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

**PROVERBS-005. THE TWO PATHS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many. 11. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. 12. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. 13. Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life. 14. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. 15. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. 16. For they sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall. 17. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. 18. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. 19. The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble."*

*Proverbs 4:10-19*

This passage includes much more than temperance or any other single virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted effects of walking in it and in the other.

The general call to listen in verse 10 is characteristically enforced by the Old Testament assurance that obedience prolongs life. That is a New Testament truth as well; for there is nothing more certain than that a life in conformity with God's will, which is the same thing as a life in conformity with physical laws, tends to longevity. The experience of any doctor will show that. Here in England we have statistics which prove that total abstainers are a long-lived people, and some insurance offices construct their tables accordingly.

After that general call to listen comes, in verse 11, the description of the path in which long life is to be found. It is the way of Wisdom--that is, that which Wisdom prescribes, and in which therefore it is wise to walk. It is always foolish to do wrong. The rough title of an old play is The Devil is an Ass, and if that is not true about him, it is absolutely true about those who listen to his lies. Sin is the stupidest thing in the universe, for it ignores the plainest facts, and never gets what it flings away so much to secure.

Another aspect of the path is presented in the designation paths of uprightness, which seems to be equivalent to those which belong to, or perhaps which consist of, uprightness. The idea of straightness or evenness is the primary meaning of the word, and is, of course, appropriate to the image of a path. In the moral view, it suggests how much more simple and easy a course of rectitude is than one of sin. The one goes straight and unswerving to its end; the other is crooked, devious, intricate, and wanders from the true goal. A crooked road is a long road, and an up-and-down road is a tiring road. Wisdom's way is straight, level, and steadily approaches its aim.

In verse 13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the picture of the way of uprightness and its travellers is translated into the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of instruction, which is substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will filch away instruction, if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves; for she is thy life, and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth calling the life of a man.

Verses 14 to 17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former the designation was the path of uprightness or of wisdom, and the description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path, here the designation is the path of the wicked, and the description is mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep it at arm's-length. Whom resist is imperative. True, negative virtue is incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue without it. We must be accustomed to say No, or we shall come to little good. An outer belt of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is mostly prohibitions. So did not I, because of the fear of God must be our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to be part of the way of Wisdom. It is one, and, in the present state of England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which we can turn from the path of the wicked and pass on.

The picture of the wicked in verses 16 and 17 is that of very grossly criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold of some innocent lad, and putting him up to a thing or two, which means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing an unaccustomed sinner's eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,--avoid, pass not by, turn from, and pass on. The reference to bread and wine in verse 17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men's living is won by their wickedness, which procures bread, and by their violence, which brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is culpable. We may contrast this foul source of a degraded living with verse 13, where instruction is set forth as the life of the upright.

Verses 18 and 19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase the perfect day might be rendered, vividly though clumsily, the steady of the day--that is, noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one coming in from the blaze outside. How great is that darkness! It is the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God's love.