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

**EZRA-006. HEROIC FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"22. I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon them all for good that seek Him.... 23. So we fasted and besought our God for this.... 31. The hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. 32. And we came to Jerusalem."*

*Ezra 8:22, 23, 31, 32*

The memory of Ezra the scribe has scarcely had fairplay among Bible-reading people. True, neither his character nor the incidents of his life reach the height of interest or of grandeur belonging to the earlier men and their times. He is no hero, or prophet; only a scribe; and there is a certain narrowness as well as a prosaic turn about his mind, and altogether one feels that he is a smaller man than the Elijahs and Davids of the older days. But the homely garb of the scribe covered a very brave devout heart, and the story of his life deserves to be more familiar to us than it is.

This scrap from the account of his preparations for the march from Babylon to Jerusalem gives us a glimpse of a high-toned faith, and a noble strain of feeling. He and his company had a long weary journey of four months before them. They had had little experience of arms and warfare, or of hardships and desert marches, in their Babylonian homes. Their caravan was made unwieldy and feeble by the presence of a large proportion of women and children. They had much valuable property with them. The stony desert, which stretches unbroken from the Euphrates to the uplands on the east of Jordan, was infested then as now by wild bands of marauders, who might easily swoop down on the encumbered march of Ezra and his men, and make a clean sweep of all which they had. And he knew that he had but to ask and have an escort from the king that would ensure their safety till they saw Jerusalem. Artaxerxes surname, the long-handed, may have described a physical peculiarity, but it also expressed the reach of his power; his arm could reach these wandering plunderers, and if Ezra and his troop were visibly under his protection, they could march secure. So it was not a small exercise of trust in a higher Hand that is told us here so simply. It took some strength of principle to abstain from asking what it would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have. But, as he says, he remembered how confidently he has spoken of God's defence, and he feels that he must be true to his professed creed, even if it deprives him of the king's guards. He halts his followers for three days at the last station before the desert, and there, with fasting and prayer, they put themselves in God's hand; and then the band, with their wives and little ones, and their substance,--a heavily-loaded and feeble caravan,--fling themselves into the dangers of the long, dreary, robber-haunted march. Did not the scribe's robe cover as brave a heart as ever beat beneath a breastplate?

That symbolic phrase, the hand of our God, as expressive of the divine protection, occurs with remarkable frequency in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and though not peculiar to them, is yet strikingly characteristic of them. It has a certain beauty and force of its own. The hand is of course the seat of active power. It is on or over a man like some great shield held aloft above him, below which there is safe hiding. So that great Hand bends itself over us, and we are secure beneath its hollow. As a child sometimes carries a tender-winged butterfly in the globe of its two hands that the bloom on the wings may not be ruffled by fluttering, so He carries our feeble, unarmoured souls enclosed in the covert of His Almighty hand. Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand? Who hath gathered the wind in His fists? In that curved palm where all the seas lie as a very little thing, we are held; the grasp that keeps back the tempests from their wild rush, keeps us, too, from being smitten by their blast. As a father may lay his own large muscular hand on his child's tiny fingers to help him, or as Elisha put his hands on the king's hands, that the contact might strengthen him to shoot the arrow of the Lord's deliverance, so the hand of our God is upon us to impart power as well as protection; and our bow abides in strength, when the arms of our hands are made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. That was Ezra's faith, and that should be ours.

Note Ezra's sensitive shrinking from anything like inconsistency between his creed and his practice. It was easy to talk about God's protection when he was safe behind the walls of Babylon; but now the pinch had come. There was a real danger before him and his unwarlike followers. No doubt, too, there were plenty of people who would have been delighted to catch him tripping; and he felt that his cheeks would have tingled with shame if they had been able to say, Ah! that is what all his fine professions come to, is it? He wants a convoy, does he? We thought as much. It is always so with these people who talk in that style. They are just like the rest of us when the pinch comes. So, with a high and keen sense of what was required by his avowed principles, he will have no guards for the road. There was a man whose religion was at any rate not a fair-weather religion. It did not go off in fine speeches about trusting to the protection of God, spoken from behind the skirts of the king, or from the middle of a phalanx of his soldiers. He clearly meant what he said, and believed every word of it as a prose fact, which was solid enough to build conduct on.

I am afraid a great many of us would rather have tried to reconcile our asking for a band of horsemen with our professed trust in God's hand; and there would have been plenty of excuses very ready about using means as well as exercising faith, and not being called upon to abandon advantages, and not pushing a good principle to Quixotic lengths, and so on, and so on. But whatever truth there is in such considerations, at any rate we may well learn the lesson of this story--to be true to our professed principles; to beware of making our religion a matter of words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no risk in applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our actions up to the mark of what they expect of us. If the Church would oftener think of what the world looks for from it, it would seldomer have cause to be ashamed of the terrible gap between its words and its deeds.

