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

**2 CHRONICLES-016. COSTLY AND FATAL HELP by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him: and he said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel."*

*2 Chronicles 28:23*

Ahaz came to the throne when a youth of twenty. From the beginning he reversed the policy of his father, and threw himself into the arms of the heathen party. In a comparatively short reign of sixteen years he stamped out the worship of God, and nearly ruined the kingdom.

He did not plunge into idolatry for want of good advice. The greatest of the prophets stood beside him. Isaiah addressed to him remonstrances which might have made the most reckless pause, and promises which might have kindled hope and courage in the bosom of despair. Hosea in the northern kingdom, Micah in Judah, and other less brilliant names were amongst the stars which shone even in that dark night. But their light was all in vain. The foolish lad had got the bit between his teeth, and, like many another young man, thought to show his breadth and his spirit by neglecting his father's counsellors, and abandoning his father's faith. He was ready to worship anything that called itself a god, always excepting Jehovah. He welcomed Baal, Moloch, Rimmon, and many more with an indiscriminate eagerness that would have been ludicrous if it had not been tragical. The more he multiplied his gods the more he multiplied his sorrows, and the more he multiplied his sorrows the more he multiplied his gods.

From all sides the invaders came. From north, northeast, east, south-east, south, they swarmed in upon him. They tore away the fringes of his kingdom; and hostile armies flaunted their banners beneath the very walls of Jerusalem.

And then, in his despair, like a scorpion in a circle of fire, he inflicted a deadly wound on himself by calling in the fatal help of Assyria. Nothing loth, that warlike power responded, scattered his less formidable foes, and then swallowed the prey which it had dragged from between the teeth of the Israelites and Syrians. The result of Ahaz's frantic appeals to false gods and faithless men may still be read on the cuneiform inscriptions, where, amidst a long list of unknown tributary kings, stands, with a Philistine on one side of him and an Ammonite on the other, the shameful record, Ahaz of Judah.

That was what came of forsaking the God of his fathers. It is a type of what always has come, and always must come, of a godless life. That is the point of view from which I wish to look at the story, and at these words of my text which gather the whole spirit of it into one sentence.

**I. First, then, let me ask you to notice how this narrative illustrates for us the crowd of vain helpers to which a man has to take when he turns his back upon God.**

If we compare the narrative in our chapter with the parallel in the Second Book of Kings, we get a very vivid picture of the strange medley of idolatries which they introduced. Amongst Ahaz's new gods are, for instance, the golden calves of Israel and the ferocious Moloch of Ammon, to whom he sacrificed, passing through the fire at least one of his own children. The ancient sacred places of the Canaanites, on every high hill and beneath every conspicuous tree, again smoked with incense to half-forgotten local deities. In every open space in Jerusalem he planted a brand-new altar with a brand-new worship attendant upon it. In the Temple, he brushed aside the altar that Solomon had made and put up a new one, copied from one which he had seen at Damascus. The importation of the Damascene altar, I suppose, meant, as our text tells us, the importation of the Damascene gods along with it.

Side by side with that multiplication of false deities went the almost entire neglect of the worship of Jehovah, until at last, as his reign advanced and he floundered deeper into his troubles, the Temple was spoiled, everything in it that could be laid hands upon was sent to the melting-pot, to pay the Assyrian tribute; and then the doors were shut, the lamps extinguished, the fire quenched on the cold altars, and the silent Temple left to the bats and--the Shekinah; for God still abode in the deserted house.

Further, side by side with this appealing all round the horizon to whatsoever obscene and foul shape seemed to promise some help, there went the foolish appeal to the northern invaders to come and aid him, which they did, to his destruction. His whole career is that of a godless and desperate man who will grasp at anything that offers deliverance, and will worship any god or devil who will extricate him from his troubles.

Is the breed extinct, think you? Is there any one among us who, if he cannot get what he wants by fair ways, will try to get it by foul? Do none of you ever bow down to Satan for a slice of the kingdoms of this world? Ahaz has still plenty of brothers and sisters in all our churches and chapels.

This story illustrates for us what, alas! is only too true, both on the broad scale, as to the generation in which we live, and on the narrower field of our own individual lives. Look at the so-called cultured classes of Europe to-day; turning away, as so many of them are, from the Lord God of their fathers; what sort of gods are they worshipping instead? Scraps from Buddhism, the Vedas, any sacred books but the Bible; quackeries, and charlatanism, arid dreams, and fragmentary philosophies all pieced together, to try and make up a whole, instead of the old-fashioned whole that they have left behind them. There are men and women in many congregations who, in modern fashion, are doing precisely the thing that Ahaz did--having abandoned Christianity, they are trying to make up for it by hastily stitching together shreds and patches that they have found in other systems. The garment is narrower than that a man can wrap himself in it, and a creed patched together so will never make a seamless whole which can be trusted not to rend.

But look, further, how the same thing is true as to the individual lives of godless men.

Many of us are trying to make up for not having the One by seeking to stay our hearts on the many. But no accumulation of insufficiencies will ever make a sufficiency. You may fill the heaven all over with stars, bright and thickly set as those in the whitest spot in the galaxy, and it will be night still. Day needs the sun, and the sun is one, and when it comes the twinkling lights are forgotten. You cannot make up for God by any extended series of creatures, any more than a row of figures that stretched from here to Sirius and back again would approximate to infinitude.

The very fact of the multitude of helpers is a sign that none of them is sufficient. There is no end of cures for toothache, that is to say there is none. There is no end of helps for men that have abandoned God, that is to say, every one in turn when it is tried, and the stress of the soul rests upon it, gives, and is found to be a broken staff that pierces the hand that leans upon it.

Consult your own experience. What is the meaning of the unrest and distraction that mark the lives of most of the men in this generation? Why is it that you hurry from business to pleasure, from pleasure to business, until it is scarcely possible to get a quiet breathing time for thought at all? Why is it but because one after another of your gods have proved insufficient, and so fresh altars must be built for fresh idolatries, and new experiments made, of which we can safely prophesy the result will be the old one. We have not got beyond St. Augustine's saying:--Oh, God! my heart was made for Thee, and in Thee only doth it find repose. The many idols, though you multiply them beyond count, all put together will never make the One God. You are seeking what you will never find. The many pearls that you seek will never be enough for you. The true wealth is One, One pearl of great price.

**II. So notice again how this story teaches the heavy cost of these helpers help.**

Ahaz had, as he thought, two strings to his bow. He had the gods of Damascus and of other lands on one hand, he had the king of Assyria on another. They both of them exacted onerous terms before they would stir a foot to his aid. As for the northern conqueror, all the wealth of the king and of the princes and of the Temple was sent to Assyria as the price of his hurtful help. As for the gods, his helpers, one of his sons at least went into the furnace to secure their favour; and what other sacrifices he may have made besides the sacrifice of his conscience and his soul, history does not tell us. These were considerable subsidies to have to be paid down before any aid was granted.

Do you buy this world's help any cheaper, my brother? You get nothing for nothing in that market. It is a big price that you have to pay before these mercenaries will come to fight on your side. Here is a man that succeeds in life, as we call it. What does it cost him? Well! it has cost him the suppression, the atrophy by disuse, of many capacities in his soul which were far higher and nobler than those that have been exercised in his success. It has cost him all his days; it has possibly cost him the dying out of generous sympathies and the stimulating of unwholesome selfishness. Ah! he has bought his prosperity very dear. Political economists have much to say about the appreciation of gold. I think if people would estimate what they pay for it, in an immense majority of cases, in treasure that cannot be weighed and stamped, they would find it to be about the dearest thing in God's universe; and that there are few men who make worse bargains than the men who give themselves for worldly success, even when they receive what they give themselves for.

There are some of you who know how much what you call enjoyment has cost you. Some of us have bought pleasure at the price of innocence, of moral dignity, of stained memories, of polluted imaginations, of an incapacity to rise above the flesh: and some of us have bought it at the price of health. The world has a way of getting more out of you than it gives to you.

At the best, if you are not Christian men and women, whether you are men of business, votaries of pleasure, seekers after culture and refinement or anything else, you have given Heaven to get earth. Is that a good bargain? Is it much wiser than that of a horde of naked savages that sell a great tract of fair country, with gold-bearing reefs in it, for a bottle of rum, and a yard or two of calico? What is the difference? You have been fooled out of the inheritance which God meant for you; and you have got for it transient satisfaction, and partial as it is transient. If you are not Christian people, you have to buy this world's wealth and goods at the price of God and of your own souls. And I ask you if that is an investment which recommends itself to your common sense. Oh! my brother; what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose himself? Answer the question.

**III. Lastly, we may gather from this story an illustration of the fatal falsehood of the world's help.**

Ahaz pauperised himself to buy the hireling swords of Assyria, and he got them; but, as it says in the narrative, the king came unto him, and distressed him, but strengthened him not. He helped Ahaz at first. He scattered the armies of which the king of Judah was afraid like chaff, with his fierce and disciplined onset. And then, having driven them off the bleeding prey, he put his own paw upon it, and growled Mine! And where he struck his claws there was little more hope of life for the prostrate creature below him.

