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

**2 CHRONICLES-010. A STRANGE BATTLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"We have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee."*

*2 Chronicles 20:12*

A formidable combination of neighbouring nations, of which Moab and Ammon, the ancestral enemies of Judah, were the chief, was threatening Judah. Jehoshaphat, the king, was panic-stricken when he heard of the heavy war-cloud that was rolling on, ready to burst in thunder on his little kingdom. His first act was to muster the nation, not as a military levy but as suppliants, to seek help of the Lord. The enemy was camping down by the banks of the Dead Sea, almost within striking distance of Jerusalem. It seemed a time for fighting, not for praying, but even at that critical moment, the king and the men, whom it might have appeared that plain duty called to arms, were gathered in the Temple, and, hampered by their wives and children, were praying. Would they not have done better if they had been sturdily marching through the wilderness of Judah to front their foes? Our text is the close and the climax of Jehoshaphat's prayer, and, as the event proved, it was the most powerful weapon that could have been employed, for the rest of the chapter tells the strangest story of a campaign that was ever written. No sword was drawn. The army was marshalled, but Levites with their instruments of music, not fighters with their spears, led the van, and as they began to sing and to praise, sudden panic laid hold on the invading force, who turned their arms against each other. So when Judah came to some rising ground, on which stood a watch-tower commanding a view over the savage grimness of the wilderness, it saw a field of corpses, stark and stiff and silent. Three days were spent in securing the booty, and on the fourth, Jehoshaphat and his men assembled themselves in the Valley of Blessing, and thence returned a joyous multitude praising God for the victory which had been won for them without their having struck a blow. The whole story may yield large lessons, seasonable at all times. We deal with it, rather than with the fragment of the narrative which we have taken as our text.

**I. We see here the confidence of despair.**

Jehoshaphat's prayer had stayed itself on God's self-revelation in history, and on His gift of the land to their fathers. It had pleaded that the enemy's hostility was a poor reward for Israel's ancient forbearance, and now, with a burst of agony, it casts down before God, as it were, Judah's desperate plight as outnumbered by the swarm of invaders and brought to their last shifts--we have no might against this great company ... neither know we what to do. But the very depth of despair sets them to climb to the height of trust. That is a mighty But, which buckles into one sentence two such antitheses as confront us here. We know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee--blessed is the desperation which catches at God's hand; firm is the trust which leaps from despair!

The helplessness is always a fact, though most of us manage to get along for the most part without discovering it. We are all outnumbered and overborne by the claims, duties, hindrances, sorrows, and entanglements of life. He is not the wisest of men who, facing all that life may bring and take away, all that it must bring and take away, knows no quiver of nameless fear, but jauntily professes himself ready for all that life can inflict. But there come moments in every life when the false security in which shallow souls wrap themselves ignobly is broken up, and then often a paroxysm of terror or misery grips a man, for which he has no anodyne, and his despair is as unreasonable as his security. The meaning of all circumstances that force our helplessness on us is to open to us Jehoshaphat's refuge in his--our eyes are upon Thee. We need to be driven by the crowds of foes and dangers around to look upwards. Our props are struck away that we may cling to God. The tree has its lateral branches hewed off that it may shoot up heavenward. When the valley is filled with mist and swathed in evening gloom, it is the time to lift our gaze to the peaks that glow in perpetual sunshine. Wise and happy shall we be if the sense of helplessness begets in us the energy of a desperate faith. For these two, distrust of self and glad confidence in God, are not opposites, as naked distrust and trust are, but are complementary. He does not turn his eyes to God who has not turned them on himself, and seen there nothing to which to cling, nothing on which to lean. Astronomers tell us that there are double stars revolving round one axis and forming a unity, of which the one is black and the other brilliant. Self-distrust and trust in God are thus knit together and are really one.

**II. We see here the peaceful assurance of victory that attends on faith.**

A flash of inspiration came to one of the Levitical singers who had, no doubt, been deeply moved and had unconsciously fitted himself for receiving it. Divinely breathed confidence illuminated his waiting spirit, and a great message of encouragement poured from his lips. His words heartened the host more than a hundred trumpets braying in their ears. How much one man who has drunk in God's assurance of victory can do to send a thrill of his own courage through more timorous hearts! Courage is no less contagious than panic. This Levite becomes the commander of the army, and Jehoshaphat and his captains bow their heads and accept his plan for to-morrow, hearing in his ringing accents a message from Jehovah. The instructions given and at once accepted are as unlike those of ordinary warfare as is the whole incident; for there is to be no sword drawn nor blow struck, but they are to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. They are told where to find the enemy and are bid to go forth in order of battle against them, and they are assured that the battle is not theirs, but God s. No wonder that the message was hailed as from heaven, and put new heart into the host, or that, when the messenger's voice ceased, his brother Levites broke into shrill praise as for a victory already won. With what calm, triumphant hearts the camp would sleep that night!

