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

**JEREMIAH-026. THE SWORD OF THE LORD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6.* *O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still. 7. How can it be quiet, seeing the Lord hath given it a charge?"*

*Jeremiah 47:6-7*

The prophet is here in the full tide of his prophecies against the nations round about. This paragraph is entirely occupied with threatenings. Bearing the cup of woes, he turns to one after another of the ancestral enemies of Israel, Egypt and Philistia on the south and west, Moab on the south and east, then northwards to Ammon, south to Edom, north to Damascus, Kedar, Hagor, Elam, and finally to the great foe--Babylon. In the hour of Israel's lowest fortunes and the foe's proudest exultation these predictions are poured out. Jeremiah stands as if wielding the sword of which our text speaks, and whirls and points the flashing terror of its sharpened edge against the ring of foes. It turns every way, like the weapon of the angelic guard before the lost paradise, and wherever it turns a kingdom falls.

In the midst of his stern denunciations he checks himself to utter this plaintive cry of pity and longing. A tender gleam of compassion breaks through the heart of the thunder-cloud. It is very beautiful to note that the point at which the irrepressible welling up of sweet waters breaks the current of his prophecy is the prediction against Israel's bitterest, because nearest, foe, these uncircumcised Philistines. He beholds the sea of wrath drowning the great Philistine plain, its rich harvests trampled under foot by stamping of hoofs of his strong ones, and that desolation wrings from his heart the words of our text. I take them to be spoken by the prophet. That, of course, is doubtful. It may be that they are meant to give in a vivid dramatic form the effect of the judgments on the sufferers. They recognise these as the sword of the Lord. Their only thought is an impatient longing that the judgments would cease,--no confession of sin, no humbling of them selves, but only--remove Thy hand from us.

And the answer is either the prophet's or the divine voice; spoken in the one case to himself, in the other to the Philistines; but in either setting forth the impossibility that the sweeping sword should rest, since it is the instrument in God's hand, executing His charge and fulfilling His appointment.

**I. The shrinking from the unsheathed sword of the Lord.**

We may deal with the words as representing very various states of mind.

They may express the impatience of sufferers. Afflictions are too often wasted. Whatever the purpose of chastisement, the true lesson of it is so seldom learned, even in regard to the lowest wisdom it is adapted to teach. In an epidemic, how few people learn to take precautions, such as cleanliness or attention to diet! In hard times commercially, how slow most are to learn the warning against luxury, over-trading, haste to be rich! And in regard to higher lessons, men have a dim sense sometimes that the blow comes from God, but, like Balaam, go on their way in spite of the angel with the sword. It does not soften, nor restrain, nor drive to God. The main result is, impatient longing for its removal.

The text may express the rooted dislike to the thought and the fact of punishment as an element in divine government. This is a common phase of feeling always, and especially so now. There is a present tendency, good in many aspects, but excessive, to soften away the thought of punishment; or to suppose that God's punishments must have the same purposes as men's. We cannot punish by way of retribution, for no balance of ours is fine enough to weigh motives or to determine criminality. Our punishments can only be deterrent or reformatory, but this is by reason of our weakness. He has other objects in view.

Current ideas of the love of God distort it by pitting it against His retributive righteousness. Current ideas of sin diminish its gravity by tracing it to heredity or environment, or viewing it as a necessary stage in progress. The sense of God's judicial action is paralysed and all but dead in multitudes.

All these things taken together set up a strong current of opinion against any teaching of punitive energy in God.

The text may express the pitying reluctance of the prophet.

Jeremiah is remarkable for the weight with which the burden of the Lord pressed upon him. The true prophet feels the pang of the woes which he is charged to announce more than his hearers do.

Unfair charges are made against gospel preachers, as if they delighted in the thought of the retribution which they have to proclaim.

**II. The solemn necessity for the unsheathing of the sword.**

The judgments must go on. In the text the all-sufficient reason given is that God has willed it so. But we must take into account all that lies in that name of Lord before we understand the message, which brought patience to the heart of the prophet. If a Jewish prophet believed anything, he believed that the will of the Lord was absolutely good. Jeremiah's reason for the flashing sword is no mere beating down human instincts, by alleging a will which is sovereign, and there an end. We have to take into account the whole character of Him who has willed it, and then we can discern it to be inevitable that God should punish evil.

His character makes it inevitable. God's righteousness cannot but hate sin and fight against it. To leave it unpunished stains His glory.

God's love cannot but draw and wield the sword. It is unsheathed in the interests of all that is lovely and of good report. If God is God at all, and not an almighty devil, He must hate sin. The love and the righteousness, which in deepest analysis are one, must needs issue in punishment. There would be a blight over the universe if they did not.

The very order of the universe makes it inevitable. All things, as coming from Him, must work for His lovers and against His enemies, as the stars in their courses fought against Sisera.

The constitution of men makes it inevitable. Sin brings its own punishment, in gnawing conscience, defiled memories, incapacity for good, and many other penalties.

It is to be remembered that the text originally referred to retribution on nations for national sins, and that what Jeremiah regarded as the strokes of the Lord might be otherwise regarded as political catastrophes. Let us not overlook that application of the principles of the text. Scripture regards the so-called natural consequences of a nation's sins as God's judgments on them. The Christian view of the government of the world looks on all human affairs as moved by God, though done by men. It takes full account of the responsibility of men the doers, but above all, recognises the rod and Him who hath appointed it. We see exemplified over and over again in the world's history the tragic truth that the accumulated consequences of a nation's sins fall on the heads of a single generation. Slowly, drop by drop, the cup is filled. Slowly, moment by moment, the hand moves round the dial, and then come the crash and boom of the hammer on the deep-toned bell. Good men should pray not, Put up thyself into thy scabbard, but, Gird Thy sword on Thy thigh, O thou most mighty... on behalf of truth and meekness and righteousness.

**III. The sheathing of the sword.**

The passionate appeal in the text, which else is vain, has in large measure its satisfaction in the work of Christ.

God does not delight in punishment. He has provided a way. Christ bears the consequence of man's sin, the sense of alienation, the pains and sorrows, the death. He does not bear them for Himself. His bearing them accomplishes the ends at which punishment aims, in expressing the divine hatred of sin and in subduing the heart. Trusting in Him, the sword does not fall on us. In some measure indeed it still does. But it is no longer a sword to smite, but a lancet to inflict a healing wound. And the worst punishment does not fall on us. God's sword was sheathed in Christ's breast. So trust in Him, then shall you have boldness in the day of judgment.