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

**EZEKIEL-005. THE RIVER OF LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Waters issued out from under the threshold of the house ..."*

*Ezekiel 47:1*

Unlike most great cities, Jerusalem was not situated on a great river. True, the inconsiderable waters of Siloam--which flow softly because they were so inconsiderable--rose from a crevice in the Temple rock, and beneath that rock stretched the valley of the Kedron, dry and bleached in the summer, and a rainy torrent during the rainy seasons; but that was all. So, many of the prophets, who looked forward to the better times to come, laid their finger upon that one defect, and prophesied that it should be cured. Thus we read in a psalm: There is a river, the divisions whereof make glad the City of our God. Faith saw what sense saw not. Again, Isaiah says: There--that is to say, in the new Jerusalem--the glorious Lord shall be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams. And so, this prophet casts his anticipations of the abundant outpouring of blessing that shall come when God in very deed dwells among men, into this figure of a river pouring out from beneath the Temple-door, and spreading life and fertility wherever its waters come. I need not remind you how our Lord Himself uses the same figure, and modifies it, by saying that whosoever believeth on Him, out of him shall flow rivers of living waters; or how, in the very last words of the Apocalyptic seer, we hear again the music of the ripples of the great stream, the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb. So then, all through Scripture, we may say that we hear the murmur of the stream, and can catch the line of verdure upon its banks. My object now is not only to deal with the words that I have read as a starting-point, but rather to seek to draw out the wonderful significance of this great prophetic parable.

**I. I notice, first, the source from which the river conies.**

I have already anticipated that in pointing out that it flows from the very Temple itself. The Prophet sees it coming out of the house--that is to say, the Sanctuary. It flows across the outer court of the house, passes the altar, comes out under the threshold, and then pours itself down on to the plain beneath. This is the symbolical dress of the thought that all spiritual blessings, and every conceivable form of human good, take their rise in the fact of God's dwelling with men. From beneath the Temple threshold comes the water of life; and wherever it is true that in any heart--or in any community--God dwells, there will be heard the tinkling of its ripples, and freshness and fertility will come from the stream. The dwelling of God with a man, like the dwelling of God in humanity in the Incarnation of His own dear Son, is, as it were, the opening of the fountain that it may pour out into the world. So, if we desire to have the blessings that are possible for us, we must comply with the conditions, and let God dwell in our hearts, and make them His temples; and then from beneath the threshold of that temple, too, will pour out, according to Christ's own promise, rivers of living water which will be first for ourselves to drink of and be blessed by, and then will refresh and gladden others.

Another thought connected with this source of the river of life is that all the blessings which, massed together, are included in that one word salvation--which is a kind of nebula made up of many unresolved stars--take their rise from nothing else than the deep heart of God Himself. This river rose in the House of the Lord, and amidst the mysteries of the Divine Presence; it took its rise, one might say, from beneath the Mercy-seat where the brooding Cherubim sat in silence and poured itself into a world that had not asked for it, that did not expect it, that in many of its members did not desire it and would not have it. The river that rose in the secret place of God symbolises for us the great thought which is put into plainer words by the last of the apostles when he says, We love Him because He first loved us. All the blessings of salvation rise from the unmotived, self-impelled, self-fed divine love and purpose. Nothing moves Him to communicate Himself but His own delight in giving Himself to His poor creatures; and it is all of grace that it might be all through faith.

Still further, another thought that may be suggested in connection with the source of this river is, that that which is to bless the world must necessarily take its rise above the world. Ezekiel has sketched, in the last portion of his prophecy, an entirely ideal topography of the Holy Land. He has swept away mountains and valleys, and levelled all out into a great plain, in the midst of which rises the mountain of the Lord's House, far higher than the Temple hill. In reality, opposite it rose the Mount of Olives, and between the two there was the deep gorge of the Valley of the Kedron. The Prophet smooths it all out into one great plain, and high above all towers the Temple-mount, and from it there rushes down on to the low levels the fertilising, life-giving flood.

That imaginary geography tells us this, that what is to bless the world must come from above the world. There needs a waterfall to generate electricity; the power which is to come into humanity and deal with its miseries must have its source high above the objects of its energy and its compassion, and in proportion to the height from which it falls will be the force of its impact and its power to generate the quickening impulse. All merely human efforts at social reform, rivers that do not rise in the Temple, are like the rivers in Mongolia, that run for a few miles and then get sucked up by the hot sands and are lost and nobody sees them any more. Only the perennial stream, that comes out from beneath the Temple threshold, can sustain itself in the desert, to say nothing of transforming the desert into a Garden of Eden. So moral and social and intellectual and political reformers may well go to Ezekiel, and learn that the river of the water of life, which is to heal the barren and refresh the thirsty land, must come from below the Temple threshold.

