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

**PSALMS-059**. **THE SHELTERING WING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust: His truth shall be thy shield and buckler."*

*Psalm 91:4*

We remember the magnificent image in Moses song, of God's protection and guidance as that of the eagle who stirred up his nest, and hovered over the young with his wings, and bore them on his pinions. That passage may possibly have touched the imagination of this psalmist, when he here employs the same general metaphor, but with a distinct and significant difference in its application. In the former image the main idea is that of training and sustaining. Here the main idea is that of protection and fostering. On the wing and under the wing suggest entirely different notions, and both need to be taken into account in order to get the many-sided beauties and promises of these great sayings. Now there seems to me here to be a very distinct triad of thoughts. There is the covering wing; there is the flight to its protection; and there is the warrant for that flight. He shall cover thee with His pinions; that is the divine act. Under His wings shalt thou trust; that is the human condition. His truth shall be thy shield and buckler; that is the divine manifestation which makes the human condition possible.

**I. A word then, first, about the covering wing.**

Now, the main idea in this image is, as I have suggested, that of the expanded pinion, beneath the shelter of which the callow young lie, and are guarded. Whatever kites may be in the sky, whatever stoats and weasels may be in the hedges, the brood are safe there. The image suggests not only the thought of protection but those of fostering, downy warmth, peaceful proximity to a heart that throbs with parental love, and a multitude of other happy privileges realised by those who nestle beneath that wing. But while these subsidiary ideas are not to be lost sight of, the promise of protection is to be kept prominent, as that chiefly intended by the Psalmist.

This psalm rings throughout with the truth that a man who dwells in the secret place of the Most High has absolute immunity from all sorts of evil; and there are two regions in which that immunity, secured by being under the shadow of the Almighty, is exemplified here. The one is that of outward dangers, the other is that of temptation to sin and of what we may call spiritual foes. Now, these two regions and departments in which the Christian man does realise, in the measure of his faith, the divine protection, exhibit that protection as secured in two entirely different ways.

The triumphant assurances of this psalm, There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling,--the pestilence shall smite thousands and ten thousands beside thee, but not come nigh thee,--seem to be entirely contradicted by experience which testifies that there is one event to the evil and the good, and that, in epidemics or other widespread disasters, we all, the good and the bad, God-fearers and God-blasphemers, do fare alike, and that the conditions of exemption from physical evil are physical and not spiritual. It is of no use trying to persuade ourselves that that is not so. We shall understand God's dealings with us, and get to the very throbbing heart of such promises as these in this psalm far better, if we start from the certainty that whatever it means it does not mean that, with regard to external calamities and disasters, we are going to be God's petted children, or to be saved from the things that fall upon other people. No! no! we have to go a great deal deeper than that. If we have felt a difficulty, as I suppose we all have sometimes, and are ready to say with the half-despondent Psalmist, My feet were almost gone, and my steps had well-nigh slipped, when we see what we think the complicated mysteries of divine providence in this world, we have to come to the belief that the evil that is in the evil will never come near a man sheltered beneath God's wing. The physical external event may be entirely the same to him as to another who is not covered with His feathers. Here are two partners in a business, the one a Christian man, and the other is not. A common disaster overwhelms them. They become bankrupts. Is insolvency the same to the one as it is to the other? Here are two men on board a ship, the one putting his trust in God, the other thinking it all nonsense to trust anything but himself. They are both drowned. Is drowning the same to the two? As their corpses lie side by side among the ooze, with the weeds over them, and the shell-fish at them, you may say of the one, but only of the one, There shall no evil befall thee, neither any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

For the protection that is granted to faith is only to be understood by faith. It is deliverance from the evil in the evil which vindicates as no exaggeration, nor as merely an experience and a promise peculiar to the old theocracy of Israel, but not now realised, the grand sayings of this text. The poison is all wiped off the arrow by that divine protection. It may still wound but it does not putrefy the flesh. The sewage water comes down, but it passes into the filtering bed, and is disinfected and cleansed before it is permitted to flow over our fields.

And so, brethren! if any of you are finding that the psalm is not outwardly true, and that through the covering wing the storm of hail has come and beaten you down, do not suppose that that in the slightest degree impinges upon the reality and truthfulness of this great promise, He shall cover thee with His feathers. Anything that has come through them is manifestly not an evil. Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good? If God be for us who can be against us? Not what the world calls, and our wrung hearts feel that it rightly calls, sorrows and afflictions,--these all work for our good, and protection consists, not in averting the blows, but in changing their character.

Then, there is another region far higher, in which this promise of my text is absolutely true--that is, in the region of spiritual defence. For no man who lies under the shadow of God, and has his heart filled with the continual consciousness of that Presence, is likely to fall before the assaults of evil that tempt him away from God; and the defence which He gives in that region is yet more magnificently impregnable than the defence which He gives against external evils. For, as the New Testament teaches us, we are kept from sin, not by any outward breastplate or armour, nor even by the divine wing lying above us to cover us, but by the indwelling Christ in our hearts. His Spirit within us makes us free from the law of sin and death, and conquerors over all temptations.

I say not a word about all the other beautiful and pathetic associations which are connected with this emblem of the covering wing, sweet and inexhaustible as it is, but I simply leave with you the two thoughts that I have dwelt upon, of the twofold manner of that divine protection.

