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

**JEREMIAH-015. YOKES OF WOOD AND IRON by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Go and tell Hananiah, saying, Thus saith the Lord; Thou hast broken the yokes of wood; but thou shalt make for them yokes of iron."*

*Jeremiah 28:13*

I suppose that I had better begin by a word of explanation as to the occasion of this saying. One king of Judah had already been carried off to Babylon, and the throne refilled by his brother, a puppet of the conquerors. This shadow of a king, with the bulk of the nation, was eager for revolt. Jeremiah had almost single-handed to stem the tide of the popular wish. He steadfastly preached submission, not so much to Nebuchadnezzar as to God, who had sent the invaders as chastisement. The lesson was a difficult one to learn, and the people hated the teacher. In the Jerusalem of Jeremiah's day, as in other places and at other times, a love of country which is not blind to its faults and protests against a blatant militarism, was scoffed at as unpatriotic, playing into the hands of the enemy, seeking peace at any price, whilst an insane eagerness to rush to arms without regard to resources or righteousness was called a spirited foreign policy. So Jeremiah had plenty of enemies.

He had adopted a strange way of enforcing his counsel, which would be ridiculous to-day, but was natural and impressive then and there. He constantly for months went about with an ox-yoke on his neck, as a symbol of the submission which he advocated. One day, in the temple, before a public assembly, a certain Hananiah, a member of the opposite faction, made a fierce attack on the prophet and his teaching, and uttered a counter-prophecy to the effect that, in two years, the foreign invasion would be at an end, and all would be as it used to be. Our prophet answered very quietly, saying in effect, I hope to God that it may be true; the event will show. And then Hananiah, encouraged by his meekness, proceeded to violence, tore the yoke off his shoulders and snapped it in two, reiterating his prophecy. Then Jeremiah went away home.

Soon after, the voice which he knew to be God's, and not his own thoughts, spoke within him, and gave a much sharper answer. God declared, through Jeremiah, the plain truth that, for a tiny kingdom like Judah to perk itself up in the face of a world-conquering power like Babylon, could only bring down greater severity from the conqueror. And then he declared that Hananiah, for rebellion--not against Babylon, but against God, the true King of Israel--would be taken from the earth. He died in a couple of months.

My text forms the first word of this divine message. I have nothing more to do with its original application. It gives a picturesque setting to a very impressive and solemn truth; very familiar, no doubt, but none the less because of its familiarity needing to be dinned into people's ears. It is that to throw off legitimate authority is to bind on a worse tyranny. To some kind of yoke all of us must bend our necks, and if we slip them out we do not thereby become independent, but simply bring upon ourselves a heavier pressure of a harder bondage. The remainder of my remarks will simply go to illustrate that principle in two or three cases of ascending importance. I begin at the bottom.

**I. We have the choice between the yoke of law and the iron yoke of lawlessness.**

We all know that society could not be held together without some kind of restraints upon what is done, and some stimulus to do what is apt to be neglected. Even a band of brigands, or a crew of pirates, must have some code. I have read somewhere that the cells in a honeycomb are circles squeezed by the pressure of the adjacent cells into the hexagonal shape which admits of contiguity. If they continued circles there would be space and material lost, and no complete continuity. So, in like manner, you cannot keep five men together without some mutual limitations which are shaped into a law. Now, as long as a man keeps inside it, he does not feel its pressure. A great many of us, for instance, who are in the main law-abiding people, do not ever remember that there is such a thing as restrictions upon our licence, or as obligations to perform certain duties; for we never think either of taking the licence or of shirking the duties. The yoke that is accepted ceases to press. Once let a man step outside, and what then? Why, then, he is an outlaw; and the rough side of the law is turned to him, and all possible terrors, which people within the boundary have nothing to do with, gather themselves together and frown down upon him. The sheep that stops inside the pasture is never torn by the barbed wires of the fence. If you think of the life of a criminal, with all its tricks and evasions, taking every bush to be an officer, as Shakespeare says; or as the first of the brood who was the type of them all said, Every man that seeth me shall kill me: if you think of the sword that hangs over the head of every law-breaker, and which he knows is hanging by a hair; if you think of men in counting-houses who have manipulated the books of the firm, and who durst not be away from their desks for a day lest all should come to light; and if you think of the punishment that follows sooner or later, you will see that it is better to bear the light yoke of the law than the heavy yoke of crime. Some men buy their ruin very dearly.

