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

**ISAIAH-078. THE SUFFERING SERVANT Part 6 by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong; because He hath poured out His soul unto death: and was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."*

*Isaiah 53:12*

The first clause of this verse is somewhat difficult. There are two ways of understanding it. One is that adopted in A. V., according to which the suffering Servant is represented as equal to the greatest conquerors. He is to be as gloriously successful in His victory as they have been in theirs. But there are two very strong objections to this rendering--first, that it takes the many in the sense of mighty, thus obscuring the identity of the expression here and in the previous verse and in the end of this verse; and secondly, that it gives a very feeble and frigid ending to the prophecy. It does not seem a worthy close simply to say that the Servant is to be like a Cyrus or a Nebuchadnezzar in His conquests.

The other rendering, though there are some difficulties, is to be preferred. According to it the many and the strong are themselves the prey or spoil. The words might be read, I will apportion to Him the many, and He shall apportion to Himself the strong ones.

This retains the same meaning of many for the same expression throughout the context, and is a worthy ending to the prophecy. The force of the clause is then to represent the suffering Servant as a conqueror, leading back from His conquests a long train of captives, a rich booty.

Notice some points about this closing metaphor.

Mark its singular contrast to the tone of the rest of the prophecy. Note the lowliness, the suffering, the minor key of it all, and then, all at once, the leap up to rapture and triumph. The special form of the metaphor strikes one as singular. Nothing in the preceding context even remotely suggests it. Even the previous clause about making the many righteous does not do much to prepare the way for it. Whatever be our explanation of the words, it must be one that does full justice to this metaphor, and presents some conquering power or person, whose victories are brilliant and real enough to be worthy to stand at the close of such a prophecy. We must keep in mind, too, what has been remarked on the two previous verses, that this victorious campaign and growing conquest is achieved after the Servant is dead. That is a paradox. And note that the strength of language representing His activity can scarcely be reconciled with the idea that it is only the post-mortem influence of His life which is meant.

Note, too, the singular blending of God's power and the Servant's own activity in the winning of this extended sovereignty. Side by side the two are put. The same verb is used in order to emphasise the intended parallel. I will divide, He shall divide. I will give Him--He shall conquer for Himself. Remember the intense vehemence with which the Old Testament guards the absolute supremacy of divine power, and how strongly it always puts the thought that God is everything and man nothing. Look at the contrast of the tone when a human conqueror, whose conquests are the result of God's providence, is addressed (45:1-3). There is an entire suppression of his personality, not a word about his bravery, his military genius, or anything in him. It is all I, I, I. Remember how, in chapter 10., one of the sins for which the Assyrian is to be destroyed is precisely that he thought of his victories as due to his own strength and wisdom. So he is indignantly reminded that he is only a staff in Mine hand, the axe with which God hewed the nations, whereas here the voice of God Himself speaks, and gives a strange place beside Himself to the will and power of this Conqueror. This feature of the prophecy should be accounted for in any satisfactory interpretation.

**I. The extent of the Servant's dominion.**

Note, too, the wide sweep of the Servant's dominion, which carries us back to the beginning of this prophecy in chapter 52:15, where we hear of the Servant as sprinkling (or startling) many nations, and the kings is parallel with the strong in this verse. No bounds are assigned to the Servant's conquests, which are, if not declared to be universal, at least indefinitely extended and striding on to world-wide empire.

These points are plainly here. I do not dilate upon them. But I ask whether any of the interpretations of these words, except one, gives adequate force to them? Is there anything in the history of the restored exiles which corresponds to this picture? Even if you admit the violent hypothesis that there was a better part of the nation, so good that the national sorrows had no chastisement for them, and the other violent hypothesis that the devoutest among the exiles suffered most, and the other that the death and burial and resurrection of the Servant only mean the reformation wrought on Israel by captivity. What is there in the history of Israel which can be pointed at as the conquest of the world? Was the nation that bore the yokes of a Ptolemy, an Antiochus, a Herod, a Caesar, the fulfiller of this dream of world-conquest? There is only one thing which can be called the Jew conquering the world. It is that which, as I believe, is meant here, viz. Christ's conquest. Apart from that, I know of nothing which would not be ludicrously disproportionate if it were alleged as fulfilment of this glowing prophecy.

This prophetic picture is at least four hundred years before Christ, by the admission of those who bring it lowest down, in their eagerness to get rid of prophecy. The life of Christ does correspond to it, in such a way that, clause by clause, it reads as if it were quite as much a history of Jesus as a prophecy of the Servant. This certainly is an extraordinary coincidence if it be not a prophecy. And there is really no argument against the Messianic interpretation, except dogmatic prejudice--there cannot be prophecy.

