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

**GENESIS-047. THE HANDS OF THE MIGHTY GOD OF JACOB by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The archers shot at him, but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob."*

*Genesis 49:23-24*

These picturesque words are part of what purports to be one of the oldest pieces of poetry in the Bible--the dying Jacob's prophetic blessing on his sons. Of these sons there are two over whom his heart seems especially to pour itself--Judah the ancestor of the royal tribe, and Joseph. The future fortunes of their descendants are painted in most glowing colours. And of these two, the blessing on the son who was dead and is alive again, who was lost and is found is the fuller of tender desire and glad prediction. The words of our text are probably to be taken as prophecy, not as history--as referring to the future conflicts and victories of the tribe, not to the past trials and triumphs of its father. But be that as it may, they contain, in most vivid metaphor, the earliest utterance of a very familiar truth. They are the first hint of that thought which is caught up and expanded in many a later saying of psalmist, and prophet, and apostle. We hear their echoes in the great song ascribed to David in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul: He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms; and the idea receives its fullest carrying out and noblest setting forth, in the trumpet-call of the apostle, who had seen more formidable weapons and a more terrible military discipline in Rome's legions than Jacob knew, and who pressed them into his stimulating call: Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God. Strength for conflict by contact with the strength of God is the common thought of all these passages--a very familiar thought, which may perhaps be freshened for us by the singular intensity with which this metaphor of our text presents it. Look at the picture.--Here stands the solitary man, ringed all round by enemies full of bitter hate. Their arrows are on the string, their bows drawn to the ear. The shafts fly thick, and when they have whizzed past him, and he can be seen again, he stands unharmed, grasping his unbroken bow. The assault has shivered no weapon, has given no wound. He has been able to stand in the evil day--and look! a pair of great, gentle, strong hands are laid upon his hands and arms, and strength passes into his feebleness from the touch of the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. So the enemy have two, not one, to reckon with. By the side of the hunted man stands a mighty figure, and it is His strength, not the mortal's impotence, that has to be overcome. Some dream of such divine help in the struggle of battle has floated through the minds, and been enshrined in the legends, of many people, as when the panoplied Athene has been descried leading the Grecian armies, or, through the dust of conflict, the gleaming armour and white horses of the Twin Brethren were seen far in advance of the armies of Rome. But the dream is for us a reality. It is true that we go not to warfare at our own charges, nor by our own strength. If we love Him and try to make a brave stand against our own evil, and to strike a manful blow for God in this world, we shall not have to bear the brunt alone. Remember he who fights for God never fights without God.

There is a strange story in a later book of Scripture, which almost reads as if it had been modelled on some reminiscence of these words of the dying Jacob--and is, at any rate, a remarkable illustration of them. The kingdom of Israel, of which the descendants of Joseph were the most conspicuous part, was in the very crisis and agony of one of its Syrian wars. Its principal human helper was fallen sick of the sickness whereof he died. And to his death-bed came, in a passion of perplexity and despair, the irresolute weakling who was then king, bewailing the impending withdrawal of the nation's best defence. The dying Elisha, with curt authority, pays no heed to the tears of Joash, but bids him take bow and arrows. And he said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow, and he put his hand upon it; and Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands. Then, when the thin, wasted, transparent fingers of the old man were thus laid, guiding and infusing strength, by a strange paradox, into the brown, muscular hands of the young king, he tells him to open the casement that looked eastward towards the lands of the enemy, and, as the blinding sunshine and the warm air streamed into the sick-chamber, he bids him draw the bow. He was obeyed, and, as the arrow whizzed Jordanwards, the dying prophet followed its flight with words brief and rapid like it, the arrow of the Lord's deliverance. Here we have all the elements of our text singularly repeated--the dying seer, the king the representative of Joseph in the royal dignity to which his descendants have come, the arrows and the bow, the strength for conflict by the touch of hands that had the strength of God in them. The lesson of that paradox that the dying gave strength to the living, the feeble to the strong, was the old one which is ever new, that mere human power is weakness when it is strongest, and that power drawn from God is omnipotent when it seems weakest. And the further lesson is the lesson of our text, that our hands are then strengthened, when His hands are laid upon them, of whom it is written: Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is Thy hand, and high is Thy right hand.

As a father in old days might have taken his little boy out to the butts, and put a bow into his hand, and given him his first lesson in archery, directing his unsteady aim by his own firmer finger, and lending the strength of his wrist to his child's feebler pull, so God does with us. The sure, strong hand is laid on ours, and is profitable to direct. A wisdom not our own is ever at our side, and ready for our service. We but dimly perceive the conditions of the conflict, and the mark at which we should aim is ever apt to be obscured to our perceptions. But in all cases where conscience is perplexed, or where the judgment is at fault, we may, if we will, have Him for our teacher. And when we know not where to strike the foes that seem invulnerable, like the warrior who was dipped in the magic stream, or clothed in mail impenetrable as rhinoceros hide, He will make us wise to know the one spot where a wound is fatal. We shall not need to fight as he that beats the air; to strike at random; or to draw our bow at a venture, if we will let Him guide us.

Or if ever the work be seen clearly enough, but our poor hands cannot take aim for very trembling, or shoot for fear of striking something very dear to us, He will steady our nerves and make our aim sure and true. We have often, in our fight with ourselves, and in our struggle to get God's will done in the world, to face as cruel a perplexity as the father who had to split the apple on his son's head. The evil against which we have to contend is often so closely connected with things very precious to us, that it is hard to smite the one when there is such danger of grazing the other. Many a time our tastes, our likings, our prejudices, our hopes, our loves, make our sight dim, and our pulses too tumultuous to allow of a good, long, steady gaze and a certain aim. It is hard to keep the arrow's point firm when the heart throbs and the hand shakes. But in all such difficult times He is ready to help us. Behold, we know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee, is a prayer never offered in vain.

