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

**PROVERBS-027. THE PORTAIT OF A DRUNKARD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"29. Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? 30. They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. 31. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. 32. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. 33. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. 34. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. 35. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake! I will seek it yet again."*

*Proverbs 23:29-35*

This vivid picture of the effects of drunkenness leaves its sinfulness and its wider consequences out of sight, and fixes attention on the sorry spectacle which a man makes of himself in body and mind when he puts an enemy into his mouth to steal away his brains. Disgust and ridicule are both expressed. The writer would warn his son by impressing the ugliness and ludicrousness of drunkenness. The argument is legitimate, though not the highest.

The vehement questions poured out on each other's heels in verse 29 are hot with both loathing and grim laughter. The two words rendered woe and sorrow are unmeaning exclamations, very like each other in sound, and imitating the senseless noises of the drunkard. They express discomfort as a dog might express it. They are howls rather than words. That is one of the prerogatives won by drunkenness,--to come down to the beasts level, and to lose the power of articulate speech. The quarrelsomeness which goes along with certain stages of intoxication, and the unmeaning maudlin misery and whimpering into which it generally passes, are next coupled together.

Then come a pair of effects on the body. The tipsy man cannot take care of himself, and reeling against obstacles, or falling over them, wounds himself, and does not know where the scratches and blood came from. Redness of eyes is, perhaps, rather darkness, meaning thereby dim sight, or possibly black eyes, as we say,--a frequent accompaniment of drunkenness, and corresponding to the wounds in the previous clause. It is a hideous picture, and one that should be burned in on the imagination of every young man and woman. The liquor-sodden, miserable wrecks that are found in thousands in our great cities, of whom this is a picture, were, most of them, in Sunday-schools in their day. The next generation of such poor creatures are, many of them, in Sunday-schools now, and may be reading this passage to-day.

The answer to these questions has a touch of irony in it. The people who win as their possessions these six precious things have to sit up late to earn them. What a noble cause in which to sacrifice sleep, and turn night into day! And they pride themselves on being connoisseurs in the several vintages; they know a good glass of wine when they see it. What a noble field for investigation! What a worthy use of the faculties of comparison and judgment! And how desirable the prizes won by such trained taste and delicate discrimination!

In verses 31 and 32 weighty warning and dehortation follow, based in part on the preceding picture. The writer thinks that the only way of sure escape from the danger is to turn away even the eyes from the temptation. He is not contented with saying taste not, but he goes the whole length of look not; and that because the very sparkle and colour may attract. When it is red might perhaps better be rendered when it reddens itself, suggesting the play of colour, as if put forth by the wine itself. The word rendered in the Authorised Version and Revised Version colour is literally eye, and probably means the beaded bubbles winking on the surface. Moveth itself aright (Authorised Version) is not so near the meaning as goeth down smoothly (Revised Version). The whole paints the attractiveness to sense of the wine-cup in colour, effervescence, and taste.

And then comes in, with startling abruptness, the end of all this fascination,--a serpent's bite and a basilisk's sting. The kind of poisonous snake meant in the last clause of verse 32 is doubtful, but certainly is one much more formidable than an adder. The serpent's lithe gracefulness and painted skin hide a fatal poison; and so the attractive wine-cup is sure to ruin those who look on it. The evil consequences are pursued in more detail in what follows.

But here we must note two points. The advice given is to keep entirely away from the temptation. Look not is safe policy in regard of many of the snares for young lives that abound in our modern society. It is not at all needful to see life, or to know the secrets of wickedness, in order to be wise and good. Simple concerning evil is a happier state than to have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Many a young man has been ruined, body and soul, by a prurient curiosity to know what sort of life dissipated men and women led, or what sort of books they were against which he was warned, or what kind of a place a theatre was, and so on. Eyes are greedy, and there is a very quick telephone from them to the desires. The lust of the eye soon fans the lust of the flesh into a glow. There are plenty of depths of Satan gaping for young feet; and on the whole, it is safer and happier not to know them, and so not to have defiling memories, nor run the risk of falling into fatal sins. Whether the writer of this stern picture of a drunkard was a total abstainer or not, the spirit of his counsel not to look on the wine is in full accord with that practice. It is very clear that if a man is a total abstainer, he can never be a drunkard. As much cannot be said of the moderate man.

Note too, how in all regions of life, the ultimate results of any conduct are the important ones. Consequences are hard to calculate, and they do not afford a good guidance for action. But there are many lines of conduct of which the consequences are not hard to calculate, but absolutely certain. It is childish to take a course because of a moment's gratification at the beginning, to be followed by protracted discomfort afterwards. To live for present satisfaction of desires, and to shut one's eyes tight against known and assured results of an opposite sort, cannot be the part of a sensible man, to say nothing of a religious one. So moralists have been preaching ever since there was such a thing as temptation in the world; and men have assented to the common sense of the teaching, and then have gone straight away and done the exact opposite.

