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

**JOSHUA-015. THE NATIONAL OATH AT SHECHEM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. And Joshua said unto the people. Ye cannot serve the Lord: for He is an holy God; He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. 20. If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then He will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that He hath done you good. 21. And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the Lord. 22. And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves, that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve Him. And they said, We are witnesses. 23. Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel. 24. And the people said unto Joshua, The Lord our God will we serve, and His voice will we obey. 25. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. 26. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. 27. And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which He spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God. 28. So Joshua let the people depart, every man unto his inheritance."*

*Joshua 24:19-28*

We reach in this passage the close of an epoch. It narrates the last public act of Joshua and the last of the assembled people before they scatter every man unto his inheritance. It was fitting that the transition from the nomad stage to that of settled abode in the land should be marked by the solemn renewal of the covenant, which is thus declared to be the willingly accepted law for the future national life. We have here the closing scene of that solemn assembly set before us.

The narrative carries us to Shechem, the lovely valley in the heart of the land, already consecrated by many patriarchal associations, and by that picturesque scene (Joshua viii. 30-35), when the gathered nation, ranged on the slopes of Ebal and Gerizim, listened to Joshua reading all that Moses commanded. There, too, the coffin of Joseph, which had been reverently carried all through the desert and the war, was laid in the ground that Jacob had bought five hundred years ago, and which now had fallen to Joseph's descendants, the tribe of Ephraim. There was another reason for the selection of Shechem for this renewal of the covenant. The gathered representatives of Israel stood, at Shechem, on the very soil where, long ago, Abram had made his first resting-place as a stranger in the land, and had received the first divine pledge, unto thy seed will I give this land, and had piled beneath the oak of Moreh his first altar (of which the weathered stones might still be there) to the Lord, who appeared unto him. It was fitting that this cradle of the nation should witness their vow, as it witnessed the fulfilment of God's promise. What Plymouth Rock is to one side of the Atlantic, or Hastings Field to the other, Shechem was to Israel. Vows sworn there had sanctity added by the place. Nor did these remembrances exhaust the appropriateness of the site. The oak, which had waved green above Abram's altar, had looked down on another significant incident in the life of Jacob, when, in preparation for his journey to Bethel, he had made a clean sweep of the idols of his household, and buried them under the oak which was by Shechem (Gen. 35:2-4). His very words are quoted by Joshua in his command, in verse 23, and it is impossible to overlook the intention to parallel the two events. The spot which had seen the earlier act of purification from idolatry was for that very reason chosen for the later. It is possible that the same tree at whose roots the idols from beyond the river, which Leah and Rachel had brought, had been buried, was that under which Joshua set up his memorial stone; and it is possible that the very stone had been part of Abram's altar. But, in any case, the place was sacred by these past manifestations of God and devotions of the fathers, so that we need not wonder that Joshua selected it rather than Shiloh, where the ark was, for the scene of this national oath of obedience. Patriotism and devotion would both burn brighter in such an atmosphere. These considerations explain also the designation of the place as the sanctuary of the Lord,--a phrase which has led some to think of the Tabernacle, and apparently occasioned the Septuagint reading of Shiloh instead of Shechem in verses 1 and 25. The precise rendering of the preposition in verse 26 (which the Revised Version has put in the margin) shows that the Tabernacle is not meant; for how could the oak-tree be in the Tabernacle? Clearly, the open space, hallowed by so many remembrances, and by the appearance to Abram, was regarded as a sanctuary.

