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

**NUMBERS-007. WEIGHED, AND FOUND WANTING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night. 2. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron; and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! 3. And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? 4. And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt 5. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. 6. And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes. 7. And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land. 8. If the Lord delight in us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. 9. Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not. 10. But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel.."*

*Numbers 14:1-10*

Terror is more contagious than courage, for a mob is always more prone to base than to noble instincts. The gloomy report of the spies jumped with the humour of the people, and was at once accepted. Its effect was to throw the whole assembly into a paroxysm of panic, which was expressed in the passionate Eastern manner by wild, ungoverned shrieking and tears. What a picture of a frenzied crowd the first verse of this chapter gives! That is not the stuff of which heroes can be made. Weeping endured for a night, but to such weeping there came no morning of joy. When day dawned, the tempest of emotion settled down into sullen determination to give up the prize which hung within reach of a bold hand, ripe and ready to drop. It was one of the moments which come once at least in the lives of nations as of individuals, when a supreme resolve is called for, and when to fall beneath the stern requirement, and refuse a great attempt because of danger, is to pronounce sentence of unworthiness and exclusion on themselves. Not courage only, but belief in God, was tested in this crucial moment, which made a turning-point in the nation's history. Our text brings before us with dramatic vividness and sharpness of contrast, three parties in this decisive hour--the faithless cowards, the faithful four, and the All-seeing presence.

**I.** Note the faithless cowards. The gravity of the revolt here is partly in its universality, which is emphasised in the narrative at every turn: all the congregation (v. 1), all the children of Israel, the whole congregation (v. 2), all the assembly of the congregation (which implies a solemn formal convocation), all the company (v. 7), all the congregation, all the children of Israel (v. 10). It was no sectional discontent, but full-blown and universal rebellion. The narrative draws a distinction between the language addressed to Moses, and the whisperings to one another. Publicly, the unanimous voice suggested the return to Egypt as an alternative for discussion, and put it before Moses; to one another they muttered the proposal, which no man had yet courage to speak out, of choosing a new leader, and going back, whatever became of Moses. That could only mean murder as well as mutiny. The whispers would soon be loud enough.

In the murmurs to Moses, observe the distinct and conscious apostacy from Jehovah. They recognise that God has brought them there, and they slander Him by the assertion that His malignant, deliberate purpose was to kill them all, and make slaves of their wives and children. That was how they read the past, and thought of Him! He had enticed them into His trap, as a hunter might some foolish animal, by dainties strewed along the path, and now they were in the toils, and their only chance of life was to break through. Often, already, had they raised that mad cry--back to Egypt! but there had never been such a ring of resolve in it, nor had it come from so many throats, nor had any serious purpose to depose Moses been entertained. If we add the fact that they were now on the very frontier of Canaan, and that the decision now taken was necessarily final, we get the full significance of the incident from the mere secular historian's point of view. But its bearing on the people's relation to Jehovah gives a darker colouring to it. It is not merely faint-hearted shrinking from a great opportunity, but it is wilful and deliberate rejection of His rule, based upon utter distrust of His word. So Scripture treats this event as the typical example of unbelief (Psa. xcv.; Heb. iii. and iv.). So regarded, it presents, as in a mirror, some of the salient characteristics of that master sin. Bad as it is, it is not out of the range of possibility that it should be repeated, and we need the warning to take heed lest any of us should fall after the same example of unbelief.

We may learn from it the essentials of faith and its opposite. The trust which these cowards failed to exercise was reliance on Jehovah, a personal relation to a Person. In externals and contents, their trust was very unlike the New Testament faith, but in object and essence it was identical. They had to trust in Jehovah; we, in God manifest in the flesh. Their creed was much less clear and blessed than ours, but their faith, if they had had it, would have been the same. Faith is not the belief of a creed, whether man-made or God-revealed, but the cleaving to the Person whom the creed makes known. He may be made known more or less perfectly; but the act of the soul, by which we grasp Him, does not vary with the completeness of the revelation. That act was one for the world's grey fathers and for us. In like manner, unbelief is the same black and fatal sin, whatever be the degree of light against which it turns. To depart from the living God is its essence, and that is always rebellion and death.

Note the short memory and churlish unthankfulness of unbelief. It has been often objected to the story of the Exodus, that such extremity of folly as is ascribed to the Israelites is inconceivable in such circumstances. How could men, with all these miracles in mind, and manna falling daily, and the pillar blazing every night, and the roll of Sinai's thunders scarcely out of their ears, behave thus? But any one who has honestly studied his own heart, and known its capacity for neglecting the plainest indications of God's presence, and forgetting the gifts of His love, will believe the story, and see brethren in these Israelites. Miracles were less wonderful to them, because they knew less about nature and its laws. Any miracles constantly renewed become commonplace. Habit takes the wonder out of everything. The heart that does not like to retain God in its knowledge will find easy ways of forgetting Him, and revolting from Him, though the path be strewed with blessings, and tokens of His presence flame on every side. True, it is strange that all the wonders and mercies of the past two years had made no deeper impression on these people's hearts; but if they had not done so, it is not unnatural that they had made so slight an impression on their wills. Their ingratitude and forgetfulness are inexplicable, as all sin is, for its very essence is that it has no sufficient reason. But neither is inconceivable, and both are repeated by us every day.

Note the credulity of unbelief. The word of Jehovah had told them that the land flowed with milk and honey, and that they were sure to conquer it. They would not believe Him unless they had verification of His promises. And when they got their own fears reflected in the multiplying mirror of the spies report, they took men's words for gospel, and gave to them a credence without examination or qualification, which they had never given to God. I think that I have heard of people who inveigh against Christians for their slavish acceptance of the absolute authority of Jesus Christ, and who pin their faith to some man's teaching with a credulity quite as great as and much less warrantable than ours.

