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

**GENESIS-036. MAHANAIM: THE TWO CAMPS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim (i.e. Two camps)."*

*Genesis 32:1-2*

This vision came at a crisis in Jacob's life. He has just left the house of Laban, his father-in-law, where he had lived for many years, and in company with a long caravan, consisting of wives, children, servants, and all his wealth turned into cattle, is journeying back again to Palestine. His road leads him close by the country of Esau. Jacob was no soldier, and he is naturally terrified to meet his justly incensed brother. And so, as he plods along with his defenceless company trailing behind him, as you may see the Arab caravans streaming over the same uplands to-day, all at once, in the middle of his march, a bright-harnessed army of angels meets him. Whether visible to the eye of sense, or, as would appear, only to the eye of faith, they are visible to this troubled man; and, in a glow of confident joy, he calls the name of that place Mahanaim, two camps. One camp was the little one of his down here, with the helpless women and children and his own frightened and defenceless self, and the other was the great one up there, or rather in shadowy but most real spiritual presence around about him, as a bodyguard making an impregnable wall between him and every foe. We may take some very plain and everlastingly true lessons out of this story.

**I. First, the angels of God meet us on the dusty road of common life. Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.**

As he was tramping along there, over the lonely fields of Edom, with many a thought on his mind and many a fear at his heart, but feeling There is the path that I have to walk on, all at once the air was filled with the soft rustle of angel wings, and the brightness from the flashing armour of the heavenly hosts flamed across his unexpecting eye. And so is it evermore. The true place for us to receive visions of God is in the path of the homely, prosaic duties which He lays upon us. The dusty road is far more likely to be trodden by angel feet than the remote summits of the mountain, where we sometimes would fain go; and many an hour consecrated to devotion has less of the manifest presence of God than is granted to some weary heart in its commonplace struggle with the little troubles and trials of daily life. These make the doors, as it were, by which the visitants draw near to us.

It is the common duties, the narrow round, the daily task, that not only give us all we ought to ask, but are the selected means and channels by which, ever, God's visitants draw near to us. The man that has never seen an angel standing beside him, and driving his loom for him, or helping him at his counter and his desk, and the woman that has never seen an angel, according to the bold realism and homely vision of the old German picture, working with her in the kitchen and preparing the meal for the household, have little chance of meeting such visitants at any other point of their experience or event of their lives.

If the week be empty of the angels, you will never catch sight of a feather of their wings on the Sunday. And if we do not recognise their presence in the midst of all the prose, and the commonplace, and the vulgarity, and the triviality, and the monotony, the dust of the small duties, we shall go up to the summit of Sinai itself and see nothing there but cold grey stone and everlasting snows. Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. The true field for religion is the field of common life.

And then another side of the same thought is this, that it is in the path where God has bade us walk that we shall find the angels round us. We may meet them, indeed, on paths of our own choosing, but it will be the sort of angel that Balaam met, with a sword in his hand, mighty and beautiful, but wrathful too; and we had better not front him! But the friendly helpers, the emissaries of God's love, the apostles of His grace, do not haunt the roads that we make for ourselves. They confine themselves rigidly to the paths in which God has before ordained that we should walk in them. A man has no right to expect, and he will not get, blessing and help and divine gifts when, self-willedly, he has taken the bit between his teeth, and is choosing his own road in the world. But if he will say, Lord! here I am; put me where Thou wilt, and do with me what Thou wilt, then he may be sure that that path, though it may be solitary of human companionship, and leading up amongst barren rocks and over bare moorlands, where the sun beats down fiercely, will not be unvisited by a better presence, so that in sweet consciousness of sufficiency of rich grace, he will be able to say, I, being in the way, the Lord met me.

**II. Still further, we may draw from this incident the lesson that God's angels meet us punctually at the hour of need.**

Jacob is drawing nearer and nearer to his fear every step. He is now just on the borders of Esau's country, and close upon opening communications with his brother. At that critical moment, just before the finger of the clock has reached the point on the dial at which the bell would strike, the needed help comes, the angel guards draw near and camp beside him. It is always so. The Lord shall help her, and that right early. His hosts come no sooner and no later than we need. If they appeared before we had realised our danger and our defencelessness, our hearts would not leap up at their coming, as men in a beleaguered town do when the guns of the relieving force are heard booming from afar. Often God's delays seem to us inexplicable, and our prayers to have no more effect than if they were spoken to a sleeping Baal. But such delays are merciful. They help us to the consciousness of our need. They let us feel the presence of the sorrow. They give opportunity of proving the weakness of all other supports. They test and increase desire for His help. They throw us more unreservedly into His arms. They afford room for the sorrow or the burden to work its peaceable fruits. So, and in many other ways, delay of succour fits us to receive succour, and our God makes no tarrying but for our sakes.

