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

**GENESIS-022. WAITING FAITH REWARDED AND STRENGTHENED BY NEW REVELATIONS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before Me, and be thou perfect. And I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep My covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee In their generations."*

*Genesis 17:1-9*

Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He was ninety-nine when God appeared to him, as recorded in this chapter. There had been three divine communications in these twenty-five years--one at Bethel on entering the land, one after the hiving off of Lot, and one after the battle with the Eastern kings. The last-named vision had taken place before Ishmael's birth, and therefore more than thirteen years prior to the date of the lesson.

We are apt to think of Abraham's life as being crowded with supernatural revelations. We forget the foreshortening necessary in so brief a sketch of so long a career, which brings distant points close together. Revelations were really but thinly sown in Abram's life. For something over thirteen years he had been left to walk by faith, and, no doubt, had felt the pressure of things seen, silently pushing the unseen out of his life.

Especially would this be the case as Ishmael grew up, and his father's heart began to cling to him. The promise was beginning to grow dimmer, as years passed without the birth of the promised heir. As verse 18 of this chapter shows, Abram's thoughts were turning to Ishmael as a possible substitute. His wavering confidence was steadied and quickened by this new revelation. We, too, are often tempted to think that, in the highest matters, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and to wish that God would be content with our Ishmaels, which satisfy us, and would not withdraw us from possessed good, to make us live by hope of good unseen. We need to reflect on this vision when we are thus tempted.

**I.** Note the revelation of God's character, and of our consequent duty, which preceded the repetition of the covenant. I am the Almighty God. The aspect of the divine nature, made prominent in each revelation of Himself, stands in close connection with the circumstances or mental state of the recipient. So when God appeared to Abram after the slaughter of the kings, He revealed Himself as thy Shield with reference to the danger of renewed attack from the formidable powers which He had bearded and beaten. In the present case the stress is laid on God's omnipotence, which points to doubts whispering in Abram's heart, by reason of God's delay in fulfilling His word, and of his own advancing years and failing strength. Paul brings out the meaning of the revelation when he glorifies the faith which it kindled anew in Abram, being fully assured that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform (Rom. iv. 21). Whenever our faith has fallen asleep and we are ready to let go our hold of God's ideal and settle down on the low levels of the actual, or to be somewhat ashamed of our aspirations after what seems so slow of realisation, or to elevate prudent calculations of probability above the daring enthusiasms of Christian hope, the ancient word, that breathed itself into Abram's hushed heart, should speak new vigour into ours. I am the Almighty God--take My power into all thy calculations, and reckon certainties with it for the chief factor. The one impossibility is that any word of Mine should fail. The one imprudence is to doubt My word.

What follows in regard to our duty from that revelation? Walk before Me, and be thou perfect. Enoch walked with God; that is, his whole active life was passed in communion with Him. The idea conveyed by walking before God is not precisely the same. It is rather that of an active life, spent in continual consciousness of being naked and opened before the eyes of Him to whom we have to give account. That thrilling consciousness will not paralyse nor terrify, if we feel that we are not only ever in the great Task-Master's eye, but that God's omniscience is all-knowing love, and is brought closer to our hearts and clothed in gracious tenderness in Christ whose eyes were as a flame of fire, but whose love is more ardent still, who knows us altogether, and pities and loves as perfectly as He knows.

What sort of life will spring from the double realisation of God's almightiness, and of our being ever before Him? Be thou perfect. Nothing short of immaculate conformity with His will can satisfy His gaze. His desire for us should be our aim and desire for ourselves. The standard of aspiration and effort cannot be lowered to meet weakness. This is nobility of life--to aim at the unattainable, and to be ever approximating towards our aim. It is more blessed to be smitten with the longing to win the unwon than to stagnate in ignoble contentment with partial attainments. Better to climb, with faces turned upwards to the inaccessible peak, than to lie at ease in the fat valleys! It is the salt of life to have our aims set fixedly towards ideal perfection, and to say, I count not myself to have apprehended: but ...I press toward the mark. Toward that mark is better than to any lower. Our moral perfection is, as it were, the reflection in humanity of the divine almightiness.

The wide landscape may be mirrored in an inch of glass. Infinity may be, in some manner, presented in miniature in finite natures. Our power cannot represent God's omnipotence, but our moral perfection may, especially since that omnipotence is pledged to make us perfect if we will walk before Him.

**II.** Note the sign of the renewed covenant. Compliance with these injunctions is clearly laid down as the human condition of the divine fulfilment of it. Be thou perfect comes first; My covenant is with thee follows. There was contingency recognised from the beginning. If Israel broke the covenant, God was not unfaithful if He should not adhere to it. But the present point is that a new confirmation is given before the terms are repeated. The main purpose, then, of this revelation, did not lie in that repetition, but in the seal given to Abram by the change of name.

Another sign was also given, which had a wider reference. The change of name was God's seal to His part. Circumcision was the seal of the other party, by which Abram, his family, and afterwards the nation, took on themselves the obligations of the compact.

The name bestowed is taken to mean Father of a Multitude. It was the condensation into a word, of the divine promise. What a trial of Abram's faith it was to bid him take a name which would sound in men's ears liker irony than promise! He, close on a hundred years old, with but one child, who was known not to be the heir, to be called the father of many! How often Canaanites and his own household would smile as they used it! What a piece of senile presumption it would seem to them! How often Abram himself would be tempted to think his new name a farce rather than a sign! But he took it humbly from God, and he wore it, whether it brought ridicule from others or assurance in his own heart. It takes some courage for any of us to call ourselves by names which rest on God's promise and seem to have little vindication in present facts. The world is fond of laughing at saints, but Christians should familiarise themselves with the lofty designations which God gives His children, and see in them not only a summons to life corresponding, but a pledge and prophecy of the final possession of all which these imply. God calls things that are not, as though they were; and it is wisdom, faith, and humility--not presumption--which accepts the names as omens of what shall one day be.

The substance of the covenant is mainly identical with previous revelations. The land is to belong to Abram's seed. That seed is to be very numerous. But there is new emphasis placed on God's relation to Abram's descendants. God promises to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, and, again, I will be their God (verses 7, 8). That article of the old covenant is repeated in the new (Jer. 31:33), with the addition, And they shall be My people, which is really involved in it. We do not read later more spiritual ideas into the words, when we find in them here, at the very beginning of Hebrew monotheism, an insight into the deep truth of the reciprocal possession of God by us, and of us by God. What a glimpse into the depths of that divine heart is given, when we see that we are His possession, precious to Him above all the riches of earth and the magnificences of heaven! What a lesson as to the inmost blessedness of religion, when we learn that it takes God for its very own, and is rich in possessing Him, whatever else may be owned or lacking!

To possess God is only possible on condition of yielding ourselves to Him. When we give ourselves up, in heart, mind, and will, to be His, He is ours. When we cease to be our own, we get God for ours. The self-centred man is poor; he neither owns himself nor anything besides, in any deep sense. When we lose ourselves in God, we find ourselves, and being content to have nothing, and not even to be our own masters or owners, we possess ourselves more truly than ever, and have God for our portion, and in Him all things are ours.