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

**PROVERBS-002. WISDOM'S CALL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"20. Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: 21. She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, saying, 22. How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? 23. Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. 24. Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; 25. But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: 26. I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; 27. When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. 28. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: 29. For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: 30. They would none of my counsel; they despised all my reproof. 31. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. 32. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. 33. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil."*

*Proverbs 1:20-33*

Our passage begins with a striking picture. A fair and queenly woman stands in the crowded resorts of men, and lifts up a voice of sweet entreaty--authoritative as well as sweet. Her name is Wisdom. The word is in the plural in the Hebrew, as if to teach that in this serene and lovely form all manifold wisdoms are gathered and made one. Who then is she? It is easy to say a poetical personification, but that does not add much to our understanding. It is clear that this book means much more by Wisdom than a human quality merely; for august and divine attributes are given to her, and she is the co-eternal associate of God Himself. Dwelling in His bosom, she thence comes forth to inspire all human good deeds, to plead evermore with men, to enrich those who listen to her with choicest gifts. Intellectual clearness, moral goodness, religious devotion, are all combined in the idea of Wisdom as belonging to men.

The divine source of all, and the correspondence between the human and the divine nature, are taught in the residence of this personified Wisdom with God before she dwelt with men. The whole of the manifold revelations, by which God makes known any part of His will to men, are her voice. Especially the call contained in the Old Testament revelation is the summons of Wisdom. But whether the writer of this book had any inkling of deeper truth still, or not, we cannot but connect the incomplete personification of divine Wisdom here with its complete incarnation in a Person who is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and who embodies the lineaments of the grand picture of a Wisdom crying in the streets, even while it is true of Him that He does not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets; for the crying, which is denied to be His, is ostentatious and noisy, and the crying which is asserted to be hers is the plain, clear, universal appeal of divine love as well as wisdom. The light of Christ lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

The call of Wisdom in this passage begins with remonstrance and plain speech, giving their right names to men who neglect her voice. The first step in delivering men from evil--that is, from foolish--courses is to put very clearly before them the true character of their acts, and still more of their inclinations. Gracious offers and rich promises come after; but the initial message of Wisdom to such men as we are must be the accusation of folly. When she is come, she will convict the world of sin.

The three designations of men in verse 22 are probably arranged so as to make a climax. First come the simple, or, as the word means, open. There is a sancta simplicitas, a holy ignorance of evil, which is sister to the highest wisdom. It is well to be ignorant as well as innocent of much transgression; and there is no more mistaken and usually insincere excuse for going into foul places than the plea that it is best to know the evil and so choose the good. That knowledge comes surely and soon enough without our seeking it. But there is a fatal simplicity, open-eared, like Eve, to the Tempter's whisper, which believes the false promises of sin, and as Bunyan has taught us, is companion of sloth and presumption.

Next come scorners, who mock at good. A man must have gone a long way down hill before he begins to gibe at virtue and godliness. But the descent is steep, though the distance is long; and the simple who begins to do what is wrong will come to sneer at what is right.

Then last comes the fool, the name which, in Proverbs, is shorthand for mental stupidity, moral obstinacy, and dogged godlessness,--a foul compound, but one which is realised oftener than we think. A great many very superior intellects, cultivated ladies and gentlemen, university graduates, and the like, would be unceremoniously set down by divine wisdom as fools; and surely if account is taken of the whole compass and duration of our being, and of all our relations to things and persons seen and unseen, nothing can be more stupid than godlessness, however cultured. The word literally means coarse or thick, and may suggest the idea of stolid insensibility as the last stage in the downward progress.

But note that the charge is directed, not against deeds, but dispositions. Perverted love and perverted hatred underlie acts. The simple love simplicity, preferring to be unwarned against evil; the scorner finds delight in letting his rank tongue blossom into speech; and the false direction given to love gives a fatal twist to its corresponding hate, so that the fool detests knowledge as a thief the policeman's lantern. You cannot love what you should loathe, without loathing what you should love. Inner longings and revulsions settle character and acts.

Verse 23 passes into entreaty; for it is vain to rouse conscience by plain speech, unless something is offered to make better life possible. The divine Wisdom comes with a rod, but also with gifts; but if the rod is kissed, the rewards are possessed. The relation of clauses in verse 23 is that the first is the condition of the fulfilment of the second and third. If we turn at her reproof, two great gifts will be bestowed. Her spirit within will make us quick to hear and receive her words sounding without. Whatever other good follows on yielding to the call of divine Wisdom (and the remaining early chapters of Proverbs magnificently detail the many rich gifts that do follow), chief of all are spirits swift to hear and docile to obey her voice, and then actual communications to purged ears. Outward revelation without prepared hearts is water spilt upon rock. Prepared hearts without a message to them would be but multiplication of vain longings; and God never stultifies Himself, or gives mouths without sending meat to fill them. To the submissive spirit, there will not lack either disposition to hear or clear utterance of His will.

