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

**PROVERBS-004. THE GIFTS OF HEAVENLY WISDOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"11. My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of His correction: 12. For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth. 13. Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. 14. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. 15. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. 16. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. 17. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. 18. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. 19. The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath He established the heavens. 20. By His knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew. 21. My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: 22. So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. 23. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. 24. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet."*

*Proverbs 3:11-24*

The repetition of the words my son at the beginning of this passage marks a new section, which extends to verse 20, inclusively, another section being similarly marked as commencing in verse 21. The fatherly counsels of these early chapters are largely reiterations of the same ideas, being line upon line. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe. Many strokes drive the nail home. Exhortations to get Wisdom, based upon the blessings she brings, are the staple of the whole. If we look carefully at the section (vers. 11-20), we find in it a central core (vers. 13-18), setting forth the blessings which Wisdom gives, preceded by two verses, inculcating the right acceptance of God's chastisements which are one chief means of attaining Wisdom, and followed by two verses (vers. 19, 20), which exalt her as being divine as well as human. So the portraiture of her working in humanity is framed by a prologue and epilogue, setting forth two aspects of her relation to God; namely, that she is imparted by Him through the discipline of trouble, and that she dwells in His bosom and is the agent of His creative work.

The prologue, then, points to sorrow and trouble, rightly accepted, as one chief means by which we acquire heavenly Wisdom. Note the profound insight into the meaning of sorrows. They are instruction and reproof. The thought of the Book of Job is here fully incorporated and assimilated. Griefs and pains are not tokens of anger, nor punishments of sin, but love-gifts meant to help to the acquisition of wisdom. They do not come because the sufferers are wicked, but in order to make them good or better. Tempests are meant to blow us into port. The lights are lowered in the theatre that fairer scenes may become visible on the thin screen between us and eternity. Other supports are struck away that we may lean hard on God. The voice of all experience of earthly loss and bitterness is, Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get Wisdom. God himself becomes our Schoolmaster, and through the voice of the human teacher we hear His deeper tones saying, My son, despise not the chastening.

Note, too, the assurance that all discipline is the fruit of Fatherly love. How many sad hearts in all ages these few words have calmed and braced! How sharp a test of our childlike spirit our acceptance of them, when our own hearts are sore, is! How deep the peace which they bring when really believed! How far they go to solve the mystery of pain, and turn darkness into a solemn light!

Note, further, that the words despise and be weary both imply rather rejection with loathing, and thus express unsubmissive impatience which gets no good from discipline. The beautiful rendering of the Septuagint, which has been made familiar by its adoption in Hebrews, makes the two words express two opposite faults. They despise who steel their wills against the rod, and make as if they did not feel the pain; they faint who collapse beneath the blows, which they feel so much that they lose sight of their purpose. Dogged insensibility and utter prostration are equally harmful. He who meets life's teachings, which are a Father's correction, with either, has little prospect of getting Wisdom.

Then follows the main part of this section (vers. 13-18),--the praise of Wisdom as in herself most precious, and as bestowing highest good. The man that findeth Wisdom reminds us of the peasant in Christ's parable, who found treasure hidden in a field, and the merchandise in verse 14, of the trader seeking goodly pearls. But the finding in verse 13 is not like the rustic's in the parable, who was seeking nothing when a chance stroke of his plough or kick of his heel laid bare the glittering gold. It is the finding which rewards seeking. The figure of acquiring by trading, like that of the pearl-merchant in the companion parable, implies pains, effort, willingness to part with something in order to attain.

The nature of the price is not here in question. We know who has said, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire. We buy heavenly Wisdom when we surrender ourselves. The price is desire to possess, and willingness to accept as an undeserved, unearned gift. But that does not come into view in our lesson. Only this is strongly put in it--that this heavenly Wisdom outshines all jewels, outweighs all wealth, and is indeed the only true riches. Rubies is probably rather to be taken as corals, which seem to have been very highly prized by the Jews, and, no doubt, found their way to them from the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. The word rendered things thou canst desire is better taken as meaning jewels.

This noble and conclusive depreciation of material wealth in comparison with Wisdom, which is not merely intellectual, but rests on the fear of the Lord, and is goodness as well as understanding, never needed preaching with more emphasis than in our day, when more and more the commercial spirit invades every region of life, and rich men are the aristocrats and envied types of success. When will England and America believe the religion which they profess, and adjust their estimates of the best things accordingly? How many so-called Christian parents would think their son mad if he said, I do not care about getting rich; my goal is to be wise with God's Wisdom? How few of us order our lives on the footing of this old teacher's lesson, and act out the belief that Wisdom is more than wealth! The man who heaps millions together, and masses it, fails in life, however a vulgar world and a nominal church may admire and glorify him. The man who wins Wisdom succeeds, however bare may be his cupboard, and however people may pity him for having failed in life, because he has not drawn prizes in the Devil's lottery. His blank is a prize, and their prizes are blanks. This decisive subordination of material to spiritual good is too plainly duty and common sense to need being dwelt upon; but, alas! like a great many other most obvious, accepted truths, it is disregarded as universally as believed.

