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

**JEREMIAH-022. THE WORLD'S WAGES TO A PROPHET by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"11.* *And it came to pass, that when the army of the Chaldeans was broken up from Jerusalem for fear of Pharaoh's arm, 12. Then Jeremiah went forth out of Jerusalem to go into the land of Benjamin, to separate himself thence in the midst of the people. 13. And when he was in the gate of Benjamin, a captain of the ward was there, whose name was Irijah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Hananiah; and he took Jeremiah the prophet, saying, Thou fallest away to the Chaldeans. 14. Then said Jeremiah, It is false; I fall not away to the Chaldeans. But he hearkened not to him: so Irijah took Jeremiah, and brought him to the princes. 15. Wherefore the princes were wroth with Jeremiah, and smote him, and put him in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe: for they had made that the prison. 16. When Jeremiah was entered into the dungeon, and into the cabins, and Jeremiah had remained there many days; 17. Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took him out: and the king asked him secretly in his house, and said, Is there any word from the Lord? And Jeremiah said, There is: for, said he, thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon. 18. Moreover, Jeremiah said unto king Zedekiah, What have I offended against thee, or against thy servants, or against this people, that ye have put me in prison? 19. Where are now your prophets which prophesied unto you, saying, The king of Babylon shall not come against you, nor against this land? 20. Therefore hear now, I pray thee, O my lord the king: let my supplication, I pray thee, be accepted before thee; that thou cause me not to return to the house of Jonathan the scribe, lest I die there. 21. Then Zedekiah the king commanded that they should commit Jeremiah into the court of the prison, and that they should give him daily a piece of bread out of the bakers street, until all the bread in the city were spent. Thus Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison.."*

*Jeremiah 37:11-21*

SOME sixteen years had passed since Jehoiakim had burned the roll, during all of which the slow gathering of the storm, which was to break over the devoted city, had been going on, and Jeremiah had been vainly calling on the people to return to Jehovah. The last agony was now not far off. But there came a momentary pause in the siege, produced by the necessity of an advance against a relieving army from Egypt, which created fallacious hopes in the doomed city. It was only a pause. Back came the investing force, and again the terrible, lingering process of starving into surrender was resumed. Our text begins with the raising of the siege, and extends to some point after its resumption. It needs little elucidation, so clearly is the story told, and so natural are the incidents; but perhaps we shall best gather its instruction if we look at the three sets of actors separately, and note the hostile authorities, the patient prophet and prisoner, and the feeble king. The play of these strongly contrasted characters is full of vividness and instruction.

**I. We have that rough captain of the ward, who laid hands on the prophet at the gate on the north side of the city, leading to the road to the territory of Benjamin.**

No doubt there was a considerable exodus from Jerusalem when the Assyrian lines were deserted, and common prudence would have facilitated it, as reducing the number of mouths to be fed, in case the siege were renewed; but malice is not prudent, and, instead of letting the hated Jeremiah slip quietly away home to Anathoth, and so getting rid of his prophecies and him, Irijah (the Lord is a beholder) arrested him on a charge of meditating desertion to the enemy. It was a colourable accusation, for Jeremiah's constant exhortation had been to go out to the Chaldeans, and so secure life and mild treatment. But it was clearly false, for the Chaldeans were for the moment gone, and the time was the very worst that could have been chosen for a contemplated flight to their camp.

The real reason for the prophet's wish to leave the city was only too simple. It was to see if he could get a portion--some of his property, or perhaps rather some little store of food--to take back to the famine-scourged city, which, he knew, would soon be again at starvation-point. There appears to have been a little company of fellow-villagers with him, for in the midst of the people (v. 12) is to be construed with to go into the land of Benjamin. The others seem to have been let pass, and only Jeremiah detained, which makes the charge more evidently a trumped-up excuse for laying hands on him. Jeremiah calls it in plain words what it was--a lie--and protests his innocence of any such design. But the officious Irijah knew too well how much of a feather in his cap his getting hold of the prophet would be, to heed his denials, and dragged him off to the princes.

Sixteen years ago the princes round Jehoiakim had been the prophet's friends; but either a new generation had come with a new king, or else the tempers of the men had changed with the growing misery. Their behaviour was more lawless than the soldiers had been. They did not even pretend to examine the prisoner, but blazed up at once in anger. They had him in their power now, and did their worst, lawlessly scourging him first, and then thrusting him into the house of the pit--some dark, underground hole, below the house of an official, where there were a number of cells--filthy and stifling, no doubt; and there they left him. What for?

The charge of intended desertion was a mere excuse for wreaking their malice on him. They hated Jeremiah because he had steadily opposed the popular determination to fight, and had foretold disaster. Add to this that he had held up a high standard of religion and morality to a corrupt and idolatrous people, and his unpopularity is sufficiently explained.