May we not take that inspired Levite's message as one to ourselves in the midst of our many conflicts both in the outward life and in the inward? If we have truly grasped God's hands, and are fighting for what is accordant with His will, we have a right to feel that the battle is not ours but God s, and to be sure that therefore we shall conquer. Of course we are not to say to ourselves, God will fight for us, and we need not strike a blow, Jehoshaphat's example does not fit our case in that respect, and we may thank God that it does not. We have a better lot than to stand still and see the salvation of God, for we are honoured by being allowed to share the stress of conflict and the glow of battle as well as in the shout of victory. But even in the struggles of outward life, and much more in those of our spiritual nature, every man who watches his own career will many a time have to recognise God's hand, unaided by any act of his own, striking for him and giving him victory; and in the spiritual life every Christian man knows that his best moments have come from the initiation of the Spirit who bloweth where He listeth. How often we have been surprised by God's help; how often we have been quickened by God's inbreathed Spirit, and have been taught that the passivity of faith draws to us greater blessings than the activity of effort! They also serve who only stand and wait, and they also conquer who in quietness and confidence keep themselves still and let God work for them and in them. The first great blessing of trust in God is that we may be at peace on the eve of battle, and the second is that in every battle it is, in truth, not we that fight, but God who fights for and in us.

**III. We learn here the best preparation for the conflict.**

When the morning dawned, the array was set in order and the march begun, and a strange array it was. In the van marched the Temple singers singing words that are music to us still: Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever, and behind them came the ranks of Judah, no doubt swelling the volume of melody, that startled the wild creatures of the wilderness, and perhaps travelled through the still morning as far as the camp of the enemy. The singers had no armour nor weapons. They were clad in the beauty of holiness, the priestly dress, and for sword and spear they carried harps and timbrels. Our best weapons are like their equipment.

We are most likely to conquer if we lift up the voice of thanks for victory in advance, and go into the battle expecting to triumph, because we trust in God. The world's expectation of success is too often a dream, a will-o-the-wisp that tempts to bogs where the beguiled victim is choked, though even in the world it is often true; screw your courage to the sticking point, and we'll not fail. But faith, that is the expectation of success based on God's help and inspiring to struggles for things dear to His heart, is wont to fulfil itself, and by bringing God into the fray, to secure the victory. A thankful heart not seldom brings into existence that for which it is thankful.

**IV. We see here the victory and the praise for it.**

The panic that laid hold on the enemy, and turned their swords against each other, was more natural in an undisciplined horde such as these irregular levies of ancient times, than it would be in a modern army. Once started, the infection would spread, so we need not wonder that by the time that Judah arrived on the field all was over. How often a like experience attends us! We quiver with apprehension of troubles that never attack us. We dread some impending battlefield, and when we reach it, Jehoshaphat's surprise is repeated, and, behold they were dead bodies, fallen to the earth. Delivered from foes and fears, Judah's first impulse was to secure the booty, for they were keen after wealth, and their faith was not very pure or elevating. But their last act was worthier, and fitly ended the strange campaign. They gathered in some wady among the grim cliffs of the wilderness of Judah, which broke the dreariness of that savage stretch of country with perhaps verdure and a brook, and there they blessed the Lord. The chronicler gives a piece of popular etymology, in deriving the name, the valley of blessing, from that morning's worship. Perhaps the name was older than that, and was given from a feeling of the contrast between the waste wilderness, which in its gaunt sterility seemed an accursed land, and the glen which with its trees and stream was indeed a valley of blessing. If so, the name would be doubly appropriate after that day's experience. Be that as it may, here we have in vivid form the truth that all our struggles and fightings may end in a valley of blessing, which will ring with the praise of the God who fights for us. If we begin our warfare with an appeal to God, and with prayerful acknowledgment of our own impotence, we shall end it with thankful acknowledgment that we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us and fought for us, and our choral song of praise will echo through the true Valley of Blessing, where no sound of enemies shall ever break the settled stillness, and the host of the redeemed, like that army of Judah, shall bear psalteries and harps and trumpets, and shall need spear and sword no more at all for ever.