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

**ISAIAH-031. THREE PICTURES OF ONE REALITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also He will deliver it; and passing over He will preserve it'."*

*Isaiah 31:5*

The immediate occasion of this very remarkable promise is, of course, the peril in which Jerusalem was placed by Sennacherib's invasion; and the fulfilment of the promise was the destruction of his army before its gates. But the promise here, like all God's promises, is eternal in substance, and applies to a community only because it applies to each member of that community. Jerusalem was saved, and that meant that every house in Jerusalem was saved, and every man in it the separate object of the divine protection So that all the histories of Scripture, and all the histories of men in the world, are but transitory illustrations of perennial principles, and every atom of the consolation and triumph of this verse comes to each of us, as truly as it did to the men that with tremulous heart began to take cheer, as they listened to Isaiah. There is a wonderful saying in one of the other prophets which carries that lesson, where, bringing down the story of Jacob's struggle with the angel of Peniel to the encouragement of the existing generation, he says, He spake to us. They were hundreds of years after the patriarch, and yet had fallen heirs to all that God had ever said to him So, from that point of view, I am not spiritualising, or forcing the meaning of these words, when I bring them direct into the lives of each one of ourselves.

**I. And, first, I would note the very striking and beautiful pictures that are given in these verses.**

There are three of them, on each of which I must touch briefly. As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem. The form of the words in the original shows that it is the mother-bird that is thought about. And the picture rises at once of her fluttering over the nest, where the callow chickens are, unable to fly and to help themselves. It is a kind of echo of the grand metaphor in the song that is attributed to Moses, which speaks of the eagle fluttering over her nest, and taking care of her young. Jerusalem was as a nest on which, for long centuries, that infinite divine love had brooded. It was but a poor brood that had been hatched out, but yet as birds flying He had watched over the city. Can you not almost see the mother-bird, made bold by maternal love, swooping down upon the intruder that sought to rob the nest, and spreading her broad pinion over the callow fledglings that lie below? That is what God does with us. As I said, it is a poor brood that is hatched out. That does not matter; still the Love bends down and helps. Nobody but a prophet could have ventured on such a metaphor as that, and nobody but Jesus Christ would have ventured to mend it and say, As a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, when there are hawks in the sky. So He, in all the past ages, was the One that as birds flying ... defended His people, and would have gathered them under His wings, only they would not.

Now, beautiful as this metaphor is, as it stands, it seems to me, like some brilliant piece of colouring, to derive additional beauty from its connection with the background upon which it stands out. For just a verse before the prophet has given another emblem of what God is and does, and if you will carry with you all those thoughts of tenderness and maternal care and solicitude, and then connect them with that verse, I think the thought of His tenderness will start up into new beauty. For here is what precedes the text: Like as a lion, and the young lion roaring on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor bow himself for the noise of them. So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion. Look at these two pictures side by side, on the one hand the lion, with his paw on his prey, and the angry growl that answers when the shepherds vainly try to drag it away from him. That is God. Ay! but that is only an aspect of God. As birds flying, so the Lord will defend Jerusalem. We have to take that into account too. This generation is very fond of talking about God's love; does it believe in God's wrath? It is very fond of speaking about the gentleness of Jesus; has it pondered that tremendous phrase, the wrath of the Lamb? The lion that growls, and the mother-bird that hovers--God is like them both. That is the first picture that is here.

The second one is not so obvious to English readers, but it is equally striking, though I do not mean to dwell upon it. The word that is translated in our text twice, defend and defending--So will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem, and defending will deliver--means, literally, shielding. Thus we have the same general idea as that in the previous metaphor of the mother-bird hovering above the nest: God is like a shield held over us, and so flinging off front the broad and burnished surface of the Almighty buckler, all the darts that any foe can launch against as. Our God is a Sun and Shield. I need not enlarge on this familiar metaphor.

But the third picture I wish to point to in more detail: Passing over, He will deliver. Now, the word that is there rendered passing over, is almost a technical word in the Old Testament, because it is that employed in reference to the Passover. And so you see the swiftness of genius with which the prophet changes his whole scene. We had the nest and the mother-bird, we had the battlefield and the shield; now we are swept away back to that night when the Destroying Angel stalked through the land, and passed over the doors on which the blood had been sprinkled. And thus this God, who in one aspect may be likened to the mother-bird hovering with her little breast full of tenderness, and made brave by maternal love conquering natural timidity, and in another aspect may be likened to the broad shield behind which a man stands safe, may also be likened to that Destroying Angel that went through Egypt, and smote wherever there were not the tokens of the blood on the lintels, and passed over wherever there were. Of course, the original fulfilment of this third picture is the historical case of the army of Sennacherib; outside the walls, widespread desolation; inside the walls, an untroubled night of peace. That night in Egypt is paralleled, in the old Jewish hymn that is still sung at the Passover, with the other night when Sennacherib's men were slain; and the parallel is based on our text. So, then, here is another illustration of what I started with saying, that the past events of Scripture are transient expressions of perennial principles and tendencies. For the Passover night was not to be to the contemporaries of the prophet an event receding ever further into the dim distance, but it was a present event, and to be reproduced in that catastrophe when in the morning when they arose, they were all dead corpses. And the event is being repeated to-day, and will be for each of us, if we will.

