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

**GENESIS-019. GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And He brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness. And He said unto him, I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it. And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? And He said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon. And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. And when the fowls came down upon the carcases, Abram drove them away. And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates."*

*Genesis 15:5-18*

**I. Abram had exposed himself to dangerous reprisals by his victory over the confederate Eastern raiders.**

In the reaction following the excitement of battle, dread and despondency seem to have shadowed his soul. Therefore the assurance with which this chapter opens came to him. It was new, and came in a new form. He is cast into a state of spiritual ecstasy, and a mighty word sounds, audible to his inward ear. The form which it takes--I am thy shield--suggests the thought that God shapes His revelation according to the moment's need. The unwarlike Abram might well dread the return of the marauders in force, to avenge their defeat. Therefore God speaks to his fears and present want. Just as to Jacob the angels appeared as a heavenly camp guarding his undefended tents and helpless women; so, here and always, God is to us what we most need at the moment, whether it be comfort, or wisdom, or guidance, or strength. The manna tasted to each man, as the rabbis say, what he most desired. God's gifts take the shape of man's necessity.

Abram had just exercised singular generosity in absolutely refusing to enrich himself from the spoil. God reveals Himself as his exceeding great reward. He gives Himself as recompense for all sacrifices. Whatever is given up at His bidding, the Lord is able to give thee much more than this. Not outward things, nor even an outward heaven, is the guerdon of the soul; but a larger possession of Him who alone fills the heart, and fills the heart alone. Other riches may be counted, but this is exceeding great, passing comprehension, and ever unexhausted, and having something over after all experience. Both these aspects of God's preciousness are true for earth; but we need a shield only while exposed to attack. In the land of peace, He is only our reward.

**II. Mark the triumphant faith which wings to meet the divine promise.**

The first effect of that great assurance is to deepen Abram's consciousness of the strange contradiction to it apparently given by his childlessness. It is not distrust that answers the promise with a question, but it is eagerness to accept the assurance and ingenuous utterance of difficulties in the hope of their removal. God is too wise a father not to know the difference between the tones of confidence and unbelief, however alike they may sound; and He is too patient to be angry if we cannot take in all His promise at once. He breaks it into bits not too large for our lips, as He does here. The frequent reiterations of the same promises in Abram's life are not vain. They are a specimen of the unwearied repetition of our lessons, Here a little, there a little, which our teacher gives His slow scholars. So, once more, Abram gets the promise of posterity in still more glorious form. Before, it was likened to the dust of the earth; now it is as the innumerable stars shining in the clear Eastern heaven. As he gazes up into the solemn depths, the immensity and peace of the steadfast sky seems to help him to rise above the narrow limits and changefulness of earth, and a great trust floods his soul. Abram had lived by faith ever since he left Haran; but the historian, usually so silent about the thoughts of his characters, breaks through his usual manner of narrative to insert the all-important words which mark an epoch in revelation, and are, in some aspects, the most significant in the Old Testament. Abram believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness.

Observe the teaching as to the nature and object of faith in that first clause. The word rendered believed literally means to steady oneself by leaning on something. So it gives in a vivid picture more instructive than many a long treatise what faith is, and what it does for us. As a man leans his trembling hand on a staff, so we lay our weak and changeful selves on God's strength; and as the most mutable thing is steadied by being fastened to a fixed point, so we, though in ourselves light as thistledown, may be steadfast as rock, if we are bound to the rock of ages by the living band of faith. The metaphor makes it plain that faith cannot be merely an intellectual act of assent, but must include a moral act, that of confidence. Belief as credence is mainly an affair of the head, but belief as trust is an act of the will and the affections.

