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

**PROVERBS-026. THE AFTERWARDS AND OUR HOPES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17. Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. 18. For surely there is an end and thine expectation shall not be cut off."*

*Proverbs 23:17-18*

The Book of Proverbs seldom looks beyond the limits of the temporal, but now and then the mists lift and a wider horizon is disclosed. Our text is one of these exceptional instances, and is remarkable, not only as expressing confidence in the future, but as expressing it in a very striking way. Surely there is an end, says our Authorised Version, substituting in the margin, for end, reward. The latter word is placed in the text of the Revised Version. But neither end nor reward conveys the precise idea. The word so translated literally means something that comes after. So it is the very opposite of end', it is really that which lies beyond the end--the sequel, or the future--as the margin of the Revised Version gives alternatively, or, more simply still, the afterwards. Surely there is an afterwards behind the end. And then the proverb goes on to specify one aspect of that afterwards: Thine expectation--or, better, because more simply, thy hope--shall not be cut off. And then, upon these two convictions that there is, if I might so say, an afterclap, and that it is the time and the sphere in which the fairest hopes that a man can paint to himself shall be surpassed by the reality, it builds the plain partial exhortation: Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.

So then, we have three things here, the certainty of the afterwards, the immortality of hope consequent thereon, and the bearing of these facts on the present.

**I. The certainty of the hereafter.**

Now, this Book of Proverbs, as I have said in the great collection of popular sayings which makes the bulk of it, has no enthusiasm, no poetry, no mysticism. It has religion, and it has a very pure and lofty morality, but, for the most part, it deals with maxims of worldly prudence, and sometimes with cynical ones, and represents, on the whole, the wisdom of the market-place, and the man in the street. But now and then, as I have said, we hear strains of a higher mood. My text, of course, might be watered down and narrowed so as to point only to sequels to deeds realised in this life. And then it would be teaching us simply the very much needed lessons that even in this life, Whatever a man soweth that shall he also reap. But it seems to me that we are entitled to see here, as in one or two other places in the Book of Proverbs, a dim anticipation of a future life beyond the grave. I need not trouble you with quoting parallel passages which are sown thinly up and down the book, but I venture to take the words in the wider sense to which I have referred.

Now, the question comes to be, where did the coiners of Proverbs, whose main interest was in the obvious maxims of a prudential morality, get this conviction? They did not get it from any lofty experience of communion with God, like that which in the seventy-third Psalm marks the very high-water mark of Old Testament faith in regard to a future life, where the Psalmist finds himself so completely blessed and well in present fellowship with God, that he must needs postulate its eternal continuance, and just because he has made God the portion of his heart, and is holding fellowship with Him, is sure that nothing can intervene to break that sweet communion. They did not get it from any clear definite revelation, such as we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has made that future life far more than an inference for us, but they got it from thinking over the facts of this present life as they appeared to them, looked at from the standpoint of a belief in God, and in righteousness. And so they represent to us the impression that is made upon a man's mind, if he has the eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality, that is made by the facts of this earthly life--viz. that it is so full of onward-looking, prophetic aspect, so manifestly and tragically, and yet wonderfully and hopefully. Incomplete and fragmentary in itself, that there must be something beyond in order to explain, in order to vindicate, the life that now is. And that aspect of fragmentary incompleteness is what I would insist upon for a moment now.

You sometimes see a row of houses, the end one of them has, in its outer gable wall, bricks protruding here and there, and holes for chimney-pieces that are yet to be put in. And just as surely as that external wall says that the row is half built, and there are some more tenements to be added to it, so surely does the life that we now live here, in all its aspects almost, bear upon itself the stamp that it, too, is but initial and preparatory. You sometimes see, in the bookseller's catalogue, a book put down volume one; all that is published. That is our present life--volume one, all that is published. Surely there is going to be a sequel, volume two. Volume two is due, and will come, and it will be the continuation of volume one.

What is the meaning of the fact that of all the creatures on the face of the earth only you and I, and our brethren and sisters, do not find in our environment enough for our powers? What is the meaning of the fact that, whilst foxes have holes where they curl themselves up, and they are at rest, and the birds of the air have roosting-places, where they tuck their heads beneath their wings and sleep, the son of man hath not where to lay his head, but looks round upon the earth and says, The earth, O Lord, is full of Thy mercy. I am a stranger on the earth. What is the meaning of it? Here is the meaning of it: Surely there is a hereafter.

What is the meaning of the fact that lodged in men's natures there lies that strange power of painting to themselves things that are not as though they were? So that minds and hearts go out wandering through Eternity, and having longings and possibilities which nothing beneath the stars can satisfy, or can develop? The meaning of it is this: Surely there is a hereafter. The man that wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, in his sceptical moment ere he had attained to his last conclusion, says, in a verse that is mistranslated in our rendering, He hath set Eternity in their hearts, therefore the misery of man is great upon him. That is true, because the root of all our unrest and dissatisfaction is that we need God, and God in Eternity, in order that we may be at rest. But whilst on the one hand therefore the misery of man is great upon him, on the other hand, because Eternity is in our hearts, therefore there is the answer to the longings, the adequate sphere for the capacities in that great future, and in the God that fills it. You go into the quarries left by reason of some great convulsion or disaster, by forgotten races, and you will find there half excavated and rounded pillars still adhering to the matrix of the rock from which they were being hewn. Such unfinished abortions are all human lives if, when Death drops its curtain, there is an end.