The inseparable accompaniments of Wisdom are next eloquently described. The picture is the poetical clothing of the idea that all material good will come to him who despises it all and clasps Wisdom to his heart. Some things flow from Wisdom possessed as usual consequences; some are inseparable from her. The gift in her right hand is length of days; that in her left, which, by its position, is suggested as inferior to the former, is wealth and honour--two goods which will attend the long life. No doubt such promises are to be taken with limitations; but there need be no doubt that, on the whole, loyal devotion to and real possession of heavenly Wisdom do tend in the direction of lengthening lives, which are by it delivered from vices and anxieties which cut many a career short, and of gathering round silver hairs reverence and troops of friends.

These are the usual consequences, and may be fairly brought into view as secondary encouragements to seek Wisdom. But if she is sought for the sake of getting these attendant blessings, she will not be found. She must be loved for herself, not for her dowry, or she will not be won. At the same time, the overstrained and fantastic morality, which stigmatises regard to the blessed results of a religious life as selfishness, finds no support in Scripture, as it has none in common sense. Would there were more of such selfishness!

Sometimes Wisdom's hands do not hold these outward gifts. But the connection between her and the next blessings spoken of is inseparable. Her ways are pleasantness and peace. In keeping--not for keeping--her commandments is great reward. Inward delight and deep tranquillity of heart attend every step taken in obedience to Wisdom. The course of conduct so prescribed will often involve painful crucifying of the lower nature, but its pleasure far outweighs its pain. It will often be strewn with sharp flints, or may even have red-hot ploughshares laid on it, as in old ordeal trials; but still it will be pleasant to the true self. Sin is a blunder as well as a crime, and enlightened self-interest would point out the same course as the highest law of Wisdom. In reality, duty and delight are co-extensive. They are two names for one thing--one taken from consideration of its obligation; the other, from observation of its issues. Calm pleasures there abide. The only complete peace, which fills and quiets the whole man, comes from obeying Wisdom, or what is the same thing, from following Christ. There is no other way of bringing all our nature into accord with itself, ending the war between conscience and inclination, between flesh and spirit. There is no other way of bringing us into amity with all circumstances, so that fortunate or adverse shall be recognised as good, and nothing be able to agitate us very much. Peace with ourselves, the world, and God, is always the consequence of listening to Wisdom.

The whole fair picture is summed up in verse 18: She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her. This is a distinct allusion to the narrative of Genesis. The flaming sword of the cherub guard is sheathed, and access to the tree, which gives immortal life to those who eat, is open to us. Mark how that great word life is here gathering to itself at least the beginnings of higher conceptions than those of simple existence. It is swelling like a bud, and preparing to open and disclose the perfect flower, the life which stands in the knowledge of God and the Christ whom He has sent. Jesus, the incarnate Wisdom, is Himself the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of God. The condition of access to it is laying hold by the outstretched hand of faith, and keeping hold with holy obstinacy of grip, in spite of all temptations to slack our grasp. That retaining is the condition of true blessedness.

Verses 19 and 20 invest the idea of Wisdom with still loftier sublimity, since they declare that it is an attribute of God Himself by which creation came into being. The meaning of the writer is inadequately grasped if we take it to be only that creation shows God's Wisdom. This personified Wisdom dwells with God, is the agent of creation, comes with invitations to men, may be possessed by them, and showers blessings on them. The planet Neptune was divined before it was discovered, by reason of perturbations in the movements of the exterior members of the system, unaccountable unless some great globe of light, hitherto unseen, were swaying them in their orbits. Do we not see here like influence streaming from the unrisen light of Christ? Personification prepares for Incarnation. There is One who has been with the Father from the beginning, by whom all things came into being, whose voice sounds to all, who is the Tree of Life, whom we may all possess, and with whose own peace we may be peaceful and blessed for evermore.

Verses 21-24 belong to the next section of the great discourse or hymn. They add little to the preceding. But we may observe the earnest exhortation to let wisdom and understanding be ever in sight. Eyes are apt to stray and clouds to hide the sun. Effort is needed to counteract the tendency to slide out of consciousness, which our weakness imposes on the most certain and important truths. A Wisdom which we do not think about is as good or as bad as non-existent for us. One prime condition of healthy spiritual life is the habit of meditation, thereby renewing our gaze upon the facts of God's revelation and the bearing of these on our conduct.

The blessings flowing from Wisdom are again dilated on, from a somewhat different point of view. She is the giver of life. And then she adorns the life she gives. One has seen homely faces so refined and glorified by the fair soul that shone through them as to be, as it were, the face of an angel. Gracefulness should be the outward token of inward grace. Some good people forget that they are bound to adorn the doctrine. But they who have drunk most deeply of the fountain of Wisdom will find that, like the fabled spring, its waters confer strange loveliness. Lives spent in communion with Jesus will be lovely, however homely their surroundings, and however vulgar eyes, taught only to admire staring colours, may find them dull. The world saw no beauty that they should desire Him, in Him whom holy souls and heavenly angels and the divine Father deemed fairer than the sons of men!

Safety and firm footing in active life will be ours if we walk in Wisdom's ways. He who follows Christ's footsteps will tread surely, and not fear foes. Quiet repose in hours of rest will be his. A day filled with happy service will be followed by a night full of calm slumber, Whether we sleep or wake, we live with Him; and, if we do both, sleeping and waking will be blessed, and our lives will move on gently to the time when days and nights shall melt into one, and there will be no need for repose; for there will be no work that wearies and no hands that droop. The last lying down in the grave will be attended with no terrors. The last sleep there shall be sweet; for it will really be awaking to the full possession of the personal Wisdom, who is our Christ, our Life in death, our Heaven in heaven.