But now comes a pause. Wisdom has made her offers in the crowded streets, and amid all the noise and bustle her voice has rung out. What is the result? Nothing. Not a head has been turned, nor an eye lifted. The bustle goes on as before. They bought, they sold, as if no voice had spoken. So, after the disappointed waiting of Wisdom, her voice peals out again, but this time with severity in its tones. Note how, in verses 24 and 25, the sin of sins against the pleading Wisdom of God is represented as being simple indifference. Ye refused, no man regarded, set at nought, would none of--these are the things which bring down the heavy judgments. It does not need violent opposition or black crime to wreck a soul. Simply doing nothing when God speaks is enough to effect destruction. There is no need to lift up angry arms in hostility. If we keep them hanging listless by our sides, it is sufficient. The gift escapes us, if we simply keep our hands shut or held behind our backs. Alas, for ears which have not heard, for seeing eyes which have not seen because they loved evil simplicity and hated knowledge!

Then note the terrible retribution. That is an awful picture of the mocking laughter of Wisdom, accompanying the rush of the whirlwind and the groans of anguish and shrieks of terror. It is even more solemn and dreadful than the parallel representations in Psalm 2., for there the laughter indicates God's knowledge that the schemes of opponents are vain, but here it figures pleasure in calamities. Of course it is to be remembered that the Wisdom thus represented is not to be identified with God; but still the imagery is startling, and needs to be taken along with declarations that God has no pleasure in the death of the sinner, and to be interpreted as indicating, with daring anthropomorphism, the inevitable character of the destruction, and the uselessness of appeals to the Wisdom once despised. But we joyfully remember that the Incarnate Wisdom, fairer than the ancient personification, wept over the city which He knew must perish.

Verses 28-31 carry on the picture of too late repentance and inevitable retribution. They who let Wisdom cry, and paid no heed, shall cry to her in their turn, and be unnoticed. They whom she vainly sought shall vainly seek for her. Actions have their consequences, which are not annihilated because the doers do not like them. Thoughts have theirs; for the foolish not only eat of the fruit of their ways or doings, but are filled with their own devices or counsels. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. That inexorable law works, deaf to all cries, in the field of earthly life, both as regards condition and character; and that field of its operation is all that the writer of this book has in view. He is not denying the possibility of forgiveness, nor the efficacy of repentance, nor is he asserting that a penitent soul ever seeks God in vain; but he is declaring that it is too late to cry out for deliverance from consequences of folly when the consequences have us in their grip, and that wishes for deliverance are vain, though sighs of repentance are not. We cannot reap where we have not sowed. We must reap what we have. If we are such sluggards that we will not plough in winter by reason of the cold, we shall beg in harvest and have nothing.

But though the writer had probably only this life in view, Jesus Christ has extended the teaching to the next, when He has told of those who will seek to enter in and not be able. The experience of the fruits of their godlessness will make godless men wish to escape eating the fruits--and that wish shall be vain. It is not for us to enlarge on such words, but it is for us all to lay them to heart, and to take heed that we listen now to the beseeching call of the heavenly Wisdom in its tenderest and noblest form, as it appeared in Christ, the Incarnate Word.

Verses 32 and 33 generalise the preceding promises and warnings in a great antithesis. The backsliding [or, turning away] of the simple slays them. There is allusion to Wisdom's call in verse 23. The simple had turned, but in the wrong direction--away from and not towards her. To turn away from heavenly Wisdom is to set one's face toward destruction. It cannot be too earnestly reiterated that we must make our choice of one of two directions for ourselves--either towards God, to seek whom is life, to find whom is heaven; or away from Him, to turn our backs on whom is to embrace unrest, and to be separate from whom is death. The security of fools, by which is meant, not their safety, but their fancy that they are safe, destroys them. No man is in such danger as the careless man of the world who thinks that he is all right. A traveller along the edge of a precipice in the night, who goes on as if he walked a broad road and takes no heed to his footing, will soon repent his rashness at the bottom, mangled and bruised. A man who in this changing world fancies that he sits as a king, and sees no sorrow, will have a rude wakening. A moment's heed saves hours of pain.

The alternative to this suicidal folly is in listening to Wisdom's call. Whoever does that will dwell safely, not in fancied but real security; and in his quiet heart there need be no unrest from feared evils, for he will have hold of a charm which turns evils into good, and with such a guide he cannot go astray, nor with such a defender be wounded to death, nor with such a companion ever be solitary. If Christ be our Light, we shall not walk in darkness. If He be our Wisdom, we shall not err. If He be our Life, we shall never see death. If He is our Good, we shall fear no evil.