But, brethren, God does not so clumsily disproportion His creatures and their place. God does not so cruelly put into men longings that have no satisfaction, and desires which never can be filled, as that there should not be, beyond the gulf, the fair land of the hereafter. Every human life obviously has in it, up to the very end, the capacity for progress. Every human life, up to the very end, has been educated and trained, and that, surely, for something. There may be masters in workshops who take apprentices, and teach them their trade during the years that are needed, and then turn round and say, I have no work for you, so you must go and look for it somewhere else. That is not how God does. When He has trained His apprentices He gives them work to do. Surely there is a hereafter, But that is only part of what is involved in this thought. It is not only a state subsequent to the present, but it is a state consequent on the present, and the outcome of it. The analogy of our earthly life avails here. To-day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the yesterdays and to-day are the parent of tomorrow. The past, our past, has made us what we are in the present, and what we are in the present is making us what we shall be in the future. And when we pass out of this life we pass out, notwithstanding all changes, the same men as we were. There may be much on the surface changed, there will be much taken away, thank God! dropped, necessarily, by the cessation of the corporeal frame, and the connection into which it brings us with things of sense. There will be much added, God only knows how much, but the core of the man will remain untouched. We all are changed by still degrees, and suddenly at last All but the basis of the evil. And so we carry ourselves with us into that future life, and, what a man soweth, that shall he also reap. Oh that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their afterward!

**II. Now, secondly, my text suggests the immortality of hope.**

Thine expectation--or rather, as I said, thy hope--shall not be cut off. This is a characteristic of that hereafter. What a wonderful saying that is which also occurs in this Book of Proverbs, The righteous hath hope in his death. Ah! we all know how swiftly, as years increase, the things to hope for diminish, and how, as we approach the end, less and less do our imaginations go out into the possibilities of the sorrowing future. And when the end comes, if there is no afterwards, the dying man's hopes must necessarily die before he does. If when we pass into the darkness we are going into a cave with no outlet at the other end, then there is no hope, and you may write over it Dante's grim word: All hope abandon, ye who enter here. But let in that thought, surely there is an afterwards, and the enclosed cave becomes a rock-passage, in which one can see the arch of light at the far end of the tunnel; and as one passes through the gloom, the eye can travel on to the pale radiance beyond, and anticipate the ampler ether, the diviner air, the brighter constellations burning, mellow moons and happy stars, that await us there. The righteous hath hope in his death. Thine expectation shall not be cut off.

But, further, that conviction of the afterward opens up for us a condition in which imagination is surpassed by the wondrous reality. Here, I suppose, nobody ever had all the satisfaction out of a fulfilled hope that he expected. The fish is always a great deal larger and heavier when we see it in the water than when it is lifted out and scaled. And I suppose that, on the whole, perhaps as much pain as pleasure comes from the hopes which are illusions far more often than they are realities. They serve their purpose in whirling us along the path of life and in stimulating effort, but they do not do much more.

But there does come a time, if you believe that there is an afterwards, when all we desired and painted to ourselves of possible good for our craving spirits shall be felt to be but a pale reflex of the reality, like the light of some unrisen sun on the snowfields, and we shall have to say the half was not told to us.

And, further, if that afterwards is of the sort that we, through Jesus Christ and His resurrection and glory, know to be, then all through the timeless eternity hope will be our guide. For after each fresh influx of blessedness and knowledge we shall have to say it doth not yet appear what we shall be. Thus now abideth--and not only now, but then and eternally--these three--faith, hope, and charity, and hope will never be cut off through all the stretch of that great afterwards.

**III. And now, finally, notice the bearing of all this on the daily present.**

Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. The conviction of the hereafter, and the blessed vision of hopes fulfilled, are not the only reasons for that exhortation. A great deal of harm has been done, I am afraid, by well-meaning preachers who have drawn the bulk of their strongest arguments to persuade men to Christian faith from the thought of a future life. Why, if there were no future, it would be just as wise, just as blessed, just as incumbent upon us to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long. But seeing that there is that future, and seeing that only in it will hope rise to fruition, and yet subsist as longing, surely there comes to us a solemn appeal to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long, which being turned into Christian language, is to live by habitual faith, in communion with, and love and obedience to, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Surely, surely the very climax and bad eminence of folly is shutting the eyes to that future that we all have to face; and to live here, as some of you are doing, ignoring it and God, and cribbing, cabining, and confining all our thoughts within the narrow limits of the things present and visible. For to live so, as our text enjoins, is the sure way, and the only way, to make these great hopes realities for ourselves.

Brethren, that afterwards has two sides to it. The prophet Malachi, in almost his last words, has a magnificent apocalypse of what he calls the day of the Lord, which he sets forth as having a double aspect. On the one hand, it is lurid as a furnace, and burns up the wicked root and branch. I saw a forest fire this last autumn, and the great pine-trees stood there for a moment pyramids of flame, and then came down with a crash. So that hereafter will be to godless men. And on the other side, that day of the Lord in the prophet's vision was radiant with the freshness and dew and beauty of morning, and the Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings. Which of the two is it going to be to us? We have all to face it. We cannot alter that fact, but we can settle how we shall face it. It will be to either the fulfilment of blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the great God and our Saviour, or else, as is said in this same Book of Proverbs: The hope of the godless shall be like one of those water plants, the papyrus or the flag, which, when the water is taken away, withereth up before any other herb. It is for us to determine whether the afterwards that we must enter upon shall be the land in which our hopes shall blossom and fruit, and blossom again immortally, or whether we shall leave behind us, with all the rest that we would fain keep, the possibility of anticipating any good. Surely there is an afterwards, and if thou wilt be in the fear of the Lord all the day long, then for evermore thy hope shall not be cut off.