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

**PROVERBS-012. THE TWO-FOLD ASPECT OF THE DIVINE WORKING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The way of the Lord is strength to the upright: but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity."*

*Proverbs 10:29*

You observe that the words shall be, in the last clause, are a supplement. They are quite unnecessary, and in fact they rather hinder the sense. They destroy the completeness of the antithesis between the two halves of the verse. If you leave them out, and suppose that the way of the Lord is what is spoken of in both clauses, you get a far deeper and fuller meaning. The way of the Lord is strength to the upright; but destruction to the workers of iniquity. It is the same way which is strength to one man and ruin to another, and the moral nature of the man determines which it shall be to him. That is a penetrating word, which goes deep down. The unknown thinkers, to whose keen insight into the facts of human life we are indebted for this Book of Proverbs, had pondered for many an hour over the perplexed and complicated fates of men, and they crystallised their reflections at last in this thought. They have in it struck upon a principle which explains a great many things, and teaches us a great many solemn lessons. Let us try to get a hold of what is meant, and then to look at some applications and illustrations of the principle.

**I. First, then, let me just try to put clearly the meaning and bearing of these words.**

The way of the Lord means, sometimes in the Old Testament and sometimes in the New, religion, considered as the way in which God desires a man to walk. So we read in the New Testament of the way as the designation of the profession and practice of Christianity; and the way of the Lord is often used in the Psalms for the path which He traces for man by His sovereign will.

But that, of course, is not the meaning here. Here it means, not the road in which God prescribes that we should walk, but that road in which He Himself walks; or, in other words, the sum of the divine action, the solemn footsteps of God through creation, providence, and history. His goings forth are from everlasting. His way is in the sea. His way is in the sanctuary. Modern language has a whole set of phrases which mean the same thing as the Jew meant by the way of the Lord, only that God is left out. They talk about the current of events, the general tendency of things, the laws of human affairs, and so on. I, for my part, prefer the old-fashioned Hebraism. To many modern thinkers the whole drift and tendency of human affairs affords no sign of a person directing these. They hear the clashing and grinding of opposing forces, the thunder as of falling avalanches, and the moaning as of a homeless wind, but they hear the sounds of no footfalls echoing down the ages. This ancient teacher had keener ears. Well for us if we share his faith, and see in all the else distracting mysteries of life and history, the way of the Lord!

But not only does the expression point to the operation of a personal divine Will in human affairs, but it conceives of that operation as one, a uniform and consistent whole. However complicated, and sometimes apparently contradictory, the individual events were, there was a unity in them, and they all converged on one result. The writer does not speak of ways, but of the way, as a grand unity. It is all one continuous, connected, consistent mode of operation from beginning to end.

The author of this proverb believed something more about the way of the Lord. He believed that although it is higher than our way, still, a man can know something about it; and that whatever may be enigmatical, and sometimes almost heart-breaking, in it, one thing is sure--that as we have been taught of late years in another dialect, it makes for righteousness. Clouds and darkness are round about Him, but the Old Testament writers never falter in the conviction, which was the soul of all their heroism and the life blood of their religion, that in the hearts of the clouds and darkness, Justice and judgment are the foundations of His throne. The way of the Lord, says this old thinker, is hard to understand, very complicated, full of all manner of perplexities and difficulties, and yet on the whole the clear drift and tendency of the whole thing is discernible, and it is this: it is all on the side of good. Everything that is good, and everything that does good, is an ally of God s, and may be sure of the divine favour and of the divine blessing resting upon it.

And just because that is so clear, the other side is as true; the same way, the same set of facts, the same continuous stream of tendency, which is all with and for every form of good, is all against every form of evil. Or, as one of the Psalmists puts the same idea, The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry. The face of the Lord is against them that do evil. The same eye that beams in lambent love on the righteous burns terribly to the evil doer. The face of the Lord means the side of the divine nature which is turned to us, and is manifested by His self-revealing activity, so that the expression comes near in meaning to the way of the Lord, and the thought in both cases is the same, that by the eternal law of His being, God's actions must all be for the good and against the evil.

They do not change, but a man's character determines which aspect of them he sees and has to experience. God's way has a bright side and a dark. You may take which you like. You can lay hold of the thing by whichever handle you choose. On the one side it is convex, on the other concave. You can approach it from either side, as you please. The way of the Lord must touch your way. Your cannot alter that necessity. Your path must either run parallel in the same direction with His, and then all His power will be an impulse to bear you onward; or it must run in the opposite direction, and then all His power will be for your ruin, and the collision with it will crush you as a ship is crushed like an egg-shell, when it strikes an iceberg. You can choose which of these shall befall you.

