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

**GENESIS-030. GUIDANCE IN THE WAY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I being in the way, the Lord led me."*

*Genesis 24:27*

So said Abraham's anonymous servant when telling how he had found Rebekah at the well, and known her to be the destined bride of his master's servant. There is no more beautiful page, even amongst the many lovely ones in these ancient stories, than this domestic idyll of the mission of the faithful servant from far Canaan across the desert. The homely test by which he would determine that the maiden should be pointed out to him, the glimpse of old-world ways at the well, the gracious courtesy of the fair damsel, and the simple devoutness of the speaker, who recognises in what to others were trivial commonplaces God's guidance to the end which He had appointed, his recognition of the divine hand moving beneath all the nothings and littlenesses of daily life--may teach us much.

**I. The first thing that these words seem to me to suggest is the conditions under which we may be sure that God leads--I being in the way.**

Now, of course, some of you may know that the words of our text are, by the Revised Version and others, rendered so as to obliterate the clause telling where the speaker was when the Lord led him, and to make the whole a continuous expression of the one fact--As for me, the Lord hath led me in the way to the house of my master's brethren. The literal rendering is, I in the way, Jehovah led me. No doubt the Hebrew idiom admits of the I being thus emphatically premised, and then repeated as me after the verb, and possibly no more is to be made of the words than that. But the fuller and more impressive meaning is possible, and I venture to retain it, and to see in it the expression of the truth that it is when we are in the way that God will certainly lead us.

So that suggests, first, how the people that have any right to expect any kind of guidance from God are those who have their feet upon a path which conscience approves. Many men run into all manner of perplexities by their own folly and self-will, and never ask whether their acts are right or wrong, wise or foolish, until they begin to taste the bitter consequences. Then they cry to God to help them, and think themselves very religious because they do. That is not the way to get God's help. Such folk are like Italian brigands who had an image of the Virgin in their hats, and sometimes had the Pope's commission in their pockets, and therefore went out to murder and ravish, in sure and certain hope of God's favour and protection.

But when we are in the way, and know that we are doing what we ought to do, and conscience says, Go on; never mind what stands against you, it is then, and only then, that we have a right to be sure that the Lord will lead us. Otherwise, the best thing that can happen to us is that the Lord should thwart us when we are on the wrong road. Resistance, indeed, may be guidance; and it is often God's manner of setting our feet in the way of His steps. We have no claim on Him for guidance, indeed, unless we have submitted ourselves to His commandments; yet His mercies go beyond our claims. Just as the obedient child gets guidance, so the petulant and disobedient child gets resistance, which is guidance too. The angel of the Lord stands in front of Balaam, amongst the vines, though the seer sometimes does not see, and blocks the path for him, and hedges up the way with his flaming sword. Only, if we would have the sweet, gracious, companionable guidance of our Lord, let us be sure, to begin with, that we are in the way, and not in any of the bypaths into which arrogance and self-will and fleshly desires and the like are only too apt to divert our feet.

Another consideration suggested by these words, I being in the way, is that if we expect guidance we must diligently do present duty. We are led, thank God, by one step at a time. He does with His child, whom He is teaching to read His will, as we sometimes do with our children, when we are occupied in teaching them their first book-learning: we cover the page up, all but the line that we want them to concentrate their eyes upon; and then, when they have got to the end of that, slip the hand down, low enough to allow the next line to come into view. So often God does with us. One thing at a time is enough for the little brains. And this is the condition of mortal life, for the most part--though there do come rare exceptions. Not that we have to look a long way ahead, and forecast what we shall do this time ten years off, or to make decisions that involve a distant future--except once or twice in a lifetime--but that we have to settle what is to be done in this flying minute, and in the one adjacent to it. Do the duty that lies nearest thee, and the remoter duty will become clearer. There is nothing that has more power to make a man's path plain before his feet than that he should concentrate his better self on the manful and complete discharge of the present moment's service. And, on the other hand, there is nothing that will so fill our sky with mists, and blur the marks of the faint track through the moor, as present negligence, or still more, present sin. Iron in a ship's hull makes the magnet tremble, and point away from its true source. He that has complied with evil to-day is the less capable of discerning duty to-morrow; and he that does all the duty that he knows will thereby increase the probability that he will know all that he needs. If any man wills to do His will, he shall know of the teaching--enough, at any rate, to direct his steps.

But there is another lesson still in the words; and that is that, if we are to be guided, we must see to it that we expect and obey the guidance.

