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

**PROVERBS-024. BREAD AND GRAVEL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*" 'Bread of deceit' is sweet to a man; but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel."*

*Proverbs 20:17*

Bread of deceit is a somewhat ambiguous phrase, which may mean either of two things, and perhaps means both. It may either mean any good obtained by deceit, or good which deceives in its possession. In the former signification it would appear to have reference primarily to unjustly gotten gain, while in the latter it has a wider meaning and applies to all the worthless treasures and lying delights of life. The metaphor is full of homely vigour, and the contrast between the sweet bread and the gravel that fills the mouth and breaks the teeth, carries a solemn lesson which is perpetually insisted upon in this book of Proverbs, and confirmed in every man's experience.

**I. The first lesson here taught is the perpetuity of the most transient actions.**

We are tempted to think that a deed done is done with, and to grasp at momentary pleasure, and ignore its abiding consequences. But of all the delusions by which men are blinded to the true solemnity of life none is more fatal than that which ignores the solemn afterward's that has to be taken into account. For, whatever issues in outward life our actions may have, they have all a very real influence on their doers; each of them tends to modify character, to form habits, to drag after itself a whole trail of consequences. Each strikes inwards and works outwards. The whole of a life may be set forth in the pregnant figure, A sower went forth to sow, and Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. The seed may lie long dormant, but the green shoots will appear in due time, and pass through all the stages of first the blade, and then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear. The sower has to become the reaper, and the reaper has to eat of the bread made from the product of the long past sowing. Shall we have to reap a harvest of poisonous tares, or of wholesome wheat? If twere done when tis done, twere well it were done quickly; but since it begins to do when tis done, it were often better that it were not done at all. A momentary pause to ask ourselves when tempted to evil, And what then? would burst not a few of the painted bubbles after which we often chase.

Is there any reason to suppose that these permanent consequences of our transient actions are confined in their operation to this life? Does not such a present, which is mainly the continuous result of the whole past, seem at least to prophesy and guarantee a similar future? Most of us, I suppose, believe in the life continuous through and after death retributive in a greater degree than life here. Whatever changes may be involved in the laying aside of the earthly house of this tabernacle, it seems folly to suppose that in it we lay aside the consequences of our past inwrought into our very selves. Surely wisdom suggests that we try to take into view the whole scope of our actions, and to carry our vision as far as the consequences reach. We should all be wiser and better if we thought more of the afterwards, whether in its partial form in the present, or in its solemn completion in the future beyond.

**II. The bitterness of what is sweet and wrong.**

There is no need to deny that bread of deceit is sweet to a man. There is a certain pleasure in a lie, and the taste of the bread purchased by it is not embittered because it has been bought by deceit. If we succeed in getting the good which any strong desire hungers after, the gratification of the desire ministers pleasure. If a man is hungry, it matters not to his hunger how he has procured the bread which he devours. And so with all forms of good which appeal to sense. The sweetness of the thing desired and obtained is more subtle, but not less real, if it nourishes some inclination or taste of a higher nature. But such sweetness in its very essence is momentary, and even, whilst being masticated, bread of deceit turns into gravel; and a mouthful of it breaks the teeth, excoriates the gums, interferes with breathing, and ministers no nourishment. The metaphor has but too familiar illustrations in the experience of us all. How often have we flattered ourselves with the thought, If I could but get this or that, how happy I should be? How often when we got it have we been as happy as we expected? We had forgotten the voice of conscience, which may be overborne for a moment, but begins to speak more threateningly when its prohibitions have been neglected; we had forgotten that there is no satisfying our hungry desires with bread of deceit, but that they grow much faster than it can be presented to them; we had forgotten the evil that was strengthened in us when it has been fed; we had forgotten that the remembrance of past delights often becomes a present sorrow and shame; we had forgotten avenging consequences of many sorts which follow surely in the train of sweet satisfactions which are wrong.

So, even in this life nothing keeps its sweetness which is wrong, and nothing which is sweet and wrong avoids a tang of intensest bitterness afterwards. And all that bitterness will be increased in another world, if there is another, when God gives us to read the book of our lives which we ourselves have written. Many a page that records past sweetness will then be felt to be written, within and without, with lamentation and woe.

All bitterness of what is sweet and wrong makes it certain that sin is the stupidest, as well as the wickedest, thing that a man can do.

**III. The abiding sweetness of true bread.**

In a subordinate sense, the true bread may be taken as meaning our own deeds inspired by love of God and approved by conscience. They may often be painful to do, but the pain merges into calm pleasure, and conscience whispers a foretaste of heaven's Well done! good and faithful servant. The roll may be bitter to the lips, but, eaten, becomes sweet as honey; whereas the world's bread is sweet at first but bitter at last. The highest wisdom and the most exacting conscience absolutely coincide in that which they prescribe, and Scripture has the warrant of universal experience in proclaiming that sin in its subtler and more refined forms, as well as in its grosser, is a gigantic mistake, and the true wisdom and reasonable regard for one's own interest alike point in the same direction,--to a life based on the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, as being the life which yields the happiest results today and perpetual bliss hereafter. But let us not forget that in the highest sense Christ Himself is the true bread that cometh down from heaven. He may be bitter at first, being eaten with tears of penitence and painful efforts at conquering sin, but even in the first bitterness there is sweetness beyond all the earth can give. He spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies, and the bread which He gives tastes as the manna of old did, like wafers made of honey. Only perverted appetites loathe this light bread and prefer the strong-favoured leeks and garlics of Egypt. They who sit at the table in the wilderness will finally sit at the table prepared in the kingdom of the heavens.