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

**DEUTERONOMY-013. SHOD FOR THE ROAD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be."*

*Deuteronomy 33:25*

There is a general correspondence between those blessings wherewith Moses blessed the tribes of Israel before his death, and the circumstances and territory of each tribe in the promised land. The portion of Asher, in whose blessing the words of our text occurs, was partly the rocky northern coast and partly the fertile lands stretching to the base of the Lebanon. In the inland part of their territory they cultivated large olive groves, the produce of which was trodden out in great rock-hewn cisterns. So the clause before my text is a benediction upon that industry--'let him dip his foot in oil. And then the metaphor naturally suggested by the mention of the foot is carried on into the next words, Thy shoes shall be iron and brass, the tribe being located upon rocky sea-coast, having rough roads to travel, and so needing to be well shod. The substance, then, of that promise seems to be--strength adequate to, and unworn by, exercise; while the second clause, though not altogether plain, seems to put a somewhat similar idea in unmetaphorical shape. As thy days, so shall thy strength be, probably means the promise of power that grows with growing years.

So, then, we have first that thought that God gives us an equipment of strength proportioned to our work,--shoes fit for our road. God does not turn people out to scramble over rough mountains with thin-soled boots on; that is the plain English of the words. When an Alpine climber is preparing to go away into Switzerland for rock work, the first thing he does is to get a pair of strong shoes, with plenty of iron nails in the soles of them. So Asher had to be shod for his rough roads, and so each of us may be sure that if God sends us on stony paths He will provide us with strong shoes, and will not send us out on any journey for which He does not equip us well.

There are no difficulties to be found in any path of duty, for which he that is called to tread it is not prepared by Him that sent him. Whatsoever may be the road, our equipment is calculated for it, and is given to us from Him that has appointed it.

Is there not a suggestion here, too, as to the sort of travelling we may expect to have? An old saying tells us that we do not go to heaven in silver slippers, and the reason is because the road is rough. The primrose way leads somewhere else, and it may be walked on delicately. But if we need shoes of iron and brass, we may pretty well guess the kind of road we have before us. If a man is equipped with such coverings on his feet, depend upon it that there will be use for them before he gets to the end of his day's journey. The thickest sole will make the easiest travelling over rocky roads. So be quite sure of this, that if God gives to us certain endowments and equipments which are only calculated for very toilsome paths, the roughness of the road will match the stoutness of the shoes.

And see what He does give. See the provision which is made for patience and strength, for endurance and courage, in all the messages of His mercy, in all the words of His love, in all the powers of His Gospel, and then say whether that looks as if we should have an easy life of it on our way home. Those two ships that went away a while ago upon the brave, and, as some people thought, desperate task of finding the North Pole--any one that looked upon them as they lay in Portsmouth Roads, might know that it was no holiday cruise they were meant for. The thickness of the sides, the strength of the cordage, the massiveness of the equipment, did not look like pleasure-sailing.

And so, dear brethren, if we think of all that is given to us in God's Gospel in the way of stimulus and encouragement, and exhortation, and actual communication of powers, we may calculate, from the abundance of the resources, how great will be the strain upon us before we come to the end, and our feet stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. Go into some of the great fortresses in continental countries, and you will find the store-rooms full of ammunition and provisions; bread enough and biscuits enough, as it seems, for half the country, laid up there, and a deep well somewhere or other in the courtyard. What does that mean? It means fighting, that is what it means. So if we are brought into this strong pavilion, so well provisioned, so massively fortified and defended, that means that we shall need all the strength that is to be found in those thick walls, and all the sustenance that is to be found in those gorged magazines, and all the refreshment that is to be drawn from that free, and full, and inexhaustible fountain, before the battle is over and the victory won. Depend upon it, the promise Thy shoes shall be iron and brass. means, Thy road shall be rocky and flinty; and so it is.

And yet, thank God! whilst it is true that it is very hard and very difficult for many of us, and hard and difficult--even if without the very--for us all, it is also true that we have the adequate provision sufficient for all our necessities--and far more than sufficient! It is a poor compliment to the strength that He gives to us to say that it is enough to carry us through. God does not deal out His gifts to people with such an economical correspondence to necessities as that. There is always a wide margin. More than we can ask, more than we can think, more than we can need is given us.