**II. Note the rapid increase of the stream.**

The Prophet describes how his companion, the interpreter, measured down the stream a thousand cubits--about a quarter of a mile--and the waters were ankle-deep another thousand, making half a mile from the start, and the water was knee-deep. Another thousand--or three-quarters of a mile--and the water was waist-deep; another thousand--about a mile in all--and the water was unfordable, waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed over. Where did the increase come from? There were no tributaries. We do not hear of any side-stream flowing into the main body. Where did the increase come from? It came from the abundant welling-up in the sanctuary. The fountain was the mother of the river--that is to say, God's ideal for the world, for the Church, for the individual Christian, is rapid increase in their experience of the depth and the force of the stream of blessings which together make up salvation. So we come to a very sharp testing question. Will anybody tell me that the rate at which Christianity has grown for these nineteen centuries corresponds with Ezekiel's vision--which is God's ideal? Will any Christian man say, My own growth in grace, and increase in the depth and fulness of the flow of the river through my spirit and my life correspond to that ideal? A mile from the source the river is unfordable. How many miles from the source of our first experience do we stand? How many of us, instead of having a river that could not be passed over, waters to swim in, have but a poor and all but stagnant feeble trickle, as shallow as or shallower than it was at first?

I was speaking a minute ago about Mongolian rivers. Australian rivers are more like some men's lives. A chain of ponds in the dry season--nay! not even a chain, but a series, with no connecting channel of water between them. That is like a great many Christian people; they have isolated times when they feel the voice of Christ's love, and yield themselves to the powers of the world to come, and then there are long intervals, when they feel neither the one nor the other. But the picture that ought to be realised by each of us is God's ideal, which there is power in the gospel to make real in the case of every one of us, the rapid and continuous increase in the depth and in the scour of the river of the water of life, that flows through our lives. Luther used to say, If you want to clean out a dunghill, turn the Elbe into it. If you desire to have your hearts cleansed of all their foulness, turn the river into it. But it needs to be a progressively deepening river, or there will be no scour in the feeble trickle, and we shall not be a bit the holier or the purer for our potential and imperfect Christianity.

**III. Lastly, note the effects of the stream.**

These are threefold: fertility, healing, life. Fertility. In the East one condition of fertility is water. Irrigate the desert, and you make it a garden. Break down the aqueduct, and you make the granary of the world into a waste. The traveller as he goes along can tell where there is a stream of water, by the verdure along its banks. You travel along a plateau, and it is all baked and barren. You plunge into an oasis, and immediately the ground is clothed with under-growth and shrubs, and the birds of the air sing among the branches. And so, says Ezekiel, wherever the river comes there springs up, as if by magic, fair trees on the banks thereof, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed.

Fertility comes second, the reception of the fertilising agent comes first. It is wasted time to tinker at our characters unless we have begun with getting into our hearts the grace of God, and the new spirit that will be wrought out by diligent effort into all beauty of life and character. Ezekiel seems to be copying the first psalm, or vice versa, the Psalmist is copying Ezekiel. At any rate, there is a verbal similarity between them, in that both dwell upon the unfading leaf of the tree that grows planted by rivers of water. And our text goes further, and speaks about perennial fruitfulness month by month, all the year round. In some tropical countries you will find blossoms, buds in their earliest stage, and ripened fruit all hanging upon one laden branch. Such ought to be the Christian life--continuously fruitful because dependent upon continual drawing into itself, by means of its roots and suckers, of the water of life by which we are fructified.

There is yet another effect of the waters--healing. As we said, Ezekiel takes great liberties with the geography of the Holy Land, levelling it all, so his stream makes nothing of the Mount of Olives, but flows due east until it comes to the smitten gorge of the Jordan, and then turns south, down into the dull, leaden waters of the Dead Sea, which it heals. We all know how these are charged with poison. Dip up a glassful anywhere, and you find it full of deleterious matter. They are the symbol of humanity, with the sin that is in solution all through it. No chemist can eliminate it, but there is One who can. He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The pure river of the water of life will cast out from humanity the malignant components that are there, and will sweeten it all. Ay, all, and yet not all, for very solemnly the Prophet's optimism pauses, and he says that the salt marshes by the side of the sea are not healed. They are by the side of it. The healing is perfectly available for them, but they are not healed. It is possible for men to reject the influences that make for the destruction of sin and the establishment of righteousness. And although the waters are healed, there still remain the obstinate marshes with the white crystals efflorescing on their surface, and bringing salt and barrenness. You can put away the healing and remain tainted with the poison.

And then the last thought is the life-giving influence of the river. Everything lived whithersoever it went. Contrast Christendom with heathendom. Admit all the hollowness and mere nominal Christianity of large tracts of life in so-called Christian countries, and yet why is it that on the one side you find stagnation and death, and on the other side mental and manifold activity and progressiveness? I believe that the difference between the people that sit in darkness and the people that walk in the light is that one has the light and the other has not, and activity befits the light as torpor befits the darkness.

But there is a far deeper truth than that in the figure, a truth that I would fain lay upon the hearts of all my hearers, that unless we our own selves have this water of life which comes from the Sanctuary and is brought to us by Jesus Christ, we are dead in trespasses and sins. The only true life is in Christ. If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.