Note the bad bargain which unbelief is ready to make. They contemplated a risky alternative to the brave dash against Canaan. There would be quite as much peril in going back as forward. The march from Egypt had not been so easy; but what would it be when there were no Moses, no Jethro, no manna, no pillar? And what sort of reception would wait them in Egypt, and what fate befall them there? In front, there were perils; but God would be with them. They would have to fight their way, but with the joyous feeling that victory was sure, and that every blow struck, and every step marched, brought them nearer triumphant peace. If they turned, every step would carry them farther from their hopes, and nearer the dreary putting on of the old yoke, which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear. They would buy slavery at as dear a price as they would have to pay for freedom and wealth. Yet they elected the baser course, and thought themselves prudent and careful of themselves in doing so. Is the breed of such miscalculators extinct? Far greater hardships and pains are met on the road of departure from God, than any which befall His servants. To follow Him involves a conflict, but to shirk the battle does not bring immunity from strife. The alternatives are not warfare or peace, God's service or liberty. The most prudent self-love would coincide with the most self-sacrificing heroic consecration, and no man can worse consult his own well-being than in seeking escape from the dangers and toil of enlisting in God's army, by running back through the desert to put his neck in chains in Egypt. As Moses said: Because then servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart for the abundance of all things, therefore thou shalt serve thine enemies, in hunger, and in thirst, and in want of all things.

**II.** The faithful four. Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua, are the only Abdiels in that crowd of unbelieving dastards. Their own peril does not move them; their only thought is to dissuade from the fatal refusal to advance. The leader had no armed force with which to put down revolt, and stood wholly undefended and powerless. It was a cruel position for him to see the work of his life crumbling to pieces, and every hope for his people dashed by their craven fears. Is there anywhere a nobler piece of self-abnegation than his prostrating himself before them in the eagerness of his pleading with them for their own good? If anything could have kindled a spark of generous enthusiasm, that passionate gesture of entreaty would have done it. It is like: We beseech you, in His stead, be ye reconciled to God. Men need to be importuned not to destroy themselves, and he will have most success in such God-like work who, as Moses, is so sure of the fatal issues, and so oblivious of all but saving men from self-inflicted ruin, that he sues as for a boon with tears in his voice, and dignity thrown to the winds.

Caleb and Joshua had a different task,--to make one more attempt to hearten the people by repeating their testimony and their confidence. Tearing their dresses, in sign of mourning, they bravely ring out once more the cheery note of assured faith. They first emphatically reiterate that the land is fertile,--or, as the words literally run, good exceedingly, exceedingly. It is right to stimulate for God's warfare by setting forth the blessedness of the inheritance. The recompense of the reward is not the motive for doing His will, but it is legitimately used as encouragement, in spite of the overstrained objection that virtue for the sake of heaven is spurious virtue. If for the sake of heaven, it is spurious; but it is not spurious because it is heartened by the hope of heaven. In Caleb's former report there was no reason given for his confidence that we are well able to overcome. Thus far all the discussion had been about comparative strength, as any heathen soldier would have reckoned it. But the two heroes speak out the great Name at last, which ought to scatter all fears like morning mist. The rebels had said that Jehovah had brought us into this land to fall by the sword. The two give them back their words with a new turn: He will bring us into this land, and give it us. That is the only antidote to fear. Calculations of comparative force are worse than useless, and their results depend on the temper of the calculator; but, if once God is brought into the account, the sum is ended. When His sword is flung into the scale, whatever is in the other goes up. So Caleb and Joshua brush aside the terrors of the Anaks and all the other bugbears. They are bread for us, we can swallow them at a mouthful; and this was no swaggering boast, but calm, reasonable confidence, because it rested on this, the Lord is with us. True, there was an if, but not an if of doubt, but a condition which they could comply with, and so make it a certainty, only rebel not against the Lord, and fear not the people of the land. Loyalty to Him would give courage, and courage with His presence would be sure of victory. Obedience turns God's ifs into verilys. There, then, we have an outline picture of the work of faith pleading with the rebellious, heartening them and itself by thoughts of the fair inheritance, grasping the assurance of God's omnipotent help, and in the strength thereof wisely despising the strongest foes, and settling itself immovable in the posture of obedience.

**III.** The sudden appearance of the all-seeing Lord. The bold remonstrance worked the people into a fury, and fidelity was about to reap the reward which the crowd ever gives to those who try to save it from its own base passions. Nothing is more hateful to resolute sinners than good counsel which is undeniably true. But just as the stones were beginning to fly, the glory of the Lord, that wondrous light which dwelt above the ark in the inmost shrine, came forth before all the awestruck crowd. The stones would be dropped fast enough, and a hush of dread would follow the howling rage of the angry crowd. Our text does not go on to the awful judgment which was proclaimed; but we may venture beyond its bounds to point out that the sentence of exclusion from the land was but the necessary consequence of the temper and character which the refusal to advance had betrayed. Such people were not fit for the fight. A new generation, braced by the keen air and scant fare of the desert, with firmer muscles and hearts than these enervated slaves had, was needed for the conquest. The sentence was mercy as well as judgment; it was better that they should live in the wilderness, and die there by natural process, after having had more education in God's loving care, than that they should be driven unwillingly to a conflict which, in their state of mind, would have been but their butchery. None the less, it is an awful condemnation for a man to be brought by God's providence face to face with a great possibility of service and of blessing, and then to show himself such that God has to put him aside, and look for other instruments. The Israelites were excluded from Canaan by no arbitrary decree, but by their own faithless fears, which made their victory impossible. They could not enter in because of unbelief. In like manner our unbelief shuts us out from salvation, because we can only enter in by faith; and the rest that remains is of such a nature that it is impossible for even His love to give it to the unbelieving. Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.