No straining is needed in order to fit this great prophetic picture of the world-Conqueror to Jesus. Even that, at first sight incongruous, picture of a victor leading long lines of captives, such as we see on Assyrian slabs and Egyptian paintings, is historically true of Him who leads captivity captive, and is, through the ages, winning ever fresh victories, and leading His enemies, turned into lovers, in His triumphal progress. He, and He only, really owns men. His slaves have made real self-surrenders to Him. Other conquerors may imprison or load with irons or deport to other lands, but they are only lords of bodies. Jesus chains are silken, and bind hearts that are proud of their bonds. He carries off His free prisoners from the power of darkness into His kingdom of light. His slaves rejoice to say, I am not my own, and he only truly possesses himself who has given himself away to the Conquering Christ. For all these centuries He has been conquering hearts, enthralling and thereby liberating wills, making Himself the life of lives. There is nothing else the least like the bond between Jesus and millions who never saw him. Who among all the leaders of thought or religious teachers has been able to impress his personality on others and to dominate them in the fashion that Jesus has done and is doing to-day? How has He done this thing, which no other man has been able in the least to do? What is His charm, the secret of His power? The prophet has no doubt what it is, and unfolds it to us with a significant For. We turn, then, to the prophetic explanation of that worldwide empire and note--

**II. The foundation of the Servant's dominion.**

That explanation is given in four clauses which fall into two pairs. They remarkably revert to the thought of the Servant's sufferings, but in how different a tone these are now spoken of, when they are no longer regarded as the results of man's blind failure to see His beauty, or as inflicted by the mysterious pleasure of Jehovah, but as the causes of His triumph! Echoes of both the two first clauses are heard from the lips of Jesus. As He passed beneath the tremulous shadow of the olives of Gethsemane, He appealed for the companionship of the three, by an all but solitary revelation of His weakness and sorrow, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; abide ye here and watch with Me. And even more distinctly did He lay His hand on this prophecy when He ended all His words in the upper room with This which is written must be fulfilled in Me, And He was reckoned with "transgressors." May we not claim Jesus as endorsing the Messianic interpretation of this prophecy? He gazed on the portrait painted ages before that night of sorrow, and saw in it His own likeness, and said, That is meant for Me. Some of us feel that, kenosis or no kenosis, He is the best judge of who is the original of the prophet's portrait.

The two final clauses are separated from the preceding by the emphatic introduction of the pronominal nominative, and cohere closely as gathering up for the last time all the description of the Servant, and as laying broad and firm the basis of His dominion, in the two great facts which sum up His office and between them stretch over the past and the future. He bare the sin of many, and maketh intercession for the transgressors. The former of these two clauses brings up the pathetic picture of the scapegoat who bore upon him all their iniquities into a solitary land. The Servant conquers hearts because He bears upon Him the grim burden which a mightier hand than Aaron's has made to meet on His head, and because He bears it away. The ancient ceremony, and the prophet's transference of the words describing it to his picture of the Servant who was to be King, floated before John the Baptist, when he pointed his brown, thin finger at Jesus and cried: Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. The goat had borne the sins of one nation; the prophet had extended the Servant's ministry indefinitely, so as to include unnumbered many; John spoke the universal word, the world. So the circles widened.

But it is not enough to bear away sins. We need continuous help in the present. Our daily struggles, our ever-felt weakness, all the ills that flesh is heir to, cry aloud for a mightier than we to be at our sides. So on the Servant's bearing the sins of the many there follows a continuous act of priestly intercession, in which, not merely by prayer, but by meritorious and prevailing intervention, He makes His own the cause of the many whose sins He has borne.

On these two acts His dominion rests. Sacrifice and Intercession are the foundations of His throne.

The empire of men's hearts falls to Him because of what He has done and is doing for them. He who is to possess us absolutely must give Himself to us utterly. The empire falls to Him who supplies men's deepest need. He who can take away men's sins rules. He who can effectually undertake men's cause will be their King.

If Jesus is or does anything less or else, He will not rule men for ever. If He is but a Teacher and a Guide, oblivion, which shrouds all, will sooner or later wrap Him in its misty folds. That His name should so long have resisted its influence is due altogether to men having believed Him to be something else. He will exercise an everlasting dominion only if He have brought in an everlasting righteousness. He will sit King for ever, if and only if He is a priest for ever. All other rule is transient.

A remarkable characteristic of this entire prophecy is the frequent repetition of expressions conveying the idea of sufferings borne for others. In one form or another that thought occurs, as we reckon, eleven times, and it is especially frequent in the last verses of the chapter. Why this perpetual harking back to that one aspect? It is to be further noticed that throughout there is no hint of any other kind of work which this Servant had to do. He fulfils His service to God and man by being bruised for men's iniquities. He came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and the chief form of His ministry was that He gave His life a ransom for the many. He came not to preach a gospel, but to die that there might be a gospel to preach. The Cross is the centre of His work, and by it He becomes the Centre of the world.

Look once more at the sorrowful, august figure that rose before the prophet's eye--with its strange blending of sinlessness and sorrow, God's approval and God's chastisement, rejection and rule, death and life, abject humiliation and absolute dominion. Listen to the last echoes of the prophet's voice as it dies on our ear--He bore the sins of the many. And then hearken how eight hundred years after another voice takes up the echoes--but instead of pointing away down the centuries, points to One at his side, and cries, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. Look at that life, that death, that grave, that resurrection, that growing dominion, that inexhaustible intercession--and say, Of whom speaketh the prophet this?

May we all be able to answer with clear confidence, These things saith Esaias when he saw His glory and spake of Him. May we all take up the ancient confession: Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... . He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed.