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

**PROVERBS-006. MONOTONY AND CRISES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble."*

*Proverbs 4:12*

The old metaphor likening life to a path has many felicities in it. It suggests constant change, it suggests continuous progress in one direction, and that all our days are linked together, and are not isolated fragments; and it suggests an aim and an end. So we find it perpetually in this Book of Proverbs. Here the way has a specific designation, the way of Wisdom--that is to say, the way which Wisdom teaches, and the way on which Wisdom accompanies us, and the way which leads to Wisdom. Now, these two clauses of my text are not merely an instance of the peculiar feature of Hebrew poetry called parallelism, in which two clauses, substantially the same, occur, but with a little pleasing difference. When thou goest--that is, the monotonous tramp, tramp, tramp of slow walking along the path of an uneventful daily life, the humdrum one foot up and another foot down which makes the most of our days. When thou runnest--that points to the crises, the sudden spurts, the necessarily brief bursts of more than usual energy and effort and difficulty. And about both of them, the humdrum and the exciting, the monotonous and the startling, the promise comes that if we walk in the path of Wisdom we shall not get disgusted with the one and we shall not be overwhelmed by the other. When thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened; when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.

But before I deal with these two clauses specifically, let me recall to you the condition, and the sole condition, upon which either of them can be fulfilled in our daily lives. The book from which my text is taken is probably one of the very latest in the Old Testament, and you catch in it a very significant and marvellous development of the Old Testament thought. For there rises up, out of these early chapters of the Book of Proverbs, that august and serene figure of the queenly Wisdom, which is more than a personification and is less than a person and a prophecy. It means more than the wise man that spoke it saw; it means for us Christ, the Power of God and the Wisdom of God. And so instead of keeping ourselves merely to the word of the Book of Proverbs, we must grasp the thing that shines through the word, and realise that the writer's visions can only become realities when the serene and august Wisdom that he saw shimmering through the darkness took to itself a human Form, and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.

With that heightening of the meaning of the phrase, the path of Wisdom assumes a heightened meaning too, for it is the path of the personal Wisdom, the Incarnate Wisdom, Christ Himself. And what does it then come to be to obey this command to walk in the way of Wisdom? Put it into three sentences. Let the Christ who is not only wise, but Wisdom, choose your path, and be sure that by the submission of your will all your paths are His, and not only yours. Make His path yours by following in His steps, and do in your place what you think Christ would have done if He had been there. Keep company with Him on the road. If we will do these three things--if we will say to Him, Lord, when Thou sayest go, I go; when Thou biddest me come, I come; I am Thy slave, and I rejoice in the bondage more than in all licentious liberty, and what Thou biddest me do, I do--if you will further say, As Thou art, so am I in the world--and if you will further say, Leave me not alone, and let me cling to Thee on the road, as a little child holds on by her mother's skirt or her father's hand, then, and only then, will you walk in the path of Wisdom.

Now, then, these three things--submission of will, conformity of conduct, closeness of companionship--these three things being understood, let us look for a moment at the blessings that this text promises, and first at the promise for long uneventful stretches of our daily life. That, of course, is mainly the largest proportion of all our lives. Perhaps nine-tenths at least of all our days and years fall under the terms of this first promise, When thou walkest. For many miles there comes nothing particular, nothing at all exciting, nothing new, nothing to break the plod, plod, plod along the road. Everything is as it was yesterday, and the day before that, and as it will be to-morrow, and the day after that, in all probability. The trivial round, the common task make up by far the largest percentage of our lives. It is as in wine, the immense proportion of it is nothing but water, and only a small proportion of alcohol is diffused through the great mass of the tamer liquid.

Now, then, if Jesus Christ is not to help us in the monotony of our daily lives, what, in the name of common sense, is His help good for? If it is not true that He will be with us, not only in the moments of crisis, but in the long commonplace hours, we may as well have no Christ at all, for all that I can see. Unless the trivial is His field, there is very little field for Him, in your life or mine. And so it should come to all of us who have to take up this daily burden of small, monotonous, constantly recurring, and therefore often wearisome, duties, as even a more blessed promise than the other one, that when thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened.

I remember hearing of a man that got so disgusted with having to dress and undress himself every day that he committed suicide to escape from the necessity. That is a very extreme form of the feeling that comes over us all sometimes, when we wake in a morning and look before us along the stretch of dead level, which is a great deal more wearisome when it lasts long than are the cheerful vicissitudes of up hill and down dale. We all know the deadening influence of a habit. We all know the sense of disgust that comes over us at times, and of utter weariness, just because we have been doing the same things day after day for so long. I know only one infallible way of preventing the common from becoming commonplace, of preventing the small from becoming trivial, of preventing the familiar from becoming contemptible, and it is to link it all to Jesus Christ, and to say, For Thy sake, and unto Thee, I do this; then, not only will the rough places become plain, and the crooked things straight, and not only will the mountains be brought low, but the valleys of the commonplace will be exalted. Thy steps shall not be straitened. I will make his feet as hind's feet, says one of the old prophets. What a picture of light, buoyant, graceful movement that is! And each of us may have that, instead of the grind, grind, grind! tramp, tramp, tramp! along the level and commonplace road of our daily lives, if we will. Walk in the path of Christ, with Christ, towards Christ, and thy steps shall not be straitened.

Now, there is another aspect of this same promise--viz. if we thus are in the path of Incarnate Wisdom, we shall not feel the restrictions of the road to be restraints. Thy steps shall not be straitened; although there is a wall on either side, and the road is the narrow way that leads to life, it is broad enough for the sober man, because he goes in a straight line, and does not need half the road to roll about in. The limits which love imposes, and the limits which love accepts, are not narrowing. I will walk at liberty, for--I do as I like. No! that is slavery; but, I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts; and I do not want to go vagrantising at large, but limit myself thankfully to the way which Thou dost mark out. Thy steps shall not be straitened. So much for the first of these promises.

Now what about the other one? When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.

As I have said, the former promise applies to the hours and the years of life. The latter applies to but a few moments of each man's life. Cast your thoughts back over your own days, and however changeful, eventful, perhaps adventurous, and as we people call it, romantic, some parts of our lives may have been, yet for all that you can put the turning-points, the crises that have called for great efforts, and the gathering of yourselves up, and the calling forth of all your powers to do and to dare, you can put them all inside of a week, in most cases. When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. The greater the speed, the greater the risk of stumbling over some obstacle in the way. We all know how many men there are that do very well in the uneventful commonplaces of life, but bring them face to face with some great difficulty or some great trial, and there is a dismal failure. Jesus Christ is ready to make us fit for anything in the way of difficulty, in the way of trial, that can come storming upon us from out of the dark. And He will make us so fit if we follow the injunctions to which I have already been referring. Without His help it is almost certain that when we have to run, our ankles will give, or there will be a stone in the road that we never thought of, and the excitement will sweep us away from principle, and we shall lose our hold on Him; and then it is all up with us.

There is a wonderful saying in one of the prophets, which uses this same metaphor of my text with a difference, where it speaks of the divine guidance of Israel as being like that of a horse in the wilderness. Fancy the poor, nervous, tremulous creature trying to keep its footing upon the smooth granite slabs of Sinai. Travellers dare not take their horses on mountain journeys, because they are highly nervous and are not sure-footed enough. And, so says the old prophet, that gracious Hand will be laid on the bridle, and hold the nervous creature's head up as it goes sliding over the slippery rocks, and so He will bring it down to rest in the valley. Now unto Him that is able to keep us from stumbling, as is the true rendering, and to present us faultless ... be glory. Trust Him, keep near Him, let Him choose your way, and try to be like Him in it; and whatever great occasions may arise in your lives, either of sorrow or of duty, you will be equal to them.

But remember the virtue that comes out victorious in the crisis must have been nourished and cultivated in the humdrum moments. For it is no time to make one's first acquaintance with Jesus Christ when the eyeballs of some ravenous wild beast are staring into ours, and its mouth is open to swallow us. Unless He has kept our feet from being straitened in the quiet walk, He will not be able to keep us from stumbling in the vehement run.

One word more. This same distinction is drawn by one of the prophets, who adds another clause to it. Isaiah, or the author of the second portion of the book which goes by his name, puts in wonderful connection the two thoughts of my text with analogous thoughts in regard to God, when he says, Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? and immediately goes on to say, They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. So it is from God, the unfainting and the unwearied, that the strength comes which makes our steps buoyant with energy amidst the commonplace, and steadfast and established at the crises of our lives. But before these two great promises is put another one: They shall mount up with wings as eagles, and therefore both the other become possible. That is to say, fellowship with God in the heavens, which is made possible on earth by communion with Christ, is the condition both of the unwearied running and of unfainting walking. If we will keep in the path of Christ, He will take care of the commonplace dreary tracts and of the brief moments of strain and effort, and will bring us at last where He has gone, if, looking unto Him, we run with patience the race, and walk with cheerfulness the road, that is set before us.