So much for the individual. But there is another aspect of this same principle on which I venture to say a word, although it is only a word, in passing. I do not suppose that there are many of my hearers who are likely to commit overt breaches of the law. But there are a great many of us who are apt to neglect the obligations of citizenship. In a community like ours, laziness, fastidiousness, absorption in our own occupations, and a number of other more or less reputable reasons, tempt many to stand aloof from the plain imperative obligations of every citizen in a free country. Every man who thus neglects to do his part for the common weal does his part in handing over the rule of the community to the least worthy. You will find--as you see in some democratic countries to-day, where the cultivated classes, and the classes with the sternest morality, have withdrawn in disgust from the turmoil--the mob having the upper hand, the least worthy scrambling into high places, and the community suffering, and bearing a heavier yoke, by reason of the unwillingness of some to bear the yoke and do the duty of a citizen. Vice lifts up its head, morality is scouted, self-interest is pursued unblushingly, and the whole tone of public opinion is lowered. Christian men and women, remember that you are members of a community, and you bear the yoke of responsibility therefore; and if you do not discharge your obligation, then you will have a heavier burden still to bear.

I need not remind you, I suppose, of how this same thesis--that we have to choose between the yoke of law and the iron yoke of lawlessness--is illustrated in the story of almost all violent revolutions. They run the same course. First a nation rises up against intolerable oppression, then revolution devours its own children, and the scum rises to the top of the boiling pot. Then comes, in the language of the picturesque historian of the French Revolution, the type of them all--then comes at the end the whiff of grapeshot and the despot. First the government of a mob, and then the tyranny of an emperor, crush the people that shake off the yoke of reasonable law. That is my first point.

**II. Let me take a higher illustration;--we have to choose between the yoke of virtue and the iron yoke of vice.**

We are under a far more spiritual and searching law than that written in any statute-book, or administered by any court. Every man carries within his own heart the court, the tribunal; the culprit and the judge. And here too, if law is not obeyed, the result is not liberty, but the slavery of lawlessness.

No man can ponder his own nature and make without feeling that on every fibre of him is stamped a great law which he is bound to obey, and that on every fibre of him is impressed the necessity of part of his nature coercing, restraining, or spurring other parts of it. For, if we take stock of ourselves, what do we find? The broad basis of the pyramid, as it were, is laid in the faculties nearest the earth, the appetites which are inseparable from our corporeal being, and these know nothing about right or wrong, but are utterly blind to such distinctions. Put a loaf before a hungry man, and his mouth waters, whether the loaf belongs to himself or whether it is inside a baker's window.

Then above these, as the next course of the pyramid, there are other desires, sentiments, affections, and emotions, less grossly sensuous than those of which I have been speaking, but still equally certain to be excited by the presence of their appropriate object, without any consideration of whether law is broken or kept in securing of it. Above these, which are, so to speak, branded on their very foreheads with the iron of slavery, stand certain faculties which are as clearly anointed to rule as the others are intended to serve. There is reason or intelligence, which is evidently meant to be eyes to these blind instincts and emotions of desire, and there is what we call the power of will, that stands like an engine-driver with his hand upon the lever which will either stop the engine or accelerate its revolutions. It says to passions and desires Go! and they go; and, alas! it sometimes says Halt! and they will not halt. Then there is conscience, which brings to light for every man something higher than himself. A great philosopher once said that the two sublimest things in the universe were the moral law and the starry heavens; and that law I ought bends over us like the starry heavens with which he associated it. No man can escape from the pressure of duty, and on every man is laid, by his very make, the twofold obligation, first to look upwards and catch the behests of that solemn law, and then to turn his eyes and his strength inwards and coerce or spur, as the case may be, the powers of his nature, and rule the kingdom within himself.

Now, as long as a man lets the ruling parts of his nature guide the lower faculties, he feels comparatively no pressure from the yoke. But, if he once allows beggars to ride on horseback whilst princes walk-- sense and appetite and desire, and more or less refined forms of inclination, to take the place which belongs only to conscience interpreting duty--then he has exchanged the easy yoke for one that is heavy indeed.

What does a man do when, instead of loyally accepting the conditions of his nature, and bowing himself to serve the all-embracing and all-penetrating law of duty, he sets up inclination of any sort in its place? What does he do? I will tell you. He unships the helm; he flings compass and sextant overboard; he fires up the furnaces, and screws down the safety-valve, and says, Go ahead! And what will be the end of that, think you? Either an explosion or a crash upon a reef; and you may take your choice of which is the better kind of death--to be blown up or to go down. Keep within the law of conscience, and let it govern all inclinations, and most of all the animal part of your nature; and you will feel little pressure, and no pain, from the yoke. Shake it off, and there is fulfilled in the disobedient man the threatening of my text, which rightly translated ought to be, Thou hast broken the yokes of wood, and thou hast made instead of them yokes of iron.