It is His way to let us come almost to the edge of the precipice, and then, in the very nick of time, when another minute and we are over, to stretch out His strong right hand and save us. So Peter is left in prison, though prayer is going up unceasingly for him--and no answer comes. The days of the Passover feast slip away, and still he is in prison, and prayer does nothing for him. The last day of his life, according to Herod's purpose, dawns, and all the day the Church lifts up its voice--but apparently there is no answer, nor any that regarded. The night comes, and still the vain cry goes up, and Heaven seems deaf or apathetic. The night wears on, and still no help comes. But in the last watch of that last night, when day is almost dawning, at nearly the last minute when escape would have been possible, the angel touches the sleeping Apostle, and with leisurely calmness, as sure that he had ample time, leads him out to freedom and safety. It was precisely because Jesus loved the Household at Bethany that, after receiving the sisters message, He abode still for two days in the same place where He was. However our impatience may wonder, and our faithlessness venture sometimes almost to rebuke Him when He comes, with words like Mary's and Martha s--Lord, if Thou hadst been here, such and such sorrows would not have happened, and Thou couldst so easily have been here--we should learn the lesson that even if He has delayed so long that the dreaded blow has fallen, He has come soon enough to make it the occasion for a still more glorious communication of His power. Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.

**III. Again, we learn from this incident that the angels of God come in the shape which we need.**

Jacob's want at the moment was protection. Therefore the angels appear in warlike guise, and present before the defenceless man another camp, in which he and his unwieldy caravan of women and children and cattle may find security. If his special want had been of some blessing of another kind, no doubt another form of appearance, suited with precision to his need, would have been imposed upon these angel helpers. For God's gifts to us change their character; as the Rabbis fabled that the manna tasted to each man what each most desired. The same pure heavenly bread has the varying savour that commends it to varying palates. God's grace is Protean. It takes all the forms that man's necessities require. As water assumes the shape of any vessel into which it is put, so this great blessing comes to each of us, moulded according to the pressure and taking the form of our circumstances and necessities. His fulness is all-sufficient. It is the same blood that, passing to all the members, ministers to each according to the needs and fashion of each. And it is the same grace which, passing to our souls, in each man is shaped according to his present condition and ministers to his present wants.

So, dear brethren, in that great fulness each of us may have the thing that we need. The angel who to one man is protection, to another shall be teaching and inspiration; to another shall appear with chariots of fire and horses of fire to sweep the rapt soul heavenward; to another shall draw near as a deliverer from his fetters, at whose touch the bonds shall fall from off him; to another shall appear as the instructor in duty and the appointer of a path of service, like that vision that shone in the castle to the Apostle Paul, and said, Thou must bear witness for me at Rome; to another shall appear as opening the door of heaven and letting a flood of light come down upon his darkened heart, as to the Apocalyptic seer in his rocky Patmos. And all this worketh that one and the self-same Lord of angels dividing to every man severally as He will, and as the man needs. The defenceless Jacob has the manifestation of the divine presence in the guise of armed warriors that guard his unwarlike camp.

I add one last word. Long centuries after Jacob's experience at Mahanaim, another trembling fugitive found himself there, fearful, like Jacob, of the vengeance and anger of one who was knit to him by blood. When poor King David was flying from the face of Absalom his son, the first place where he made a stand, and where he remained during the whole of the rebellion, was this town of Mahanaim, away on the eastern side of the Jordan. Do you not think that to the kingly exile, in his feebleness and his fear, the very name of his resting-place would be an omen? Would he not recall the old story, and bethink himself of how round that other frightened man

Bright-harnessed angels stood in order serviceable'

and would he not, as he looked on his little band of friends, faithful among the faithless, have his eyesight cleared to behold the other camp? Such a vision, no doubt, inspired the calm confidence of the psalm which evidently belongs to that dark hour of his life, and made it possible for the hunted king, with his feeble band, to sing even then, I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for Thou, Lord, makest me dwell in safety, solitary though I am.

Nor is the vision emptied of its power to stay and make brave by all the ages that have passed. The vision was for a moment; the fact is for ever. The sun's ray was flashed back from celestial armour, the next all unreflected shone on the lonely wastes of the desert--but the host of God was there still. The transitory appearance of the permanent realities is a revelation to us as truly as to the patriarch; and though no angel wings may winnow the air around our road, nor any sworded seraphim be seen on our commonplace march, we too have all the armies of heaven with us, if we tread the path which God has marked out, and in our weakness and trembling commit ourselves to Him. The heavenly warriors die not, and hover around us to-day, excelling in the strength of their immortal youth, and as ready to succour us as they were all these centuries ago to guard the solitary Jacob.

Better still, the Captain of the Lord's host is come up to be our defence, and our faith has not only to behold the many ministering spirits sent forth to minister to us, but One mightier than they, whose commands they all obey, and who Himself is the companion of our solitude and the shield of our defencelessness. It was blessed that Jacob should be met by the many angels of God. It is infinitely more blessed that the Angel of the Lord--the One who is more than the many--encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.

The postscript of the last letter which Gordon sent from Khartoum closed with the words, The hosts are with me--Mahanaim. Were they not, even though death was near? Was that sublime faith a mistake--the vision an optical delusion? No, for their ranks are arrayed around God's children to keep them from all evil while He wills that they should live, and their chariots of fire and horses of fire are sent to bear them to heaven when He wills that they should die.