Ay! and that is what this world always does. In the case before us there was providential guidance of the politics of the Eastern nations in order to bring about these results; and we do not look for anything of that sort. No! But there are natural laws at work today which are God's laws, and which ensure the worthlessness of the help bought so dear.

A godless life has at the best only partial satisfaction, and that partial satisfaction soon diminishes. Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.

That is the experience of all men, and I need not dwell upon the threadbare commonplaces which have survived from generation to generation, because each generation in turn has found them so piteously true, about the incompleteness and the fleetingness of all the joys and treasures of this life. The awful power of habit, if there were no other reason, takes the edge off all gratification except in so far as God is in it. Nothing fully retains its power to satisfy. Nothing has that power absolutely at any moment; but even what measure of it any of our possessions or pursuits may have for a time, soon, or at all events by degrees, passes away. The greater part of life is but like drinking out of empty cups, and the cups drop from our hands. What one of our purest and peacefullest poets said in his haste about all his kind is true in spirit of all godless lives:--

We poets, in our youth, begin in gladness,

But thereof cometh, in the end, despondency and madness.

Vanity of vanities! saith--not the Preacher only, but the inmost heart of every godless man and woman--vanity of vanities! all is vanity!

And do not forget that, partial and transient as these satisfactions of which I have been speaking are, they derive what power of helping and satisfying is in them only from the silence of our consciences, and our success in being able to shut out realities. One word, they say, spoken too loud, brings down the avalanche, and beneath its white, cold death, the active form is motionless and the beating heart lies still. One word from conscience, one touch of an awakened reflectiveness, one glance at the end--the coffin and the shroud and what comes after these--slay your worldly satisfactions as surely as that falling snow would crush some light-winged, gauzy butterfly that had been dancing at the cliff's foot. Your jewellery is all imitation. It is well enough for candle-light. Would you like to try the testing acid upon it? Here is a drop of it. Know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Does it smoke? or does it stand the test? Here is another drop. This night thy soul shall be required of thee. Does it stand that test? My brother! do not be afraid to take in all the facts of your earthly life, and do not pretend to satisfy yourselves with satisfactions which dare not face realities, and shrivel up at their presence.

These fatal helpers come as friends and allies, and they remain as masters. Ahaz and a hundred other weak princes have tried the policy of sending for a strong foreign power to scatter their enemies, and it has always turned out one way. The foreigner has come and he has stopped. The auxiliary has become the lord, and he that called him to his aid becomes his tributary. Ay! and so it is with all the things of this world. Here is some pleasant indulgence that I call to my help lightly and thoughtlessly. It is very agreeable and does what I wanted with it, and I try it again. Still it answers to my call. And then after a while I say, I am going to give that up, and I cannot, I have brought in a master when I thought I was only bringing in an ally that I could dismiss when I liked. The sides of the pit are very slippery; it is gay travelling down them, but when the animal is trapped at the bottom there is no possibility of getting up again. So some of you, dear friends! have got masters in your delights, masters in your pursuits, masters in your habits. These are your gods, these are your tyrants, and you will find out that they are so, if ever, in your own strength, you try to break away from them.

So let me plead with you. With some of you, perhaps, my voice, as a familiar voice, that in some measure, however undeservedly, you trust, may have influence. Let me plead with you--do not run after these will-o-the-wisps that will only lure you into destruction, but follow the light of life which is Jesus Christ Himself. Do not take these tyrants for your helpers, who will master you under pretence of aiding you; and work their will of you instead of lightening your burden. The same unwise and hopeless mode of life, which we have been describing this evening by one symbolic illustration, as calling vain helpers to our aid, was presented by Ahaz's great contemporary Isaiah, in words which Ahaz himself may have heard, as striking a covenant with death, and making lies our refuge. Some of us, alas! have been doing that all our lives. Let such hearken to the solemn words which may have rung in the ears of this unworthy king. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet, and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies. I come to you, dear friends! to press on your acceptance the true Guide and Helper--even Jesus Christ your Brother, in whose single Self you will find all that you have vainly sought dispersed at sundry times and in divers manners--among creatures. Take Him for your Saviour by trusting your whole selves to Him. He is the Sacrifice by whose blood all our sins are washed away, and the Indweller, by whose Spirit all our spirits are ennobled and gladdened. I ask you to take Him for your Helper, who will never deceive you; to call whom to our aid is to be secure and victorious for ever. Behold! I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.