The object of faith is set in sunlight clearness by these words,--the first in which Scripture speaks of faith. Abram leaned on the Lord. It was not the promise, but the promiser, that was truly the object of Abram's trust. He believed the former, because he trusted Him who made it. Many confusions in Christian teaching would have been avoided if it had been always seen that faith grasps a person, not a doctrine, and that even when the person is revealed by doctrine, it is him, and not only it, which faith lays hold of. Whether God speaks promises, teachings of truth, or commandments, faith accepts them, because it trusts Him. Christ is revealed to us for our faith by the doctrinal statements of the New Testament. But we must grasp Himself, as so revealed, if we are to have faith which saves the soul. This same thought of the true object of faith as personal helps us to understand the substantial identity of faith in all ages and stages of revelation, however different the substance of the creeds. Abram knew very little of God, as compared with our knowledge. But it was the same God whom Abram trusted, and whom we trust as made known in His Son. Hence we can stretch out our hands across the ages, and clasp his as partaker of like precious faith. We walk in the light of the same sun,--he in its morning beams, we in its noonday glory. There has never been but one road to God, and that is the road which Abram trod, when he believed in the Lord.

**III. Mark the full-orbed gospel truth as to the righteousness of faith which is embedded in this record of early revelation, He counted it to him for righteousness.**

A geologist would be astonished if he came on remains in some of the primary strata which indicated the existence, in these remote epochs, of species supposed to be of much more recent date. So here we are startled at finding the peculiarly New Testament teaching away back in this dim distance. No wonder that Paul fastened on this passage which so remarkably breaks the flow of the narrative, as proof that his great principle of justification by faith was really the one only law by which, in all ages, men had found acceptance with God. Long before law or circumcision, faith had been counted for righteousness. The whole Mosaic system was a parenthesis; and even in it, whoever had been accepted had been so because of his trust, not because of his works. The whole of the subsequent divine dealings with Israel rested on this act of faith, and on the relation to God into which, through it, Abram entered. He was not a perfectly righteous man, as some passages of his life show; but he rose here to the height of loving and yearning trust in God, and God took that trust in lieu of perfect conformity to His will. He treated and regarded him as righteous, as is proved by the covenant which follows. The gospel takes up this principle, gives us a fuller revelation, presents the perfect righteousness of Christ as capable of becoming ours by faith, and so unveils the ground on which Abram and the latest generations are equally accepted in the beloved. This reckoning of righteousness to the unrighteous, on condition of their faith, is not because of any merit in faith. It does not come about in reward of, but by means of, their faith, which is nothing in itself, but is the channel only of the blessing. Nor is it a mere arbitrary act of God's, or an unreal imputing of what is not. But faith unites with Christ; and he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit, so as that in Him we have redemption. His righteousness becomes ours. Faith grafts us into the living Vine, and we are no longer regarded in our poor sinful individual personality, but as members of Christ. Faith builds us into the rock; but He is a living Stone, and we are living stones, and the life of the foundation rises up through all the courses of the great temple. Faith unites sinful men to God in Christ; therefore it makes them partakers of the blessedness of the man, ...to whom the Lord will not impute sin, and of the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord reckons his faith for righteousness. That same faith which thus clothes us with the white robe of Christ's righteousness, in lieu of our own tattered raiment, also is the condition of our becoming righteous by the actual working out in our character of all things lovely and of good report. It opens the heart to the entrance of that divine Christ, who is first made for us, and then, by daily appropriation of the law of the spirit of life, is made in us, righteousness and sanctification, and redemption. May all who read these lines be found in Him, having that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith!'

**IV. Consider the covenant which is the consequence of Abram's faith, and the proof of his acceptance.**

It is important to observe that the whole remainder of this chapter is regarded by the writer as the result of Abram's believing God. The way in which verse 7 and the rest are bolted on, as it were, to verse 6, clearly shows this. The nearer lesson from this fact is, that all the Old Testament revelation from this point onward rests on the foundation of faith. The further lesson, for all times, is that faith is ever rewarded by more intimate and loving manifestations of God's friendship, and by fuller disclosure of His purposes. The covenant is not only God's binding Himself anew by solemn acts to fulfil His promises already made, but it is His entering into far sweeter and nearer alliance with Abram than even He had hitherto had. That name, the friend of God, by which he is still known over all the Mohammedan world, contains the very essence of the covenant. In old days men were wont to conclude a bond of closest amity by cutting their flesh and interchanging the flowing blood. Henceforth they had, as it were, one life. We have not here the shedding of Abram's blood, as in the covenant of circumcision. Still, the slain animals represent the parties to the covenant, and the notion of a resulting unity of the closest order as between God and Abram is the very heart of the whole incident.