**II. And now a word, in the second place, about the flight of the shelterless to the shelter.**

The word which is rendered in our Authorised Version, shalt thou trust, is, like all Hebrew words for mental and spiritual emotions and actions, strongly metaphorical. It might have been better to retain its literal meaning here instead of substituting the abstract word trust. That is to say, it would have been an improvement if we had read with the Revised Version, not, under His wings shalt thou trust, but under His wings shalt thou take refuge. For that is the idea which is really conveyed; and in many of the psalms, if you will remember, the same metaphor is employed. Hide me beneath the shadow of Thy wings; Beneath Thy wings will I take refuge until calamities are overpast; and the like. Many such passages will, no doubt, occur to your memories.

But what I wish to signalise is just this, that in this emblem of flying into a refuge from impending perils we get a far more vivid conception, and a far more useful one, as it seems to me, of what Christian faith really is than we derive from many learned volumes and much theological hair-splitting. Under His wings shalt thou flee for refuge. Is not that a vivid, intense, picturesque, but most illuminative way of telling us what is the very essence, and what is the urgency, and what is the worth, of what we call faith? The Old Testament is full of the teaching--which is masked to ordinary readers, but is the same teaching as the New Testament is confessedly full of--of the necessity of faith as the one bond that binds men to God. If only our translators had wisely determined upon a uniform rendering in Old and New Testament of words that are synonymous, the reader would have seen what is often now reserved for the student, that all these sayings in the Old Testament about trusting in God run on all fours with Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.

But just mark what comes out of that metaphor; that trust, the faith which unites with God, and brings a man beneath the shadow of His wings, is nothing more or less than the flying into the refuge that is provided for us. Does that not speak to us of the urgency of the case? Does that not speak to us eloquently of the perils which environ us? Does it not speak to us of the necessity of swift flight, with all the powers of our will? Is the faith which is a flying into a refuge fairly described as an intellectual act of believing in a testimony? Surely it is something a great deal more than that. A man out in the plain, with the avenger of blood, hot-breathed and bloody-minded, behind him might believe, as much as he liked, that there would be safety within the walls of the City of Refuge, but unless he took to his heels without loss of time, the spear would be in his back before he knew where he was. There are many men who know all about the security of the refuge, and believe it utterly, but never run for it; and so never get into it. Faith is the gathering up of the whole powers of my nature to fling myself into the asylum, to cast myself into God's arms, to take shelter beneath the shadow of His wings. And unless a man does that, and swiftly, he is exposed to every bird of prey in the sky, and to every beast of prey lurking in wait for him.

The metaphor tells us, too, what are the limits and the worth of faith. A man is not saved because he believes that he is saved, but because by believing he lays hold of the salvation. It is not the flight that is impregnable, and makes those behind its strong bulwarks secure. Not my outstretched hand, but the Hand that my hand grasps, is what holds me up. The power of faith is but that it brings me into contact with God, and sets me behind the seven-fold bastions of the Almighty protection.

So, brethren! another consideration comes out of this clause: Under His wings shalt thou trust. If you do not flee for refuge to that wing, it is of no use to you, however expanded it is, however soft and downy its underside, however sure its protection. You remember the passage where our Lord uses the same venerable figure with modifications, and says: How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not. So our would not thwarts Christ's would. Flight to the refuge is the condition of being saved. How can a man get shelter by any other way than by running to the shelter? The wing is expanded; it is for us to say whether we will flee for refuge to the hope set before us.

**III. Now, lastly, the warrant for this flight.**

His truth shall be thy shield. Now, truth here does not mean the body of revealed words, which are often called God's truth, but it describes a certain characteristic of the divine nature. And if, instead of truth, we read the good old English word troth, we should be a great deal nearer understanding what the Psalmist meant. Or if troth is archaic, and conveys little meaning to us; suppose we substitute a somewhat longer word, of the same meaning, and say, His faithfulness shall be thy shield. You cannot trust a God that has not given you an inkling of His character or disposition, but if He has spoken, then you know where to have him. That is just what the Psalmist means. How can a man be encouraged to fly into a refuge, unless he is absolutely sure that there is an entrance for him into it, and that, entering, he is safe? And that security is provided in the great thought of God's troth. Thy faithfulness is like the great mountains. Who is like unto Thee, O Lord! or to Thy faithfulness round about Thee? That faithfulness shall be our shield, not a tiny targe that a man could bear upon his left arm; but the word means the large shield, planted in the ground in front of the soldier, covering him, however hot the fight, and circling him around, like a wall of iron.

God is faithful to all the obligations under which He has come by making us. That is what one of the New Testament writers tells us, when he speaks of Him as a faithful Creator. Then, if He has put desires into our hearts, be sure that somewhere there is their satisfaction; and if He has given us needs, be sure that in Him there is the supply; and if He has lodged in us aspirations which make us restless, be sure that if we will turn them to Him, they will be satisfied and we shall be at rest. God never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them. He remembers our frame, and measures His dealings accordingly. When He made me, He bound Himself to make it possible that I should be blessed for ever; and He has done it.

God is faithful to His word, according to that great saying in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the writer tells us that by God's counsel, and God's oath, two immutable things, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us. God is faithful to His own past. The more He has done the more He will do. Thou hast been my Help; leave me not, neither forsake me. Therein we present a plea which God Himself will honour. And He is faithful to His own past in a yet wider sense. For all the revelations of His love and of His grace in times that are gone, though they might be miraculous in their form, are permanent in their essence. So one of the Psalmists, hundreds of years after the time that Israel was led through the wilderness, sang: There did we--of this present generation--rejoice in Him. What has been, is, and will be, for Thou art the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. We have not a God that lurks in darkness, but one that has come into the light. We have to run, not into a Refuge that is built upon a perhaps, but upon Verily, verily! I say unto thee. Let us build rock upon Rock, and let our faith correspond to the faithfulness of Him that has promised.