What shall the end be? ought to be the question at every beginning. If we would cultivate the habit of holding present satisfactions in suspense, and of giving no weight to present advantages until we saw right along the road to the end of the journey, there would be fewer failures, and fewer weary, disenchanted old men and women, to lament that the harvest they had to reap and feed on was so bitter. There are other and higher reasons against any kind of fleshly indulgence than that at the last it bites like a serpent, and with a worse poison than serpent's sting ever darted; but that is a reason, and young hearts, which are by their very youth blessedly unused to look forward, will be all the happier to-day, and all the surer of to-morrow's good, if they will learn to say, And afterwards--what? The passage passes to a renewed description of the effects of intoxication, in which the disgusting and the ludicrous aspects of it are both made prominent. Verse 33 seems to describe the excited imagination of the drunkard, whose senses are no longer under his control, but play him tricks that make him a laughingstock to sober people. One might almost take the verse to be a description of delirium tremens. Strange things are seen, and perverse things (that is, unreal, or ridiculous) are stammered out. The writer has a keen sense of the humiliation to a man of being thus the fool of his own bewildered senses, and as keen a one of the absurd spectacle he presents; and he warns his son against coming down to such a depth of degradation.

It may be questioned whether the boasted quickening and brightening effects of alcohol are not always, in a less degree, that same beguiling of sense and exciting of imagination which, in their extreme form, make a man such a pitiable and ridiculous sight. It is better to be dull and see things as they are, than to be brilliant and see things larger, brighter, or any way other than they are, because we see them through a mist. Imagination set agoing by such stimulus, will not work to as much purpose as if aroused by truth. God's world, seen by sober eyes, is better than rosy dreams of it. If we need to draw our inspiration from alcohol, we had better remain uninspired. If we desire to know the naked truth of things, the less we have to do with strong drink the better. Clear eyesight and self-command are in some degree impaired by it always. The earlier stages are supposed to be exhilaration, increased brilliancy of fancy and imagination, expanded good-fellowship, and so on. The latter stages are these in our passage, when strange things dance before cheated eyes, and strange words speak themselves out of lips which their owner no longer controls. Is that a condition to be sought after? If not, do not get on to the road that leads to it.

Verse 34 adds another disgusting and ridiculous trait. A man who should try to lie down and go to sleep in the heart of the sea or on the masthead of a ship would be a manifest fool, and would not keep life in him for long. One has seen drunken men laying themselves down to sleep in places as exposed and as ridiculous as these; and one knows the look of the heavy lump of insensibility lying helpless on public roads, or on railway tracks, or anywhere where the fancy took him. The point of the verse seems to be the drunken man's utter loss of sense of fitness, and complete incapacity to take care of himself. He cannot estimate dangers. The very instinct of self-preservation has forsaken him. There he lies, though as sure to be drowned as if he were in the depth of the sea, though on as uncomfortable a bed as if he were rocking on a masthead, where he could not balance himself.

The torpor of verse 34 follows on the unnatural excitement of verse 33, as, in fact, the bursts of uncontrolled energy in which the man sees and says strange things, are succeeded by a collapse. One moment raging in excitement caused by imaginary sights, the next huddled together in sleep like death,--what a sight the man is! The teacher here would have his son consider that he may come to that, if he looks on the wine-cup. Thou shalt be so and so. It is very impolite, but very necessary, to press home the individual application of pictures like this, and to bid bright young men and women look at the wretched creatures they may see hanging about liquor shops, and remember that they may come to be such as these.

Verse 35 finishes the picture. The tipsy man's soliloquy puts the copestone on his degradation. He has been beaten, and never felt it. Apparently he is beginning to stir in his sleep, though not fully awake; and the first thing he discovers when he begins to feel himself over is that he has been beaten and wounded, and remembers nothing about it. A degrading anaesthetic is drink. Better to bear all ills than to drown them by drowning consciousness. There is no blow which a man cannot bear better if he holds fast by God's hand and keeps himself fully exposed to the stroke, than if he sought a cowardly alleviation of it, softer the drunkard's fashion.

But the pains of his beating and the discomforts of his waking do not deter the drunkard. When shall I awake? He is not fully awake yet, so as to be able to get up and go for another drink. He is in the stage of feeling sorry for himself, and examining his bruises, but he wishes he were able to shake off the remaining drowsiness, that he might seek yet again for his curse. The tyranny of desire, which wakes into full activity before the rest of the man does, and the enfeebled will, which, in spite of all bruises and discomforts, yields at once to the overmastering desire, make the tragedy of a drunkard's life. There comes a point in lives of fleshly indulgence in which the craving seems to escape from the control of the will altogether. Doctors tell us that the necessity for drink becomes a physical disease. Yes; but it is a disease manufactured by the patient, and he is responsible for getting himself into such a state.

This tragic picture proves that there were many originals of it in the days when it was painted. Probably there are far more, in proportion to population, in our times. The warning it peals out was never more needed than now. Would that all preachers, parents, and children laid it to heart and took the advice not even to look upon the wine!