This servant of Abraham's, with a very imperfect knowledge of the divine will, had, when he set out on his road, prayed very earnestly that God would lead him. He had ventured to prescribe a certain token, in its simplicity: If the girl drops her pitcher, and gives us drink gladly, and does not grudge to fill the troughs for the cattle, that will show that she is of a good sort, and will make the right wife for Isaac. He had prayed thus, and he was ready to accept whomsoever God so designated. He had not made up his mind, Bethuel's daughter is a relation of my master's, and so she will be a suitable wife for his son. He left it all with God, and then he went straight on his road, and was perfectly sure that he would get the guidance that he had sought. And when it came the good man bowed and obeyed.

Now there is a picture for us all. There are many people that say, O Lord! guide me. when all the while they mean, Let me guide Thee. They are perfectly willing to accept the faintest and moat questionable indications that may seem to point down the road where their inclination drives them, and like Lord Nelson at Copenhagen, will put the telescope to the blind eye when the flag is flying at the admiral's peak, signalling Come out of action, because they are determined to stay where they are.

Do not let us forget that the first condition of securing real guidance in our daily life is to ask it, and that the next is to look for it, and that a third is to be quite willing to accept it, whether the finger points down the broad road that we would like to go upon, or through some tangled path amongst the brushwood that we would fain avoid. And if you and I, dear brethren, in the littlenesses of our daily life, do fulfil these conditions, the heavens will crumble, and earth will melt, before God will leave His child untaught in the way in which he should go.

Only, let us be patient. Do you remember what Joshua said to the Israelites? Let there be a good space of vacant ground between you and the guiding ark, that you may know by which way you ought to go. When men precipitately press on the heels of half-disclosed providences, they are uncommonly apt to mistake the road. We must wait till we are sure of God's will before we try to do it. If we are not sure of what He would have us do, then, for the present, He would have us do nothing until He speaks. I being in the way, the Lord led me.

**II. Now a word about the manner of the guidance.**

There was no miracle, no supernatural voice, no pillar of cloud or fire, no hovering glory round the head of the village maiden. All the indications were perfectly natural and trivial. A thousand girls had gone to the wells that day all about Haran and done the very same things that Rebekah did. But the devout man who had prayed for guidance, and was sure that he was getting it, was guided by her most simple, commonplace act; and that is how we are usually to be guided. God leaves a great deal to our common sense. His way of speaking to common sense is by very common things. If any of us fancy that some glow at the heart, some sudden flash as of inspiration, is the test of a divine commandment, we have yet to learn the full meaning of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. For that Incarnation, amongst all its other mighty influences, hallowed the commonest things of life and turned them into ministers of God's purposes. So remember, God's guidance may come to you through so insignificant a girl as Rebekah. It may come to you through as commonplace an incident as tipping the water of a spring out of an earthen pot into a stone trough. None the less is it God's guidance; and what we want is the eye to see it. He will guide us by very common indications of His providence.

**III. And now, the last thing that I would say a word about is the realisation in daily life of this guidance as a plain actual fact.**

This anonymous trusted servant of Abraham's, whose name we should like to have known, had a mere segment of the full orb of the knowledge of God that shines upon our path. With true Oriental freedom to speak about the deepest matters, he was not afraid nor ashamed to stand before Bethuel and Laban, and all these other strangers that crowded round the doorway, and say, The Lord led me. There is a pattern for some of us tongue-tied, shamefaced Christians. Whatever may be the truth about the degradations of which heathen religion is full, there is a great deal in heathen religion that ought to teach, and does teach, Christendom a lesson, as to willingness to recognise and to confess God's working in daily life. It may be very superficial; it may be very little connected with high morality; but so far as it goes it is a thousand-fold better than the dumb religion that characterises such hosts of Christian people.

A realisation of the divine guidance is the talisman that makes crooked things straight and rough places plain; that brings peace and calmness into our hearts, amid all changes, losses, and sorrows. If we hold fast by that faith, it will interpret for us the mysterious in the providences concerning our own lives, and will help us to feel that, as I said, resistance to our progress may be true guidance, and thwarting our wills may be our highest good. For the road which we travel should, in all its turnings, lead us to God; and whatsoever guides us to Him is only and always blessed.

May I, for one moment, turn these words in another direction, and remind you, dear friends, of how the sublimest application of them is still to be realised? As a climber on a mountain-peak may look down the vale up which he had painfully toiled for many days and see the dusty path lying, like a sinuous snake, down all along it, so, when we get up yonder, Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee these many years in the wilderness, and shalt see the green pastures and the still waters, valleys of the shadow of death, and burning roads with sharp flints, which have all brought thee hither at last. We shall know then what we believe now, that the Lord does indeed go before them who desire to follow Him, and that the God of Israel is their reward. Then we shall say with deepened thankfulness, deepened by complete understanding of life here, seen in the light of its attained end, I being in the way, the Lord led me, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.