And there is a still more striking beauty about the saying, if we give the full literal meaning to the word strength. It is used by our translators, I suppose, in a somewhat archaic and peculiar signification, namely, that of a stronghold. At all events the Hebrew means a fortress, a place where men may live safe and secure; and if we take that meaning, the passage gains greatly in force and beauty. This way of the Lord is like a castle for the shelter of the shelterless good man, and behind those strong bulwarks he dwells impregnable and safe. Just as a fortress is a security to the garrison, and a frowning menace to the besiegers or enemies, so the name of the Lord is a strong tower, and the way of the Lord is a fortress. If you choose to take shelter within it, its massive walls are your security and your joy. If you do not, they frown down grimly upon you, a menace and a terror. How differently, eight hundred years ago, Normans and Saxons looked at the square towers that were built all over England to bridle the inhabitants! To the one they were the sign of the security of their dominion; to the other they were the sign of their slavery and submission. Torture and prison-houses they might become; frowning portents they necessarily were. The way of the Lord is a castle fortress to the man that does good, and to the man that does evil it is a threatening prison, which may become a hell of torture. It is ruin to the workers of iniquity. I pray you, settle for yourself which of these it is to be to you.

**II. And now let me say a word or two by way of application, or illustration, of these principles that are here.**

First, let me remind you how the order of the universe is such that righteousness is life and sin is death. This universe and the fortunes of men are complicated and strange. It is hard to trace any laws, except purely physical ones, at work. Still, on the whole, things do work so that goodness is blessedness, and badness is ruin. That is, of course, not always true in regard of outward things, but even about them it is more often and obviously true than we sometimes recognise. Hence all nations have their proverbs, embodying the generalised experience of centuries, and asserting that, on the whole, honesty is the best policy, and that it is always a blunder to do wrong. What modern phraseology calls laws of nature, the Bible calls the way of the Lord; and the manner in which these help a man who conforms to them, and hurt or kill him if he does not, is an illustration on a lower level of the principle of our text. This tremendous congeries of powers in the midst of which we live does not care whether we go with it or against it, only if we do the one we shall prosper, and if we do the other we shall very likely be made an end of. Try to stop a train, and it will run over you and murder you; get into it, and it will carry you smoothly along. Our lives are surrounded with powers, which will carry our messages and be our slaves if we know how to command nature by obeying it, or will impassively strike us dead if we do not.

Again, in our physical life, as a rule, virtue makes strength, sin brings punishment. Riotous living makes diseased bodies. Sins in the flesh are avenged in the flesh, and there is no need for a miracle to bring it about that he who sows to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption. God entrusts the punishment of the breach of the laws of temperance and morality in the body to the natural operation of such breach. The inevitable connection between sins against the body and disease in the body, is an instance of the way of the Lord--the same set of principles and facts--being strength to one man and destruction to another. Hundreds of young men in Manchester--some of whom are listening to me now, no doubt--are killing themselves, or at least are ruining their health, by flying in the face of the plain laws of purity and self-control. They think that they must have their fling, and obey their instincts, and so on. Well, if they must, then another must will insist upon coming into play--and they must reap as they have sown, and drink as they have brewed, and the grim saying of this book about profligate young men will be fulfilled in many of them. His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the grave. Be not deceived, God is not mocked, and His way avenges bodily transgressions by bodily sufferings.

And then, in higher regions, on the whole, goodness makes blessedness, and evil brings ruin. All the powers of God's universe, and all the tenderness of God's heart are on the side of the man that does right. The stars in their courses fight against the man that fights against Him; and on the other side, in yielding thyself to the will of God and following the dictates of His commandments, Thou shalt make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee. All things serve the soul that serves God, and all war against him who wars against his Maker. The way of the Lord cannot but further and help all who love and serve Him. For them all things must work together for good. By the very laws of God's own being, which necessarily shape all His actions, the whole stream of tendency without us makes for righteousness. In the one course of life we go with the stream of divine activity which pours from the throne of God. In the other we are like men trying to row a boat up Niagara. All the rush of the mighty torrent will batter us back. Our work will be doomed to destruction, and ourselves to shame. For ever and ever to be good is to be well. An eternal truth lies in the facts that the same word good means pleasant and right, and that sin and sorrow are both called evil. All sin is self-inflicted sorrow, and every rogue is a roundabout fool. So ask yourselves the question: Is my life in harmony with, or opposed to, these omnipotent laws which rule the whole field of life? Still further, this same fact of the two-fold aspect and operation of the one way of the Lord will be made yet more evident in the future. It becomes us to speak very reverently and reticently about the matter, but I can conceive it possible that the one manifestation of God in a future life may be in substance the same, and yet that it may produce opposite effects upon oppositely disposed souls. According to the old mystical illustration, the same heat that melts wax hardens clay, and the same apocalypse of the divine nature in another world may to one man be life and joy, and to another man may be terror and despair. I do not dwell upon that; it is far too awful a thing for us to speak about to one another, but it is worth your taking to heart when you are indulging in easy anticipations that of course God is merciful and will bless and save everybody after he dies. Perhaps--I do not go any further than a perhaps--perhaps God cannot, and perhaps if a man has got himself into such a condition as it is possible for a man to get into, perhaps, like light upon a diseased eye, the purest beam may be the most exquisite pain, and the natural instinct may be to call upon the rocks and the hills to fall upon them and cover them up in a more genial darkness from that Face, to see which should be life and blessedness.