Especially in regard to this matter of trust in an unseen Hand, and reliance on visible helps, we all need to be very rigid in our self-inspection. Faith in the good hand of God upon us for good should often lead to the abandonment, and always to the subordination, of material aids. It is a question of detail, which each man must settle for himself as each occasion arises, whether in any given case abandonment or subordination is our duty. This is not the place to enter on so large and difficult a question. But, at all events, let us remember, and try to work into our own lives, that principle which the easy-going Christianity of this day has honeycombed with so many exceptions, that it scarcely has any whole surface left at all; that the absolute surrender and forsaking of external helps and goods is sometimes essential to the preservation and due expression of reliance on God.

There is very little fear of any of us pushing that principle to Quixotic lengths. The danger is all the other way. So it is worth while to notice that we have here an instance of a man's being carried by a certain lofty enthusiasm further than the mere law of duty would take him. There would have been no harm in Ezra's asking an escort, seeing that his whole enterprise was made possible by the king's support. He would not have been leaning on an arm of flesh by availing himself of the royal troops, any more than when he used the royal firman. But a true man often feels that he cannot do the things which he might without sin do. All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient, said Paul. The same Apostle eagerly contended that he had a perfect right to money support from the Gentile Churches; and then, in the next breath, flamed up into, I have used none of these things, for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. A sensitive spirit, or one profoundly stirred by religious emotion, will, like the apostle whose feet were moved by love, far outrun the slower soul, whose steps are only impelled by the thought of duty. Better that the cup should run over than that it should not be full. Where we delight to do His will, there will often be more than a scrupulously regulated enough; and where there is not sometimes that more, there will never be enough.

Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore

Of nicely calculated less or more.

What shall we say of people who profess that God is their portion, and are as eager in the scramble for money as anybody? What kind of a commentary will sharp-sighted, sharp-tongued observers have a right to make on us, whose creed is so unlike theirs, while our lives are identical? Do you believe, friends! that the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him? Then, do you not think that racing after the prizes of this world, with flushed cheeks and labouring breath, or longing, with a gnawing hunger of heart, for any earthly good, or lamenting over the removal of creatural defences and joys, as if heaven were empty because some one's place here is, or as if God were dead because dear ones die, may well be a shame to us, and a taunt on the lips of our enemies? Let us learn again the lesson from this old story,--that if our faith in God is not the veriest sham, it demands and will produce, the abandonment sometimes and the subordination always, of external helps and material good.

Notice, too, Ezra's preparation for receiving the divine help. There, by the river Ahava, he halts his company like a prudent leader, to repair omissions, and put the last touches to their organisation before facing the wilderness. But he has another purpose also. I proclaimed a fast there, to seek of God a right way for us. There was no foolhardiness in his courage; he was well aware of all the possible dangers on the road; and whilst he is confident of the divine protection, he knows that, in his own quiet, matter-of-fact words, it is given to all them that seek Him. So his faith not only impels him to the renunciation of the Babylonian guard, but to earnest supplication for the defence in which he is so confident. He is sure it will be given--so sure, that he will have no other shield; and yet he fasts and prays that he and his company may receive it. He prays because he is sure that he will receive it, and does receive it because he prays and is sure.

So for us, the condition and preparation on and by which we are sheltered by that great Hand, is the faith that asks, and the asking of faith. We must forsake the earthly props, but we must also believingly desire to be upheld by the heavenly arms. We make God responsible for our safety when we abandon other defence, and commit ourselves to Him. With eyes open to our dangers, and full consciousness of our own unarmed and unwarlike weakness, let us solemnly commend ourselves to Him, rolling all our burden on His strong arms, knowing that He is able to keep that which we have committed to Him. He will accept the trust, and set His guards about us. As the song of the returning exiles, which may have been sung by the river Ahava, has it: My help cometh from the Lord. The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

So our story ends with the triumphant vindication of this Quixotic faith. A flash of joyful feeling breaks through the simple narrative, as it tells how the words spoken before the king came true in the experience of the weaponless pilgrims: The hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way; and we came to Jerusalem. It was no rash venture that we made. He was all that we hoped and asked. Through all the weary march He led us. From the wild, desert-born robbers, that watched us from afar, ready to come down on us, from ambushes and hidden perils, He kept us, because we had none other help, and all our hope was in Him. The ventures of faith are ever rewarded. We cannot set our expectations from God too high. What we dare scarcely hope now we shall one day remember. When we come to tell the completed story of our lives, we shall have to record the fulfilment of all God's promises, and the accomplishment of all our prayers that were built on these. Here let us cry, Be Thy hand upon us. Here let us trust, Thy hand will be upon us. Then we shall have to say, The hand of our God was upon us, and as we look from the watch-towers of the city, on the desert that stretches to its very walls, and remember all the way by which He led us, we shall rejoice over His vindication of our poor faith, and praise Him that not one thing hath failed of all the things which the Lord our God spake concerning us.