The particulars as to the rite by which the covenant was established are profoundly illuminative. The significant division of the animals into two shows that they were regarded as representing the contracting parties, and the passing between them symbolised the taking up of the obligations of the covenant. This strange rite, which was widely spread, derives importance from the use of it probably made in Hebrews ix. 16, 17. The new covenant, bringing still closer friendship and higher blessings, is sealed by the blood of Christ. He represents both God and man. In His death, may we not say that the manhood and the Godhead are parted, and we, standing as it were between them, encompassed by that awful sacrifice, and enclosed in its mysterious depths, enter into covenant with God, and become His friends?

We need not to dwell upon the detailed promises, of which the covenant was the seal. They are simply the fuller expansion of those already made, but now confirmed by more solemn guarantees. The new relation of familiar friendship, established by the covenant itself, is the main thing. It was fitting that God's friend should be in the secret of His purposes. The servant knoweth not what his lord doeth, but the friend does. And so we have here the assurance that faith will pierce to the discernment of much of the mind of God, which is hid from sense and the wisdom of this world. If we would know, we must believe. We may be men of God's counsel, and see deeply into the realities of the present, and far ahead into what will then become the certainties of the future, if only we live by faith in the secret place of the Most High, and, like John, lean so close on the Master's bosom that we can hear His lowest whisper.

Notice, too, the lessons of the smoking furnace and the blazing torch. They are like the pillar of fire and cloud. Darkness and light; a heart of fire and a wrapping of darkness,--these are not symbols of Israel and its checkered fate, as Dean Stanley thinks, but of the divine presence: they proclaim the double aspect of all divine manifestations, the double element in the divine nature. He can never be completely known; He is never completely hid. Ever does the lamp flame; ever around it the smoke wreathes. In all His self-revelation is the hiding of His power; after all revelation He dwelleth in the thick darkness. Only the smoke is itself fire, but not illumined to our vision. The darkness is light inaccessible. Much that was smoke to Abram has caught fire, and is light to us. But these two elements will ever remain; and throughout eternity God will be unknown, and yet well known, pouring Himself in ever-growing radiance on our eyes, and yet the King invisible.

Nor is this all the teaching of the symbol. It speaks of that twofold aspect of the divine nature, by which to hearts that love He is gladsome light, and to unloving ones He is threatening darkness. As to the Israelites the pillar was light, and to the Egyptians darkness and terror; so the same God is joy to some, and dread to others. What maketh heaven, that maketh hell. Light itself can become the source of pain the most exquisite, if the eye is diseased. God Himself cannot but be a torment to men who love darkness rather than light. Love and wrath, life and death, a God who pities and who cannot but judge, are solemnly proclaimed by that ancient symbol, and are plainly declared to us in the perfect revelation in Christ Jesus.

Observe, too, the manner of the ratification of the covenant. The symbol of the Divine presence passed between the pieces. No mention is made of Abram's doing so. Why this one-sided covenant? Because God's gracious dealings with men are one-sided. He seeks no oaths from us; He does not exchange blessings for our gifts. His covenant is the free result of His unmotived love, and is ratified by a solemn sacrifice, which we do not offer. We have nothing to do but to take what He gives. All ideas of barter and bargain are far from Him. Our part is but to embrace His covenant, which is complete and ratified whether we embrace it or not. What a wonderful thought that is of a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God! We do not hear so much of it as our fathers did. The more is the pity. It means that God has, as it were, buoyed out across the boundless ocean of His possible modes of action a plain course, which He binds Himself to keep; that He has frankly let us into the very secret of His doings; that He has stooped to use human forms of assurance to make it easier to trust Him; that He has confirmed His promise by a mighty sacrifice. Therefore we may enter into closest friendship with Him, and take for our own the exultant swan-song of Abram's royal son: Although my house be not so with God [although my life be stained, and my righteousness unfit to be offered to His pure eyes]; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire.