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

**1 KINGS-023. UNPOSSESSED POSSESSIONS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And the king of Israel said unto his servants, Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hand of the king of Syria?"*

*1 Kings 22:3*

This city of Ramoth in Gilead was an important fortified place on the eastern side of the Jordan, and had, many years before the date of our text, been captured by its northern neighbours in the kingdom of Syria. A treaty had subsequently been concluded and broken a war followed thereafter, in which Ben-hadad, King of Syria, had bound himself to restore all his conquests. He had not observed that article of peace, and the people of Israel had not been strong enough to enforce it until the date of our text; but then, backed up by a powerful alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah, they determined to make a dash to get back what was theirs, but whilst theirs was also not theirs.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and Jehoshaphat, but I wish to turn the words of my test, and the thoughts that may come from them, into a direction profitable to ourselves. Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours? and yet it had to be got out of the hands of the King of Syria.

**I. What is ours and not ours.**

Every Christian man has large tracts of unannexed territory, unattained possibilities, unenjoyed blessings, things that are his and yet not his. How much more of God you and I have a right to than we have the possession of! The ocean is ours, but only the little pailful that we carry away home to our own houses is of use to us. The whole of God is mine if I am Christ's, and a dribble of God is all that comes into the lives of most of us.

How much inward peace is ours? It is meant that there should never pass across a Christian's soul more than a ripple of agitation, which may indeed ruffle and curl the surface; but deep down there should be the tranquillity of the fathomless ocean, unbroken by any tempests, and yet not stagnant, because there is a vital current running through it, and every drop is being drawn upward to the surface and the sunlight. There may be a peace in our hearts deep as life; a tranquillity which may be superficially disturbed, but is never thoroughly, and down in its depths, broken. And yet, let some little petty annoyance come into our daily life, and what a pucker we are in! Then we forget all about the still depths in which we ought to be living; and fears and hopes and loves and ambitions disturb our souls, just as they do the spirits of the men that do not profess to have any holdfast in God. The peace of God is ours; but, ah! in how sad a sense it is true that the peace of God is not ours!

What heights--for Ramoth means high places--what heights of consecration there are which are ours according to the divine purpose and according to the fulness of God's gift! It is meant, and it is possible, and well within the reach of every Christian soul, that he or she should live, day by day, in the continual and utter surrender of himself or herself to the will of God, and should say, I do the little I can do, and leave the rest with Thee; and should say again, All is right that seems most wrong, If it be His sweet will. But instead of this absolute submission and completeness and joyfulness of surrender of ourselves to Him, what do we find? Reluctance to obey, regret at providences, Self dominant or struggling hard against the partial domination of the will of God in our hearts. The mind which was in Jesus Christ, who was able to say, It is written of Me, lo! I come to do Thy will, O Lord! is ours by virtue of our being Christians; but, alas! in practical realisation how sadly it is not ours!

What noble possibilities of service, what power in the world, are bestowed on Christ's people! All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth, says He. And He breathed on them, and said, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. The divine gift to the Christian community, and to the individuals that compose it--for there are no gifts given to the community, but to the individuals that make it up-- is of fulness of power for all their work. And yet look how, all through the ages, the Church has been beaten by the corruption of the world; and how to-day many of us are standing, either utterly careless and callous about the diseases that we have the medicine to cure, or in desperation looking about for other healing for the social and moral condition of the community than that which is granted to us in Jesus Christ. Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria?'

There is ever so much in the world which belongs to our Master, and therefore belongs to us, and which the Church is bound to lay its hand upon and claim for its own and for its Lord's. For remember, brethren, that all the gifts at which I have been glancing--and I might have largely increased the catalogue--all these spiritual endowments of peace, and safety, and purity, and joy, of religious elevation, and consecration, and power for service, and the like--are ours by a threefold title and charter. God's purpose, which is nothing less for every one of us than that we should be filled with all the fulness of God, and that He should supply all our need, according to His riches in glory,--that is the first of the parchments on which our title depends. And the second title-deed is Christ's purchase; for the efficacy of His death and the power of His triumphant life have secured for all who trust Him the whole fulness of this divine gift. And the third of our claims and titles is the influence of that Holy Spirit whom Jesus Christ gives to every one of His children to dwell in him. There is in you, working in you, if you have any faith in that Lord, a power that is capable of making you perfectly pure, perfectly blessed, strong with an immortal strength, and glad with a joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.

Oh! then, let us think of the awful contrast between what is ours and what we have. It is ours by the divine intention, by the divine gift in its fulness and all-sufficiency, and yet think of the poor, partial realisation of it that has passed into our experience. Be sure that you have what you have, and that you make your own what God has made yours.

**II. Then, let me suggest, again, how our text hints for us, not only the difference between possession and realisation, but also our strange contentment in imperfect possession.**

Ahab's remonstrances with his servants, which make the starting-point of my remarks, seem to suggest that there were two reasons for their acquiescence in the domination of a foreign power on a bit of their soil. They had not realised that Ramoth was theirs, and they were too lazy and cowardly to go and take it. Ignorance of the fulness of the gift, and slothful timidity in daring everything in the effort to make it ours, explain a great deal of the present condition of Christian people.

Is not that condition of passive acquiescence in their small present attainments, and of careless indifference to the great stretch of the unattained, the characteristic of the mass of professing Christians? They have got a foothold on a new continent, and their possession of it is like the world's drawing of the map of Africa when we were children, which had a settlement dotted here and there along the coast, and all the broad regions of the interior were blank. The settlers huddle together upon the fringe of barren sand by the salt water, and never dream of pressing forward into the heart of the land. And so, too, many of us are content with what we have got, a little bit of God, when we might have Him all; a settlement on the fringe and edge of the land, when we might traverse the whole length of it; and behold! it is all ours.

