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

**LUKE-076**. **WHEN SHALL THESE THINGS BE? by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"20. And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. 21. Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. 22. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may he fulfilled. 23. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. 24. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. 25. And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; 26. Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. 27. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud, with power and great glory. 28. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. 29. And He spake to them a parable; Behold the fig-tree, and all the trees; 30. When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. 31. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. 32. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away till all be fulfilled. 33. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but My words shall not pass away. 34. And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. 35. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. 36. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."*

*Luke 21:20-36*

This discourse of our Lord's is in answer to the disciplesdouble question as to the time of the overthrow of the Temple and the premonitory signs of its approach. The former is answered with the indefiniteness which characterises prophetic chronology; the latter is plainly answered in verse 20.

The whole passage divides itself in four well-marked sections.

**I. There is the prediction of the fall of Jerusalem (vs. 20-24).**

The signof her desolationwas to be the advance of the enemy to her walls. Armies had been many times encamped round her, and many times been scattered; but this siege was to end in capture, and no angel of the Lord would stalk by night through the sleeping host, to stiffen sleep into death, nor would any valour of the besieged avail. Their cause was to be hopeless from the first. Flight was enjoined. Usually the inhabitants of the open country took refuge in the fortified capital when invasion harrowed their fields; but this time, for them that are in the countryto enter thereinwas to throw away their last chance of safety. The Christians obeyed, and fled, as we all know, across Jordan to Pella. The rest despised Jesuswarning--if they knew it,--and perished.

Mark the reason for the exhortation not to resist, but to flee: These are days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. That is to say, the besiegers are sent by God to execute His righteous and long-ago-pronounced judgments. Therefore it is vain to struggle against them. Behind the Roman army is the God of Israel. To dash against their cohorts is to throw one's self on the thick bosses of the Almighty's buckler, and none who dare do that can prosper. Submission to His retributive hand is the only way to escape being crushed by it. Chastisement accepted is salutary, but kicking against it drives the goad deeper into the rebellious limb.

So great is the agony to be, that what should be a joy, the birth of children, will be a woe, and the sweet duties of motherhood a curse, while the childless will be happier than the fugitives burdened with helpless infancy. We should note, too, that the distresswhich comes upon the land is presented in darker colours, and traced to its origin, in (God's)wrathdealt out unto this people. Happier they who fall by the edge of the swordthan they who are led captive into all the nations.

A gleam of hope shoots through the stormy prospect, for the treading down of Jerusalem by the Gentiles has a term set to it. It is to continue till the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. That expression is important, for it clearly implies that these timesare of considerable duration, and it thus places a period of undefined extent between the fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent prophecy. The word used for timesgenerally carries with it the notion of opportunity, and here seems to indicate that the break-up of the Jewish national existence would usher in a period in which the Gentileswould have the kingdom of God offered to them. The history of the world since the city fell is the best comment on this saying.

**II. Since the times of the Gentiles are thus of indefinite duration, they make a broad line of demarcation between what precedes and what follows them.**

Clearly the prophecy in verses 25-27 is separated in time from the fall of Jerusalem, and it is no objection to that view that the separation is not more emphatically pointed out by our Lord. These verses distinctly refer to His last coming to judgment. Verse 27 is too grand and too distinctly cast in the mould of the other predictions of that coming to be interpreted of His ideal coming in the judgments on the city.

The signs in sun and moon and starsmay refer in accordance with a familiar symbolism, to the overthrow of royalties and dominions; the sea roaring may, in like manner, symbolise agitations among the people; but the cloudand the power and great glorywith which the Son of man comes, can mean nothing else than what they mean in other prophetic passages; namely, His visible appearance, invested with the shekinah light, and wielding divine authority before the gaze of a world.

The city's fall, then, was the initial stage of a process, the duration of which is undefined here, but implied to be considerable, and of which the closing stage is the personal coming of Jesus. The same conclusion is supported by verse 28, which treats that fall as the beginning of the fulfilment of the prophecy.

**III. That verse forms a transition to the section containing the illustrative parable and the reiteration of the assurance that Christ's words would certainly be fulfilled.**

The disciples might naturally quake at the prospect, and wonder how they could face the reality. Jesus gives them strong words of cheer, which apply to all dreaded contingencies and to all social convulsions. What is a messenger of destruction to Christless men and institutions is a harbinger of full redemptionto His servants. Earthquakes but open their prison doors and loose their bands, they should not shake their hearts.