The earlier part of this chapter shows that the people, by their representatives, responded with alacrity--which to Joshua seemed too eager--to his charge, and enumerated with too facile tongues God's deliverances and benefits. His ear must have caught some tones of levity, if not of insincerity, in the lightly-made vow. So he meets it with a douche of cold water in verses 19, 20, because he wishes to condense vaporous resolutions into something more tangible and permanent. Cold, judiciously applied, solidifies. Discouragements, rightly put, encourage. The best way to deepen and confirm good resolutions which have been too swiftly and inconsiderately formed, is to state very plainly all the difficulty of keeping them. The hand that seems to repel, often most powerfully attracts. There is no better way of turning a somewhat careless we will into a persistent nay, but we will than to interpose a ye cannot. Many a boy has been made a sailor by the stories of hardships which his parents have meant as dissuasives. Joshua here is doing exactly what Jesus Christ often did. He refused glib vows because He desired whole hearts. His very longing that men should follow Him made Him send them back to bethink themselves when they promised to do it. Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest! was answered by no recognition of the speaker's enthusiasm, and by no word of pleasure or invitation, but by the apparently cold repulse: Foxes have holes, birds of the air roosting-places; but the Son of Man has not where to lay His head. That is what you are offering to share. Do you stand to your words? So, when once great multitudes came to Him He turned on them, with no invitation in His words, and told them the hard conditions of discipleship as being entire self-renunciation. He will have no soldiers enlisted under false pretences. They shall know the full difficulties and trials which they must meet; and if, knowing these, they still are willing to take His yoke upon them, then how exuberant and warm the welcome which He gives!

There is a real danger that this side of the evangelist's work should be overlooked in the earnestness with which the other side is done. We cannot be too emphatic in our reiteration of Christ's call to all the weary and heavy-laden to come unto Him, nor too confident in our assurance that whosoever comes will not be cast out; but we may be, and, I fear, often are, defective in our repetition of Christ's demand for entire surrender, and of His warning to intending disciples of what they are taking upon them. We shall repel no true seeker by duly emphasising the difficulties of the Christian course. Perhaps, if there were more plain speaking about these at the beginning, there would be fewer backsliders and dead professors with a name to live. Christ ran the risk of the rich ruler's going away sorrowful, and so should His messengers do. The sorrow tells of real desire, and the departure will sooner or later be exchanged for return with a deeper and more thorough purpose, if the earlier wish had any substance in it. If it had not, better that the consciousness of its hollowness should be forced upon the man, than that he should outwardly become what he is not really,--a Christian; for, in the one case, he may be led to reflection which may issue in thorough surrender; and in the other he will be a self-deceived deceiver, and probably an apostate.

Note the special form of Joshua's warning. It turns mainly on two points,--the extent of the obligations which they were so lightly incurring, and the heavy penalties of their infraction. As to the former, the vow to serve the Lord had been made, as he fears, with small consideration of what it meant. In heathenism, the service of a god is a mere matter of outward acts of so-called worship. There is absolutely no connection between religion and morality in idolatrous systems. The notion that the service of a god implies any duties in common life beyond ceremonial ones is wholly foreign to paganism in all its forms. The establishment of the opposite idea is wholly the consequence of revelation. So we need not wonder if the pagan conception of service was here in the minds of the vowing assembly. If we look at their vow, as recorded in verses 16-18, we see nothing in it which necessarily implies a loftier idea. Jehovah is their national God, who has fought and conquered for them, therefore they will serve Him. If we substitute Baal, or Chemosh, or Nebo, or Ra, for Jehovah, this is exactly what we read on Moabite stones and Assyrian tablets and Egyptian tombs. The reasons for the service, and the service itself, are both suspiciously external. We are not judging the people more harshly than Joshua did; for he clearly was not satisfied with them, and the tone of his answer sufficiently shows what he thought wrong in them. Observe that he does not call Jehovah your God. He does so afterwards; but in this grave reply to their exuberant enthusiasm he speaks of Him only as the Lord, as if he would put stress on the monotheistic conception, which, at all events, does not appear in the people's words, and was probably dim in their thoughts. Then observe that he broadly asserts the impossibility of their serving the Lord; that is, of course, so long as they continued in their then tone of feeling about Him and His service.

