physical or other satisfaction which the temptation offers us, but rest of soul--and that we do not get. And we are sure to get something that we did not aim at or look for--a wounded conscience, a worsened nature, often hurts to health or reputation, and other consequent ills, that were carefully kept out of sight, while we were being seduced by the siren voice. The old story of the traitress, who bargained to let the enemies into the city, if they would give her what they wore on their left arms, meaning bracelets, and was crushed to death under their shields heaped on her, is repeated in the experience of every man who listens to the juggling fiends, who keep the word of promise to the ear, but break it to the hope. The truth of this is attested by a cloud of witnesses. Conscience and experience answer the question, What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? Wasted lives answer; tyrannous evil habits answer; diseased bodies, blighted reputations, bitter memories answer.

**IV. The unbought freedom.**

Ye shall be redeemed without money. You gained nothing by your bondage; you need give nothing for your emancipation. The original reference is, of course, to the great act of divine power which set these literal captives free, not for price nor reward. As in the Exodus from Egypt, so in that from Babylon, no ransom was paid, but a nation of bondsmen was set at liberty without war or compensation. That was a strange thing in history. The paradox of buying back without buying is a symbol of the Christian redemption.

**(a)** A price has been paid.

Ye were redeemed not with corruptible things as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. The New Testament idea of redemption, no doubt, has its roots in the Old Testament provisions for the Goel or kinsman redeemer, who was to procure the freedom of a kinsman. But whatever figurative elements may enter into it, its core is the ethical truth that Christ's death is the means by which the bonds of sin are broken. There is much in the many-sided applications and powers of that Death which we do not know, but this is clear, that by it the power of sin is destroyed and the guilt of sin taken away.

**(b)** That price has been paid for all.

We have therefore nothing to pay. A slave cannot redeem himself, for all that he has is his master's already. So, no efforts of ours can set ourselves free from the cords of our sins. Men try to bring something of their own. I do my best and God will have mercy. We will bring our own penitence, efforts, good works, or rely on Church ordinances, or anything rather than sue in forma pauperis. How hard it is to get men to see that It is finished, and to come and rest only on the mere mercy of God.

How do we ally ourselves with that completed work? By simple faith, of which an essential is the recognition that we have nothing and can do nothing.

Suppose an Israelite in Babylon who did not choose to avail himself of the offered freedom; he must die in bondage. So must we if we refuse to have eternal life as the gift of God. The prophet's paradoxical invitation, He that hath no money, come ye, buy... without money, is easily solved. The price is to give up ourselves and forsake all self-willed striving after self-purchased freedom which is but subtler bondage. If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed. If not, then are ye slaves indeed, having sold yourselves for nought, and declined to be redeemed without money.