Would that the same causes did not produce the same effects now! Individuals still think an honest rebuke of their faults an insult, and a plain statement of their danger a sign of ill-feeling. Try to warn a drunkard or a profligate by telling him of the disease and misery which will dog his sins, or by setting plainly before him God's law of purity and sobriety, and you will find that the prophet's function still brings with it, in many cases, the prophet's doom. But still more truly is this the case with masses, whether nations or cities. A spurious patriotism resents as unpatriotic the far truer love of country which sets a trumpet to its mouth to tell the people their sins. In all democratic communities, whether republican or regal in their form of government, a crying evil is flattery of the masses, exalting their virtues and foretelling their prosperity, while hiding their faults and slurring over the requirements of morality and religion, which are the foundations of prosperity. What did England do with her prophets? What did America do with hers? What wages do they get to-day? The men who dare to tell their countrymen their faults, and to preach temperance, peace, civic purity, personal morality, are laid hold of by the Irijahs who preside over the newspapers, and are pilloried as deserters and half traitors at heart.

**II. We see the patient, unmoved prophet.**

One flash of honest indignation repels the charge of deserting, and then he is silent. As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. It is useless to plead before lawless violence. A silent martyr eloquently condemns an unjust judge. So, without opposition or apparent remonstrance, Jeremiah is cast into the foul den where he lies for many days, patiently bearing his fate, and speaking his complaint to God only. How long his imprisonment lasted does not appear; but the context implies that during it the siege was resumed, and that there was difficulty in procuring bread. Then the king sent for him secretly.

Zedekiah's temper at the time will be considered presently. Here we have to do with Jeremiah's answer to his question. In it we may note, as equally prominent and beautifully blended, respect, submission, consciousness of peril and impending death, and unshaken boldness. He knew that his life was at the disposal of the capricious, feeble Zedekiah. He bows before him as his subject, and brings his supplication; but not one jot of his message will he abate, nor smooth down its terribleness an atom. He repeats as unfalteringly as ever the assurance that the king of Babylon will take the city. He asserts his own innocence as regards king and courtiers and people; and he asks the scornful question what has become of all the smooth-tongued prophets of prosperity, as if he were bidding the king look over the city wall and see the tokens of their lies and of Jeremiah's truth in the investing lines of the all but victorious enemy.

Such a combination of perfect meekness and perfect courage, unstained loyalty to his king, and supreme obedience to his God, was only possible to a man who lived in very close communion with Jehovah, and had learned thereby to fear none less, because he feared Him so well, and to reverence all else whom He had set in places of reverence. True courage, of the pattern which befits God's servants, is ever gentle. Bluster is the sign of weakness. A Christian hero--and no man will be a Christian as he ought to be, who has not something of the hero in him--should win by meekness. Does not the King of all such ride prosperously because of truth and meekness, and must not the armies which follow Him do the same? Faithful witnessing to men of their sins need not be rude, harsh, or self-asserting. But we must live much in fellowship with the Lord of all the meek and the pattern of all patient sufferers and faithful witnesses, if we are ever to be like Him, or even like His pale shadow as seen in this meek prophet. The fountains of strength and of patience spring side by side at the foot of the cross.

**III. We have the weak Zedekiah, with his pitiable vacillation.**

He had been Nebuchadnezzar's nominee, and had served him for some years, and then rebelled. His whole career indicates a feeble nature, taking the impression of anything which was strongly laid on it. He was a king of putty, when the times demanded one of iron. He was cowed by the princes. Sometimes he was afraid to disobey Jeremiah, and then afraid to let his masters know that he was so. Thus he sends for the prophet stealthily, and his first question opens a depth of conflict in his soul. He did believe that the prophet spoke the word of Jehovah, and yet he could not muster up courage to follow his convictions and go against the princes and the mob. He wanted another word from Jehovah, by which he meant a word of another sort than the former. He could not bring his mind to obey the word which he had, and so he weakly hoped that perhaps God's word might be changed into one that he would be willing to obey. Many men are, like him, asking, Is there any word from the Lord? and meaning, Is there any change in the condition of receiving His favour?

He had interest enough in the prophet to interfere for his comfort, and to have him put into better quarters in the palace and provided with a circle (a round loaf) of bread out of Baker Street, as long as there was any in the city--not a very long time. But why did he do so much, and not do more? He knew that Jeremiah was innocent, and that his word was God's; and what he should have done was to have shaken off his masterful servants, followed his conscience, and obeyed God. Why did he not? Because he was a coward, infirm of purpose, and therefore unstable as water.

He is another of the tragic examples, with which all life as well as scripture is studded, of how much evil is possible to a weak character. In this world, where there are so many temptations to be bad, no man will be good who cannot strongly say No. The virtue of strength of will may be but like the rough fence round young trees to keep cattle from browsing on them and east winds from blighting them. But the fence is needed, if the trees are to grow. To be weak is to be miserable, and sinful too, generally. Whom resist must be the motto for all noble, God-like, and God-pleasing life.