People speak of future rewards and punishments as if they were given and inflicted by simple and divine volition, and did not stand in any necessary connection with holiness on the one hand or with sin on the other. I do not deny that some portion of both bliss and sorrow may be of such a character. But there is a very important and wide region in which our actions here must automatically bring consequences hereafter of joy or sorrow, without any special retributive action of God s.

We have only to keep in view one or two things about the future which we know to be true, and we shall see this. Suppose a man with his memory of all his past life perfect, and his conscience stimulated to greater sensitiveness and clearer judgment, and all opportunities ended of gratifying tastes and appetites, whose food is in this world, while yet the soul has become dependent on them for ease and comfort, What more is needed to make a hell? And the supposition is but the statement of a fact. We seem to forget much; but when the waters are drained off all the lost things will be found at the bottom. Conscience gets dulled and sophisticated here. But the icy cold of death will wake it up, and the new position will give new insight into the true character of our actions. You see how often a man at the end of life has his eyes cleared to see his faults. But how much more will that be the case hereafter! When the rush of passion is past, and you are far enough from your life to view it as a whole, holding it at arm's length, you will see better what it looks like. There is nothing improbable in supposing that inclinations and tastes which have been nourished for a lifetime may survive the possibility of indulging them in another life, as they often do in this; and what can be worse than such a thirst for one drop of water, which never can be tasted more? These things are certain, and no more is needed to make sin produce, by necessary consequence, misery, and ruin; while similarly, goodness brings joy, peace, and blessing.

**III. But again, the self-revelation of God has this same double aspect.**

The way of the Lord may mean His process by which He reveals His character. Every truth concerning Him may be either a joy or a terror to men. All His attributes are builded into a strong tower, into which the righteous runneth, and is safe, or else they are builded into a prison and torture-house. So the thought of God may either be a happy and strengthening one, or an unwelcome one. I remembered God, and was troubled says one Psalmist. What an awful confession--that the thought of God disturbed him! The thought of God to some of us is a very unwelcome one, as unwelcome as the thought of a detective to a company of thieves. Is not that dreadful? Music is a torture to some ears: and there are people who have so alienated their hearts and wills from God that the Name which should be their dearest faith is not only their ghastliest doubt, but their greatest pain. O brethren, the thought of God and all that wonderful complex of mighty attributes and beauties which make His Name should be our delight, the key to all treasures, the end of all sorrows, our light in darkness, our life in death, our all in all. It is either that to us, or it is something that we would fain forget. Which is it to you?

Especially the Gospel has this double aspect. Our text speaks of the distinction between the righteous and evil doers; but how to pass from the one class to the other, it does not tell us. The Gospel is the answer to that question. It tells us that though we are all workers of iniquity, and must, therefore, if such a text as this were the last word to be spoken on the matter, share in the ruin which smites the opponent of the divine will, we may pass from that class; and by simple faith in Him who died on the Cross for all workers of iniquity, may become of those righteous on whose side God works in all His way, who have all His attributes drawn up like an embattled army in their defence, and have His mighty name for their refuge.

As the very crown of the ways of God, the work of Christ and the record of it in the Gospel have most eminently this double aspect. God meant nothing but the salvation of the whole world when He sent us this Gospel. His way therein was pure, unmingled, universal love. We can make that great message untroubled blessing by simply accepting it. Nothing more is needed but to take God at His word, and to close with His sincere and earnest invitation. Then Christ's work becomes the fortress in which we are guarded from sin and guilt, from the arrows of conscience, and the fiery darts of temptation. But if not accepted, then it is not passive, it is not nothing. If rejected, it does more harm to a man than anything else can, just because, if accepted, it would have done him more good. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The pillar which symbolised the presence of God sent down influences on either side; to the trembling crowd of the Israelites on the one hand, to the pursuing ranks of the Egyptians on the other; and though the pillar was one, opposite effects streamed from it, and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these. Everything depends on which side of the pillar you choose to see. The ark of God, which brought dismay and death among false gods and their worshippers, brought blessing into the humble house of Obed Edom, the man of Gath, with whom it rested for three months before it was set in its place in the city of David. That which is meant to be the savour of life unto life must either be that or the savour of death unto death.

Jesus Christ is something to each of us. For you who have heard His name ever since you were children, your relation to Him settles your condition and your prospects, and moulds your character. Either He is for you the tried corner-stone, the sure foundation, on which whosoever builds will not be confounded, or He is the stone of stumbling, against which whosoever stumbles will be broken, and which will crush to powder whomsoever it falls upon, This Child is set for the rise or for the fall of all who hear His name. He leaves no man at the level at which He found him, but either lifts him up nearer to God, and purity and joy, or sinks him into an ever-descending pit of darkening separation from all these. Which is He to you? Something He must be--your strength or your ruin. If you commit your souls to Him in humble faith, He will be your peace, your life, your Heaven. If you turn from His offered grace, He will be your pain, your death, your torture. What maketh Heaven, that maketh hell. Which do you choose Him to be?