Then observe the points in the character of God on which he dwells, as indicating the points which were left out of view by the people, and as fitted to rectify their notions of service. First, He is an holy God. The scriptural idea of the holiness of God has a wider sweep than we often recognise. It fundamentally means His supreme and inaccessible elevation above the creature; which, of course, is manifested in His perfect separation from all sin, but has not regard to this only. Joshua here urges the infinite distance between man and God, and especially the infinite moral distance, in order to enforce a profounder conception of what goes to God's service. A holy God cannot have unholy worshippers. His service can be no mere ceremonial, but must be the bowing of the whole man before His majesty, the aspiration of the whole man after His loftiness, the transformation of the whole man into the reflection of His purity, the approach of the unholy to the Holy through a sacrifice which puts away sin.

Further, He is a jealous God. Jealous is an ugly word, with repulsive associations, and its application to God has sometimes been explained in ugly fashion, and has actually repelled men. But, rightly looked at, what does it mean but that God desires our whole hearts for His own, and loves us so much, and is so desirous to pour His love into us, that He will have no rivals in our love? The metaphor of marriage, which puts His love to men in the tenderest form, underlies this word, so harsh on the surface, but so gracious at the core.

There is still abundant need for Joshua's warning. We rejoice that it takes so little to be a Christian that the feeblest and simplest act of faith knits the soul to the all-forgiving Christ. But let us not forget that, on the other hand, it is hard to be a Christian indeed; for it means forsaking all that we have, and loving God with all our powers. The measure of His love is the measure of His jealousy, and He loves us no less than He did Israel. Unless our conceptions of His service are based upon our recognition of His holiness and demand for our all, we, too, cannot serve the Lord.

The other half of Joshua's warnings refers to the penalties of the broken vows. These are put with extraordinary force. The declaration that the sins of the servants of God would not be forgiven is not, of course, to be taken so as to contradict the whole teaching of Scripture, but as meaning that the sins of His people cannot be left unpunished. The closer relation between God and them made retribution certain. The law of Israel's existence, which its history ever since has exemplified, was here laid down, that their prosperity depended on their allegiance, and that their nearness to Him ensured His chastisement for their sin. You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

The remainder of the incident must be briefly disposed of. These warnings produced the desired effect; for Joshua did not seek to prevent, but to make more intelligent and firm, the people's allegiance. The resolve, repeated after fuller knowledge, is the best reward, as it is the earnest hope, of the faithful teacher, whose apparent discouragements are meant to purify and deepen, not to repress, the faintest wish to serve God. Having tested their sincerity, he calls them to witness that their resolution is perfectly voluntary; and, on their endorsing it as their free choice, he requires the putting away of their strange gods, and the surrender of their inward selves to Him who, by this their action as well as by His benefits, becomes in truth the God of Israel. Attempts have been made to evade the implication that idolatry had crept in among the people; but there can be no doubt of the plain, sad meaning of the words. They are a quotation of Jacob's, at the same spot, on a similar occasion centuries before. If there were no idols buried now under the old oak, it was not because there were none in Israel, but because they had not been brought by the people from their homes. Joshua's commands are the practical outcome of his previous words. If God be holy and jealous, serving Him must demand the forsaking of all other gods, and the surrender of heart and self to Him. That is as true to-day as ever it was. The people accept the stringent requirement, and their repeated shout of obedience has a deeper tone than their first hasty utterance had. They have learned what service means,--that it includes more than ceremonies; and they are willing to obey His voice. Blessed those for whom the plain disclosure of all that they must give up to follow Him, only leads to the more assured and hearty response of willing surrender!

The simple but impressive ceremony which ratified the covenant thus renewed consisted of two parts,--the writing of the account of the transaction in the book of the law; and the erection of a great stone, whose grey strength stood beneath the green oak, a silent witness that Israel, by his own choice, after full knowledge of all that the vow meant, had reiterated his vow to be the Lord's. Thus on the spot made sacred by so many ancient memories, the people ended their wandering and homeless life, and passed into the possession of the inheritance, through the portal of this fresh acceptance of the covenant, proclaiming thereby that they held the land on condition of serving God, and writing their own sentence in case of unfaithfulness. It was the last act of the assembled people, and the crown and close of Joshua's career.