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

**NUMBERS-013. AN UNFULFILLED DESIRE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!"*

*Numbers 23:10*

*"... Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword!"*

*Numbers 31:8*

Ponder these two pictures. Take the first scene. A prophet, who knows God and His will, is standing on the mountain top, and as he looks down over the valley beneath him, with its acacia-trees and swift river, there spread the tents of Israel. He sees them, and knows that they are a people whom the Lord hath blessed. Brought there to curse, he blesses them altogether; and as he gazes upon their ordered ranks and sees somewhat of the wondrous future that lay before them, his mind is filled with the thought of all the blessedness of that righteous nation, and the sigh of longing comes to his lips, May I be with them in life and death; may I have no higher honour, no calmer end, than to lie down and die as one of the chosen people, with memories of a divine hand that has protected me all through the past, and quiet hopes of the same hand holding me up in the great darkness! A devout aspiration, a worthy desire!

Look at the other picture. Midian has seduced Israel to idolatry and its constant companion, sensual sin. The old lawgiver has for his last achievement to punish the idolater. Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites, afterwards thou shalt be gathered to thy people. So each tribe gives its contingent to the fight, and under the fierce and prompt Phinehas, whose javelin had already smitten one of the chief offenders, they go forth. Fire and sword, devastation and victory, mark their track. The princes of Midian fall before the swift rush of the desert-born invaders. And--sad, strange company!--among them is the man who saw the vision of the Almighty, and knew the knowledge of the Most High ! he who had taught Moab the purest lessons of morality, and Midian, alas! the practice of the vilest profligacy; he who saw from afar the sceptre arise out of Israel and the Star from Jacob; he who longed to die the death of the righteous ! The onset of the avenging host, with the shout of a king in their midst; the terror of the flight, the riot of havoc and bloodshed, and, finally, the quick thrust of the sharp Israelite sword in some strong hand, and the grey hairs all dabbled with his blood--these were what the man came to who had once breathed the honest desire, Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his !

**I. There is surely a solemn lesson for us all here--as touching the danger of mere vague religious desires and convictions which we do not allow to determine our conduct.**

Balaam had evidently much knowledge. Look at these points--

**(a)** His knowledge of the covenant-name of God.

**(b)** His knowledge of a pure morality and a spiritual worship far beyond sacrificial notions, and in some respects higher than the then Old Testament standpoint.

**(c)** The knowledge (which is implied in the text) of a future state, which had gone far into the background, even if it had not been altogether lost, among the Israelites. Is it not remarkable that the religious ideas of this man were in advance of Israel's at this time; that there seems to have lingered among these outsiders more of a pure faith than in Israel itself?

**II. What a lesson here as to the souls led by God and enlightened by Him beyond the pale of Judaism!**

But all this knowledge, of what use was it to Balaam? He knows about God: does he seek to serve Him? He preaches morality to Moab, and he teaches Midian to teach the children of Israel to commit fornication. He knows something of the blessedness of a righteous man s death, and perhaps sees faintly the shining gates beyond--but how does it all end? What a gulf between knowledge and life!

What is the use of correct ideas about God? They may be the foundations of holy thoughts, and they are meant to be so. I am not setting up emotion above principle, or fancying that there can be religion without theology; but for what are all our thoughts about God given us?

**(a)** That they may influence our hearts.

**(b)** That they may subdue our wills.

**(c)** That they may mould our practical life.

If they do not do that--then what do they do?

They constitute a positive hindrance--like the dead lava-blocks that choke the mouth of a crater, or the two deposits on the bottom of a boiler, soot outside and crust inside, which keep the fire from getting at the water. They have lost their power because they are so familiar. They are weakened by not being practised. The very organs of intelligence are, as it were, ossified. Self-complacency lays hold on the possession of these ideas and shields itself against all appeals with the fact of possessing them. Many a man mistakes, in his own case, the knowledge of the truth for obedience to the truth. All this is seen in everyday life, and with reference to all manner of convictions, but it is most apparent and most fatal about Christian truth. I appeal to the many who hear and know all about the word, What more is needed? That you should do what you know (Be not hearers only); that you should yield your whole being to Christ, the living Word.

**III. Balaam is an example of convictions which remain inefficacious.**

It was not without some sense of his own character, and some forebodings of what was possibly brooding over him, that he uttered these words of the text. But they were transitory emotions, and they passed away.

I suppose that every man who hears the gospel proclaimed is, at some time or other, conscious of dawning thoughts which, if followed, would lead him to decision for Christ. I suppose that every man among us is conscious of thoughts visiting him many a time when he least expects them, which, if honestly obeyed, would work an entire revolution in his life.

I do not wish to speak as if unbelieving men were the only people who were unfaithful to their consciences, but rather to deal with what is a besetting sin of us all, though it reaches its highest aggravation in reference to the gospel.

Such stings of conviction come to us all, but how are they deadened?

**(a)** By simple neglect. Pay no attention to them; do not do anything in consequence, and they will gradually disappear. The voice unheard will cease to speak. Non-obedience to conscience will in the end almost throttle conscience.

**(b)** By angry rejection.

**(c)** By busy occupation with the outer world.

**(d)** By sinful occupation with it.

Then consider that such dealing with our convictions leaves us far worse men than before, and if continued will end in utter insensibility.

What should we do with such convictions? Reverently follow them. And in so doing they will grow and increase, and lead us at last to God and peace.

Special application of all this to our attitude towards Christian truth.

**IV. Balaam is an instance of wishes that are never fulfilled.**

He wished to die as the righteous. How did he die? miserably; and why?

**(a)** Because his wish was deficient in character.

It was one among a great many, feeble and not predominant, occasioned by circumstances, and so fading when these disappeared. Like many men's relation to the gospel who would like to be Christians, and are not. These vagrant wishes are nothing; mere catspaws of wind, not a breeze. They are not real, even while they last, and so they come to nothing.

**(b)** Because it was partially wrong in its object.

He was willing to die the death, but not to live the life, of the righteous; like many men who would be very glad to go to heaven when they die, but who will not be Christians while they live.

Now, God forbid that I should say that his wish was wrong! But only it was not enough. Such a wish led to no action.

Now, God hears the faintest wish; He does not require that we should will strongly, but He does require that we should desire, and that we should act according to our desires.

Let the close be a brief picture of a righteous death. And oh! if you feel that it is blessed, then let that desire lead you to Christ, and all will be well. Remember that Bunyan saw a byway to hell at the door of the celestial city. Remember how Balaam ended, and stands gibbeted in the New Testament as an evil man, and the type of false teachers. Finally, beware of knowledge which is not operative in conduct, of convictions which are neglected and pass away, of vague desires which come to nought.