If He were to deal with us as men often deal with one another, asking us, Well, how much do you want? cannot you do with a little less? there is the exact quantity that you need for your support--if you got your bread by weight and your water by measure, it would be a very poor affair. See how He actually does--He says, Child, there is Mine own strength for you; and we think that we honour Him when we say, God has given us enough for our necessities! Rather the old word is always true: So they did eat and were filled; and they took up of the fragments that remained seven baskets-full, and after they were satisfied and replete with the provision, there was more at the end than when they began.

That suggests another possible thought to be drawn from this promise, namely, that it assures not only of strength adequate to the difficulties and perils of the journey, but also of a strength which is not worn out by use.

The portion of Asher was the rocky sea-coast. The sharp, jagged rocks would cut to pieces anything made of leather long before the day's march was over; but the travellers have their feet shod with metal, and the rocks which they have to stumble over will only strike fire from their shoes. They need not step timidly for fear of wearing them out; but, wherever they have to march, may go with full confidence that their shoeing will not fail them. A wise general looks after that part of his soldiers outfit with special care, knowing that if it gives out, all the rest is of no use. So our Captain provides us with an inexhaustible strength, to which we may fully trust. We shall not exhaust it by any demands that we can make upon it. We shall only brighten it up, like the nails in a well-used shoe, the heads of which are polished by stumbling and scrambling over rocky roads.

So we may be bold in the march, and draw upon our stock of strength to the utmost. There is no fear that it will fail us. We may put all our force into our work, we shall not weaken the power which by reason of use is exercised, not exhausted. For the grace which Christ gives us to serve Him, being divine, is subject to no weariness, and neither faints nor fails. The bush that burned unconsumed is a type of that Infinite Being who works unexhausted, and lives undying, after all expenditure is rich, after all pouring forth is full. And of His strength we partake.

Whensoever a man puts forth an effort of any kind whatever--when I speak, when I lift my hand, when I run, when I think-there is waste of muscular tissue. Some of my strength goes in the act, and thus every effort means expenditure and diminution of force. Hence weariness that needs sleep, waste that needs food, languor that needs rest. We belong to an order of being in which work is death, in regard to our physical nature; but our spirits may lay hold of God, and enter into an order of things in which work is not death, nor effort exhaustion, nor is there loss of power in the expenditure of power.

That sounds strange, and yet it is not strange. Think of that electric light which is made by directing a strong stream upon two small pieces of carbon. As the electricity strikes upon these and turns their blackness into a fiery blaze, it eats away their substance while it changes them into light. But there is an arrangement in the lamp by which a fresh surface is continually being brought into the path of the beam, and so the light continues without wavering and blazes on. The carbon is our human nature, black and dull in itself; the electric beam is the swift energy of God, which makes us light in the Lord. For the one, decay is the end of effort; for the other, there is none. Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. Though we belong to the perishing order of nature by our bodily frame, we belong to the undecaying realm of grace by the spirit that lays hold upon God. And if our work weary us, as it must do so long as we continue here, yet in the deepest sanctuary of our being, our strength is greatened by exercise. Thy shoes shall be iron and brass. Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years. Stand, therefore, having your feet shod with the preparedness of the Gospel of peace.