Historically the fall of Jerusalem was a powerful factor in the deliverance of the Church from Jewish swaddling-bands which hampered its growing limbs. For all Christians the destruction of what can perish brings fuller vision and possession of what cannot be shaken. To Christ's friends, all things work for good. So the parable which at first sight seems strangely incongruous becomes blessedly significant and fitting. The gladsome blossoming of the trees, the herald of the glories of summer, is a strange emblem of such a tragedy, and summer itself is a still stranger one of that solemn last judgment. But the might of humble trust in Him who comes to judge makes His coming summer-like in the light and warmth with which it floods the soul, and the rich fruitage which it produces there.

Observe, too, that the parable confirms the idea of a process having stages, for the lesson of the blossoming fig-tree is not that summer has come, but that it is nigh.

The solemn assurance in verse 32, made more weighty by the Verily I say, seems at first sight to bring the final judgment within the lifetime of the generation of the hearers. But it is noteworthy that the expression till all things are fulfilledis almost verbally identical with that in verse 22, which refers only to the destruction of Jerusalem, and is therefore most naturally interpreted as having the same restricted application here. The difference between the two phrases is significant, since in the former the certainty of fulfilment is deduced from the fact of the thingsbeing written--that is, they must be accomplished because they have been foretold in Scripture,--whereas in the latter Christ rests the certainty of fulfilment on His own word. That majestic assurance in verse 33 comes well from His lips, and makes claim that His word shall outlast the whole present material order, and be fulfilled in every detail. Think of a mere man saying that!

**IV. Exhortations corresponding to the predictions follow.**

Christ's revelation of the future was neither meant to gratify idle curiosity nor to supply a timetable in advance, but to minister encouragement and to lead to watchfulness. Whether that day(ver. 34) is understood of the fall of Jerusalem or of the final coming of the Lord, it will come as a snareupon men who are absorbed with the earth which they inhabit. They will be captured by it, as a covey of birds in a field busily picking up grain, are netted by one sudden fling of the fowler's net. A wary eye would have saved them.

The exhortation is as applicable to us, for, whatever are our views about unfulfilled prophecy, death comes to us all at a time which we know not, as the Book of Ecclesiastes, using the same figure, says; Man knoweth not his time ... as the birds that are caught in the snare. Hearts must be kept above the grosser satisfactions of sense and the less gross cares of life, being neither stupefied with gorging earth's good, nor preoccupied with its gnawing anxieties, both of which are destructive of the clear realisation of the certain future. We are to preserve an attitude of wakefulness and of expectancy, and, as the sure way to it, and to clearing our hearts of perishable delights and short-sighted, self-consuming cares, we are to keep them in a continual posture of supplication. If our study of unfulfilled prophecy does that for us, it will have done what Jesus means it to do; if it does not it matters little what theories about its chronology we may adopt.

The two stages which we have tried to point out in this passage are clearly marked at the close, where escaping all these things that shall come to passand standing before the Son of manare distinguished. True, both stages were to be included in the experience of Christ's hearers, but they are none the less separate stages.

Luke's version of this great discourse gives less prominence to the final coming than does Matthew's, and does not blend the two stages so inextricably together; but it gives no hint of the duration of the times of the Gentiles, and might well leave the impression that these were brief. Now in this close setting together of a nearer and a much more remote future, with little prominence given to the interval between, our Lord is but bringing His prophecy into line with the constant manner of the older prophets. They and He paint the future in perspective, and the distance, seen behind the foreground, seems nearer than it really is. The spectator does not know how many weary miles have to be traversed before the distant blue hills are to be reached, nor what deep gorges lie between.

Such bringing together of events far apart in time of fulfilment rests in part on the fact that there have been many days of the Lord, many comings of Christ, each of which is a result on a small scale of the same retributive action of the Judge of all, as shall be manifested on the largest scale in the last and greatest day of the Lord. Therefore the true use of all these predictions is that which Christ enforces here; namely, that they should lead us to prayerful watchfulness and to living above earth, its goods and cares.