For do you think it will be easy to serve the base-born parts of your nature, when you set them on the throne and tell them to govern you? Did you never hear of such a thing as a man's vices getting such a hold on him that, when his weakened will tried to shake them off, they laughed in his face and said, Here we are still? Did you never hear of that other solemn truth--and have you never experienced how true it is?--that no man can say, I will let my inclination have its fling this once? There are never this onces. or very, very seldom. When you are glissading down a snowy Alpine slope, you cannot stop when you like, though you strike your alpenstock ever so deep into the powdery snow. If you have started, away you must go. God be thanked! the illustration does not altogether apply, for a man can stop if he will repent, but he cannot stop unless he does. Did you never hear that a teaspoonful of narcotic to-day will have to be a tablespoonful in a week or two, to produce the same effect? Are there not plenty of men who have said with all the force that a weakened will has left in it, I will never touch a drop of drink again, as long as I live, God helping me?--and they have gone down the street, and they have turned in, not at the first or the second public-house, but at the fourth or the fifth. Ah! brother, they promised them liberty, but they are the servants of corruption. Fix this in your minds. He that committeth sin is the slave of sin, of the sin that he commits. Do not put off the easy yoke of obedience to conscience and duty, or you will find that there is an iron one, with many a sharp point in its unpolished surface rubbing into your skin and wounding your shoulders. It's wiser to be good than bad. It's safer to be meek than fierce. Thou hast broken the yokes of wood; it is not difficult to do that; thou hast made instead of them yokes of iron. That is my second point.

**III. Lastly, we have the choice between the yoke of Christ and the iron yoke of godlessness.**

You may think that to be a very harsh saying, and much too vehement an antithesis. Let me vindicate it according to my own belief in a sentence or two. It seems to me that for civilised and cultivated Europe at this day, the choice lies between accepting Jesus Christ as the Revealer of God, or wandering away out into the wastes of uncertainty, or as they call it nowadays, agnosticism and doubt. I believe myself, and I venture to state it here--though there is not time to do more than state it--that no form of what is now called Theism, which does not accept the historic revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the master-light of all our seeing, will ever be able to sustain itself permanently in the face of present currents of opinion. If you do not take Christ for your Teacher, you are handed over either to the uncertainty of your own doubts, or to pinning your faith to some man and enrolling yourself as a disciple who is prepared to swallow down whole whatsoever the rabbi may say, and so giving to him what you will not give to Jesus; or else you will sink back into utter indolence and carelessness about the whole matter; or else you will go and put your belief and your soul into the hands of a priest, and shut your eyes and open your mouth and take whatever tradition may choose to send you. The one refuge from all these, as I believe, is to go to Him and learn of Him, and so take His yoke upon your shoulders.

But, let me say further, it is better to obey Christ's commandments than to set ourselves against them. For if we will take His will for our law, and meekly assume the yoke of loyal and loving obedience to Him, the door into an earthly paradise is thrown open to us. His yoke is easy, not because its prescriptions and provisions lower the standard of righteousness and morality, but because love becomes the motive; and it is always blessed to do that which the Beloved desires. When I will and I ought cover exactly the same ground, then there is no kind of pressure from the yoke. Christ's yoke is easy because, too, He gives the power to obey His commandments. His burden is such a burden (as I think one of the old fathers puts it) as sails are to a ship or wings to a bird. They add to the weight, but they carry that which carries them. So Christ's yoke bears the man that bears it. It is easy, too, because in, and not only after or for, keeping of it there is great reward; seeing that He commands nothing which is not congruous with the highest good, and bringing along with it the purest blessing. Instead of that yoke, what has the world to offer, or what do we get to dominate us, if we cast off Christ? Self, the old anarch self, and that is misery. To be self-ruled is to be self-destroyed.

There is no need that I should remind you of how it is better to accept Christ's providences than to kick against them. Sorrow to which we submit loses all its bitterness and much of its sadness. Kicking against the affliction makes its sharp point penetrate our limbs. The bird that will dash itself against the wires of its cage beats itself all bloody and torn. Let us take the providence and it ceases to be hard.

One last word;--we all carry an iron yoke upon our shoulders. For, hard as it is for us preachers to get our friends that listen to us to believe and realise it, We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. That yoke is on us all. And I, for my part, believe that no man by his own efforts can cast it off, but that the attempt to do so often brings greater strength to the sins that we seek to cast out, just as the more you mow the grass, the thicker and the stronger it grows. So I come with the great message which Jesus Christ Himself struck as the keynote and prelude of His whole ministry, when in the synagogue He said, The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me ... to preach deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. He, and He only, will break every yoke and let the oppressed go free. And then He addresses us, after He has done that, with the immortal words, the sweetness of whose sound, sweet as it is, is less than the sweetness of their sense: Take My yoke upon you ... and ye shall find rest to your souls. Oh, brother! will you not answer, O Lord! truly I am Thy servant. Thou hast loosed my bonds, and thereby bound me for ever to wear Thy yoke; as the slave clings to his ransomer, and delights to serve him all the days of his life?