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

**JEREMIAH-021. ZEDEKIAH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Zedekiah the son of Josiah reigned as king ... whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon made king."*

*Jeremiah 37:1*

Zedekiah was a small man on a great stage, a weakling set to face circumstances that would have taxed the strongest. He was a youth at his accession to the throne of a distracted kingdom, and if he had had any political insight he would have seen that his only chance was to adhere firmly to Babylon, and to repress the foolish aristocracy who hankered after alliance with the rival power of Egypt. He was mad enough to form an alliance with the latter, which was constructive rebellion against the former, and was strongly reprobated by Jeremiah. Swift vengeance followed; the country was ravaged, Zedekiah in his fright implored Jeremiah's prayers and made faint efforts to follow his counsels. The pressure of invasion was lifted, and immediately he forgot his terrors and forsook the prophet. The Babylonian army was back next year, and the final investment of Jerusalem began. The siege lasted sixteen months, and during it, Zedekiah miserably vacillated between listening to the prophet's counsels of surrender and the truculent nobles advice to resist to the last gasp. The miseries of the siege live for ever in the Book of Lamentations. Mothers boiled their children, nobles hunted on dunghills for food. Their delicate complexions were burned black, and famine turned them into living skeletons. Then, on a long summer day in July came the end. The king tried to skulk out by a covered way between the walls, his few attendants deserted him in his flight, he was caught at last down by the fords of the Jordan, carried prisoner to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah away up in the north beyond Baalbec, and there saw his sons slain before his eyes, and, as soon as he had seen that last sight, was blinded, fettered, and carried off to Babylon, where he died. His career teaches us lessons which I may now seek to bring out.

**I. A weak character is sure to become a wicked one.**

Moral weakness and inability to resist strong pressure was the keynote of Zedekiah's character. There were good things in him; he had kindly impulses, as was shown in his emancipation of the slaves at a crisis of Jerusalem's fate. Left to himself, he would at least have treated Jeremiah kindly, and did rescue him from lingering death in the foul dungeon to which the ruffian nobility had consigned him, and he provided for his being at least saved from dying of starvation during the siege. He listened to him secretly, and would have accepted his counsel if he had dared. But he yielded to the stronger wills of the nobles, though he sometimes bitterly resented their domination, and complained that the king is not he that can do anything against you.

Like most weak men, he found that temptations to do wrong abounded more than visible inducements to do right, and he was afraid to do right, and fancied that he was compelled by the force of circumstances to do wrong. So he drifted and drifted, and at last was smashed to fragments on the rocks, as all men are who do not keep a strong hand on the helm and a steady eye on the compass. The winds are good servants but bad masters. If we do not coerce circumstances to carry us on the course which conscience has pricked out on the chart, they will wreck us.

**II. A man may have a good deal of religion and yet not enough to mould his life.**

Zedekiah listened to the prophet by fits and starts. He was eager to have the benefit of the prophet's prayers. He liberated the slaves in Jerusalem. He came secretly to Jeremiah more than once to know if there were any message from God for him. Yet he had not faith enough nor submission enough to let the known will of God rule his conduct, whatever the nobles might say.

Are there not many of us who have a belief in God and a general acquiescence in Christ's precepts, who order our lives now and then by these, and yet have not come up to the point of full and final surrender? Alas, alas, for the multitudes who are not far from the kingdom, but who never come near enough to be actually in it! To be not far from is to be out of, and to be out of is to be, like Zedekiah, blinded and captived and dead in prison at last.

**III. God's love is wonderfully patient.**

Jeremiah was to Zedekiah the incarnation of God's unwearied pleadings. During his whole reign, the prophet's voice sounded in his ears, through all the clamours and cries of factions, and mingled at last with the shouts of the besiegers and the groans of the wounded, like the sustained note of some great organ, persisting through a babel of discordant noises. It was met with indifference, and it sounded on. It provoked angry antagonism and still it spoke. Violence was used to stifle it in vain. And it was not only Jeremiah's courageous pertinacity that spoke through that persistent voice, but God's unwearied love, which being rejected is not driven away, being neglected becomes more beseeching, is not easily provoked to cease its efforts, but beareth all despite, and hopeth for softened hearts till the last moment before doom falls.

That patient love pleads with each of us as persistently as Jeremiah did with Zedekiah.

**IV. The long-delayed judgment falls at last.**

With infinite reluctance the divine love had to do what God Himself has called His strange work. Divine Justice travels slowly, but arrives at last. Her foot is leaden both in regard to its tardiness and its weight. There is no ground in the long postponement of retribution for the fond dream that it will never come, though men lull themselves to sleep with that lie. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is thoroughly set in them to do evil. But the sentence will be executed. The pleading love, which has for many returning autumns spared the barren tree and sought to make it fit to bear fruit, does not prevent the owner saying at last to his servant with the axe in his hand, Now! thou shalt cut it down.