But this is not all. There is an advance even upon these great promises in the closing words. That second clause of our text says more than the first one. Thy shoes shall be iron and brass, that promises us powers and provision adapted to, and unexhausted by, the weary pilgrimage and rough road of life. But as thy days, so shall thy strength be, says even more than that. The meaning of the word rendered strength in our version is very doubtful, and most modern translators are inclined to render it rest. But if we adhere to the translation of our version, we get a forcible and relevant promise, which fits on well to the previous clause, understood as it has been in my previous remarks. The usual understanding of the words is strength proportioned to thy day, an idea which we have found already suggested by the previous clause. But that explanation rests on, or at any rate derives support from, the common misquotation of the words. They are not, as we generally hear them quoted, As thy day, so shall thy strength be,--but day is in the plural, and that makes a great difference. As thy days, so shall thy strength be, that is to say: the two sums--of thy days and of thy strength--keep growing side by side, the one as fast as the other and no faster. The days increase. Well, what then? The strength increases too. As I said, we are allied to two worlds. According to the law of one of them, the outer world of physical life, we soon reach the summit of human strength. For a little while it is true, even in the life of nature, that our power grows with our days. But we soon reach the watershed, and then the opposite comes to be true. Down, steadily down, we go. With diminishing power, with diminishing vitality, with a dimmer eye, with an obtuser ear, with a slower-beating heart, with a feebler frame, we march on and on to our grave. As thy days, so shall thy weakness be, is the law for all of us mature men and women in regard to our outward life.

But, dear brethren, we may be emancipated from that dreary law in regard to the true life of our spirits, and instead of growing weaker as we grow older, we may and we should grow stronger. We may be and we should be moving on a course that has no limit to its advance. We may be travelling on a shining path through the heavens, that has no noon-tide height from which it must slowly and sadly decline, but tends steadily and for ever upwards, nearer and nearer to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance. The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more till the noon-tide of the day. But the reality surpasses even that grand thought, for it discloses to us an endless approximation to an infinite beauty, and an ever-growing possession of never exhausted fulness, as the law for the progress of all Christ's servants. The life of each of us may and should be continual accession and increase of power through all the days here, through all the ages beyond. Why? Because the life which I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God. Christ liveth in me. It is not my strength that grows, so much as God's strength in me which is given more abundantly as the days roll. It is so given on one condition. If my faith has laid hold of the infinite, the exhaustless, the immortal energy of God, unless there is something fearfully wrong about me, I shall be becoming purer, nobler, wiser, more observant of His will, gentler, liker Christ, every way fitter for His service, and for larger service, as the days increase.

Those of us who have reached middle life, or perhaps gone a little over the watershed, ought to have this experience as our own in a very distinct degree. The years that are past ought to have drawn us somewhat away from our hot pursuing after earthly and perishable things. They should have added something to the clearness and completeness of our perception of the deep simplicity of God's gospel. They should have tightened our hold and increased our possession of Christ, and unfolded more and more of His all-sufficiency. They should have enriched us with memories of God's loving care, and lighted all the sky behind with a glow which is reflected on the path before us, and kindles calm confidence in His unfailing goodness. They should have given us power and skill for the conflicts that yet remain, as the Red Indians believe that the strength of every defeated and scalped enemy passes into his conqueror's arm. They should have given force to our better nature, and weakening, progressive weakening, to our worse. They should have rooted us more firmly and abidingly in Him from whom all our power comes, and so have given us more and fuller supplies of His exhaustless and ever-flowing might.

So it may be with us if we abide in Him, without whom we are nothing, but partaking of whose strength the weakest shall be as David, and David as an angel of God.

If for us, drawing nearer to the end is drawing nearer to the light, our faces will be brightened more and more with that light which we approach, and our path will be as the shining light which shines more and more unto the noon-tide of the day, because we are closer to the very fountain of heavenly radiance, and growingly bathed and flooded with the outgoings of His glory. As thy days, so shall thy strength be.

The promise ought to be true for us all. It is true for all who use the things that are freely given to them of God. And whilst thus it is the law for the devout life here, its most glorious fulfilment remains for the life beyond. There each new moment shall bring new strength, and growing millenniums but add fresh vigour to our immortal life. Here the unresting beat of the waves of the sea of time gnaws away the bank and shoal whereon we stand, but there each roll of the great ocean of eternity shall but spread new treasures at our feet and add new acres to our immortal heritage. The oldest angels, says Swedenborg, look the youngest. When life is immortal, the longer it lasts the stronger it becomes, and so the spirits that have stood for countless days before His throne, when they appear to human eyes, appear as--young men clothed in long white garments,--full of unaging youth and energy that cannot wane. So, whilst in the flesh we must obey the law of decay, the spirit may be subject to this better law of life, and while the outward man perisheth, the inward man be renewed day by day. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.