The word that is here rendered made strong, might be translated made pliable, or flexible conveying the notion of deftness and dexterity rather than that of simple strength. It is practised strength that He will give, the educated hand and arm, masters of the manipulation of the weapon. The stiffness and clumsiness of our handling, the obstinate rigidity as well as the throbbing feebleness of our arms, the dimness of our sight, may all be overcome. At His touch the raw recruit is as the disciplined veteran; the prophet who cannot speak because he is a child, gifted with a mouth and wisdom which all the adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor to resist. Do not be disheartened by your inexperience, or by your ignorance; but as the prophet said to the young king, Take the bow and shoot. God's strong hand will hold yours, and the arrow will fly true.

That strong hand is laid on ours, and lends its weight to our feeble pull. The bow is often too heavy for us to bend, but we do not need to strain our strength in the vain attempt to do it alone. Tasks seem too much for us. The pressure of our daily work overwhelms us. The burden of our daily anxieties and sorrows is too much. Some huge obstacle starts up in our path. Some great sacrifice for truth, honour, duty, which we feel we cannot make, is demanded of us. Some daring defiance of some evil, which has caught us in its toils, or which it is unfashionable to fight against, seems laid upon us. We cannot rise to the height of the occasion, or bring ourselves to the wrench that is required. Or the wearing recurrence of monotonous duties seems to take ail freshness out of our lives, and all spring out of ourselves; and we are ready to give over struggling any more, and let ourselves drift. Can we not feel that large hand laid on ours; and does not power, more and other than our own, creep into our numb and relaxed fingers? Yes, if we will let Him. His strength is made perfect in our weakness; and every man and woman who will make life a noble struggle against evil, vanity, or sin, may be very sure that God will direct and strengthen their hands to war, and their fingers to fight.

But the remarkable metaphor of the text not only gives the fact of divine strength being bestowed, but also the manner of the gift. What a boldness of reverent familiarity there is in that symbol of the hands of God laid on the hands of the man! How strongly it puts the contact between us and Him as the condition of our reception of power from Him! A true touch, as of hand to hand, conveys the grace. It is as when the prophet laid himself down with his warm lip on the dead boy's cold mouth, and his heart beating against the still heart of the corpse, till the life passed into the clay, and the lad lived. So, if we may say it, our Quickener bends Himself over all our deadness, and by His own warmth reanimates us.

Perhaps this same thought is one of the lessons which we are meant to learn from the frequency with which our Lord wrought His miracles of healing by the touch of His hand. Come and lay Thy hand on him, and he shall live. And He put forth His hand and touched him, and said, I will, be thou clean. Many said, He is dead; but Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. The touch of His hand is healing and life. The touch of our hands is faith. In the mystery of His incarnation, in the flow of His sympathy, in the forth-putting of His power, He lays hold not on angels, but He lays hold on the seed of Abraham. By our lowly trust, by the forth-putting of our desires, we stretch lame hands of faith, and, blessed be God! we do not grope, but we grasp His strong hand and are held up.

The contact of our spirits with His Spirit is a contact far more real than the touch of earthly hands that grasp each other closest. There is ever some film of atmosphere between the palms. But he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit, and he that clasps Christ's outstretched hand of help with his outstretched hand of weakness, holds Him with a closeness to which all unions of earth are gaping gulfs of separation. You remember how Mary cast herself at Christ's feet on the resurrection morning, and would have flung her arms round them in the passion of her joy. The calm word which checked her has a wonderful promise in it. Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father; plainly leading to the inference, When I am ascended, then you may touch Me. And that touch will be more reverent, more close, more blessed, than any clasping of His feet, even with such loving hands, and is possible for us all for evermore.

Nothing but such contact will give us strength for conflict and for conquest. And the plain lesson therefore is--see to it, that the contact is not broken by you. Put away the metaphor, and the simple English of the advice is just this:--First, live in the desire and the confidence of His help in all your need, of His strength as all your power. As a part of that confidence--its reverse and under side, so to speak--cherish the profound sense of your own weakness.

In our own strength we nothing can;

Full soon were we down-ridden--

as Luther has taught us to sing. Let there be a constant renewal, in the midst of your duties and trials, of that conscious dependence and feeling of insufficiency. Stretch out the empty hands to Him in that desire and hope, which, spoken or silent, is prayer. Keep the communications open, by which His strength flows into your souls. Let them not be choked with self-confidence, with vanities, with the rubbish of your own nature, or of the world. Do not twitch away your hands from under the strong hands that are laid so gently upon them. But let Him cover, direct, cherish, and strengthen your poor fingers till they are strong and nimble for all your work and warfare. If you go into the fight trusting to your own wit and wisdom, to the vigour of your own arm, or the courage of your own heart, that very foolhardy confidence is itself defeat, for it is sin as well as folly, and nothing can come of it but utter collapse and disaster. But if you will only go to your daily fight with yourself and the world, with your hand grasping God's hand, you will be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. The enemies may compass you about like bees, but in the name of the Lord you can destroy them. Their arrows may fly thick enough to darken the sun, but, as the proud old boast has it, then we can fight in the shade; and when their harmless points have buried themselves in the ground, you will stand unhurt, your unshivered bow ready for the next assault, and your hands made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. In all these things we are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us.