That unfamiliarity with the thought of unattained possibilities in the Christian life is a damning curse of thousands of people who call themselves Christians. They do not think, they never realise--and some of us are guilty in this respect--they never realise that it is possible for them to be all unlike what they are now, and that, instead of the miserable partial hallowing of their nature, and the poor, weak --I was going to say strength, but it is not worth calling strength, that they possess, they might be as the angels of God: the weakest as David, and David as a very angel of heaven itself. Why is it, why is it, that there is this unfamiliarity?

And then, another reason for the woful disproportion between what we have and what we utilise is the love of ease, such as kept these Israelites from going up to Ramoth-Gilead. It was a long way off; there was a river to be forded; there were heights to be climbed; there were weary marches to be taken; there were hard knocks going in front of the walls of Ramoth before they got inside it; and on the whole it was more comfortable to sit at home, or look after their farms and their merchandise, than to embark on the quixotic attempt to win back a city that had not been theirs for ever so long, and that they had got on very well without.

And so it is with hosts of Christian people; we do not realise how much we have that we never get any good out of. And, in the second place, we had rather just stay where we are, and make the best of the world as it is, and the desires of our hearts go in another direction than for our increase in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. Ah, brethren! if we had a claim to some great property, or any other wealth that we really cared about, should we be so very indifferent as to asserting our rights? Should we not fight to the death, some of us, for the last inch of soil, for the last ounce of treasure, that belonged to us? When you really value a thing, you secure the greatest possible amount of it; and there is very little margin between what you own and what you use.

And if there is such a tremendous difference between the breadth of the one and the narrowness of the other in our Christian life, there can be no reason for it except this, that we do not care enough about spiritual blessings and forces to make the effort that is needed to win and keep, and get the good of, all that is ours.

And is not that something like despising the birthright? Is it not a criminal thing for Christian people thus to neglect, and to put aside, and never to seek to obtain, all these great gifts of God? There they lie at our doors, and they are ours for the taking. Suppose a carrier brought you a whole waggon full of precious goods, and put them down at your door, and you were not at the trouble to open your doors, or to carry the goods into your cellars. That would not look as if you cared much either for the goods or for the giver. And I wonder how many of us are chargeable with that criminal despising of God's gifts, which is clearly the explanation of our letting them lie rotting, as it were, at our gates? We are starving paupers in the midst of plenty.

My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory, by Christ Jesus, says Paul. You have the right to them all. Draw cheques against the capital that is lodged in your name in that great bank.

**III. And so, lastly, my text suggests the effort that is needed to make our own ours.**

We be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria. Then these things that are ours, by God's gift, by Christ's purchase, by the Spirit's influence, will need our effort to secure them. And that is no contradiction, nor any paradox. God does exactly in the same way with regard to a great many of His natural gifts as He does with regard to His spiritual ones. He gives them to us, but we hold them on this tenure, that we put forth our best efforts to get and to keep them. His giving them does not set aside our taking. However much we tried we could not take them out of His hand if it were clenched. Open as His hand is, and stretched out to us as it is, the gifts that sparkle in it are not transferred to our hands unless we ourselves put forth an effort.

So let me say that one large part of the discipline by which men make their own their own is by familiarising themselves with the thought of the larger possibilities of unattained possessions which God has given them. That is true in everything. To recognise our present imperfection, and to see stretching before us glorious and immense possibilities, opening out into a vista where our eyesight fails us to travel to its end, is the very salt of life in every region. Artist, student, all of us are saved by hope, in a very much wider sense than the Apostle meant by that great saying. And whosoever has once lost, or felt becoming dim, the vision before him of a possible better than his present best, in any region, is in that region condemned to grow no more. If we desire to have any kind of advancement, it is only possible for us, when there gleams ever before us the untravelled road, and we see at the end of it unattained brightnesses and blessings.

And we Christian people have an endless prospect of that sort stretching before us. Oh, if we looked at it oftener, having respect unto the recompense of the reward, we should find it easier to dash at any Ramoth-Gilead, and get it out of the hands of the strongest of the enemies that may bar our way to it. Let us familiarise ourselves with the thought of our present imperfection, and of our future completeness, and of the possibilities which may become actualities, even here and now; and let us not fitfully use what power we have, but make the best of what graces are ours, and enjoy and expatiate in the spiritual blessings of peace and rest which Christ has already given to us. To him that hath shall be given, and the surest way to lose what we have is to neglect to increase it.

And, above all, let us keep nearer to our Master, and live more in fellowship with our Lord, and that will help us to deny ourselves to ungodliness and worldly lusts. It is the prevalence of these, and the absence of self-denial, that ruins most of the Christian lives that are ruined in this world. If a man wants to be what he is not, he must cease to be what he is.

Self-sacrifice, and the emptying of our hearts of trash and trifles, is the only way to get our hearts filled with God and with His blessing. Let us keep near Jesus Christ. If we have Him for ours we have peace, we have power, we have purity. He of God is made unto us all in all, and every gift that may adorn humanity, and make our lives joyous and ourselves noble, is given to us in Jesus Christ. Let us put away from ourselves, then, this slothful indifference to our unattained possessions. Know ye that Ramoth is ours? Let us be still no longer. All things are yours, whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come: all are yours if ye are Christ's.