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

**JEREMIAH-005. A COLLOQUY BETWEEN A PENITENT AND GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"A voice was heard upon the high places, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel: for they have perverted their way, and they have forgotten the Lord their God. Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God."*

*Jeremiah 3:21-22*

We have here a brief dramatic dialogue. First is heard a voice from the bare heights, the sobs and cries of penitence, produced by the prophet's earnest remonstrance. The penitent soul is absorbed in the thought of its own evil. Its sin stands clear before it. Israel sees its sin in its two forms. They have perverted their way, or have led a wrong outward life of action, and the reason is that they have forgotten God, or have been guilty of inward alienation and departure from Him. Here is the consciousness of sin in its essential character, and that produces godly sorrow. The distinction between mere remorse and repentance is here already, in the weeping and supplication.

**I. So we have here a consciousness of sin in its true nature, as embracing both deeds and heart, as originating in departure from God, and manifested in perverted conduct.**

Further, we have here sorrow. There may be consciousness of sin in its true nature without any sorrow of heart. It is fatal when a man looks upon his evil, gets a more or less clear sight of it, and is not sorry and penitent. It is conceivable that there should be perfect knowledge of sin and perfect insensibility in regard to it.

A sinful man's true mood should be sorrow--not flinging the blame on others, or on fate, or circumstances; not regarding his sin as misfortune or as inevitable or as disease.

Conscience is meant to produce that consciousness and that sorrow: but conscience may be dulled or silenced. It cannot be anyhow induced to call evil good, but it may be mistaken in what is evil. The gnomon is true, but a veil of cloud may be drawn over the sky.

Further, we have here supplication. These two former may both be experienced, without this third. There may be consciousness of sin and sorrow which lead to no blessing. My bones waxed old through my roaring. Sorrow after a godly sort may be hindered by false notions of God's great love, or by false notions of what a man ought to do when he finds he has gone wrong. It may be hindered by cleaving, subtle love of sin, or by self-trust. But where all these have been overcome there is true repentance.

**II. The loving divine answer.**

Another ear than the prophet's has heard the plaint from the bare heights. Many a frenzied shriek had gone up from these shrines of idolatrous worship, and as with Baal's prophets, it had brought no answer, nor had there been any that regarded. But this weeping reaches the ear that is never closed. Contrast with verse 23: Truly in vain is the help that is looked for from the hills, the shouting (of idol-worshippers) on the mountains.

The instantaneousness of God's answer is very beautiful. It is like the action of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who saw his repentant boy afar off and ran and kissed him.

There seems to be, in both the invitation to return and in the promise to hear the backslidings, a quotation from Hosea xiv. (1-4). We see here how God meets the penitent with a love that recognises all his sin and yet is love. It is not rebuke or reproach that lies in that designation, backsliding children. It is tenderest mercy that lets us see that He knows exactly what we are, and yet promises His love and forgiveness. He loves us sinners with a love that beckons us back to Himself, with a love that promises healing. The truth which should be taken into the mind and heart of the man conscious of sin is God's knowledge of it all already and yet His undiminished love, God's welcome of him back, God's ready pardon. All this is true for the world in Christ, and is true for every individual soul.

The answer and the invitation here are immediate.

There is often a long period of painful struggle. It looks as if the answer were not immediate. But that is because we do not listen to it.

**III. The happy response of the returning soul.**

That too is immediate. The soul believes God's promises. It recognises God's claim. It returns to Him. We are attracted by His grace. The sunflower turns to the sun. The penitent is not driven only, but drawn --God's own loving self-revelation in Christ is His true power. I, if I am lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.

The consciousness of sin remains and is even deepened (subsequent verses), and yet is different. A light of hope is in it. The very sense of sin brings us to Him, to hide our faces on His heart like a child in its mother's lap.

This response of the soul may be instantaneous. If it is not immediate, it too probably will never be at all.