So, then, there are these three pictures--the Nest and the Mother-bird, the Battlefield and the Shield, Egypt and the Destroying Angel.

**II. We note the reality meant by these pictures.**

They mean the absolute promise from God of protection for His people from every evil. We are not to cut it down, not to say that it applies absolutely in regard to the spiritual world, but that it does not apply in regard to temporal things. Yes, it does entirely, only you have to rise to the height of God's conception of what is good and what is evil in regard to outward things, before you understand how completely, and without qualification or deduction, this promise is fulfilled to every man that puts his trust in Him. Of course, I do not need to remind you, for your own lives will do so sufficiently, that this hovering protector, this strong Shield, this Destroying Angel that passes by our houses if the blood is on the threshold, does not guarantee us any exemption from the common ills that flesh is heir to. We all know that well enough. But what does it guarantee? That all the poison shall be wiped off the arrow, that all the evil shall be taken out of the evil, that it will change its character, that if we observe the conditions, the sharpest sorrow will come to us with this written on it by the Father's hand, With My love to My child; that pain will be discipline, and discipline will be blessed. Ah! dear friends! I am sure there are many of us that can set to our seals that God is true in this matter, and that we have found that His rod does blossom, and that our sorest sorrows have been our greatest mercies, drawing us nearer to Him; Defending He will deliver, and passing over He will preserve.

**III. And now let me remind you of the way by which we can make the reality of these pictures ours.**

You know that all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are conditional, and that there are many of them that were never fulfilled, and were spoken in order that they might not be fulfilled, if only the people took warning. I wish folk would carry a little more consciously in their minds that principle in interpreting them all, and in asking about their fulfilment. Not only in regard to these ancient events, but in regard to our individual experience, God's promises and threatenings are conditional.

Take that first metaphor of the hovering mother-bird. Listen to this expansion of it in one of the psalms: He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust. The word for trust here means to fly into a refuge. Can you not see the picture? A little brood round the parent bird, frightened by some beast of prey, or hovering hawk in the sky, and fluttering under its wings, and all safe and huddled together there close against the warm breast, and in amongst the downy feathers. Under His wings shalt thou trust. Put thou thy trust in God, and God is to thee the hovering bird, the broad shield, the Angel that passes over.

Take the other picture of the Passover night. Only by our individual faith in Jesus Christ as our individual Saviour can we put the blood on our door-posts so that the Destroying Angel shall pass by. So, if we would have the sweetness of such words as these fulfilled in our daily lives, however disturbed and troubled and sorrowful and solitary they may be, the first condition is that under His wings shall we flee for refuge, and we do so by trust in Him.

But having thus fled thither, we must continue there, if we would continue under His protection. Such continuance of safety because of continuous faith is possible only by continued communion. Remember our Lord's expansion of the metaphor in His lament: How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not. We can resist the drawing. We can get away from the shelter of the wing. We can lift up our wills against Him. And what becomes of the chicken that does not run to the mother's pinions when the hawk is hovering? That is what becomes of the man that stops outside the refuge in Christ, or that by failure of his faith departs from that refuge. Ye would not; therefore your house is left unto you desolate. That house, in the Jerusalem which God defends, is not defended.

Another condition of divine protection is obedience. We need not expect that God will take care of us, and preserve us, when we did not ask His leave to get into the dangerous place that we find ourselves in. Many of us do the converse of what the Apostle condemns, we begin in the flesh, and think we shall end in the Spirit; which being translated is, we do not ask God's leave to do certain things, to enter into certain engagements or arrangements with other people, and the like, and then we expect God to come and help us in or out of them. That is by no means an uncommon form of delusion. You remember what Jesus Christ said when the Devil tried to entice Him to do a thing of that sort, by quoting Scripture to Him--He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee, to keep Thee in all Thy ways. Cast Thyself down. Trust to the promise as a kind of parachute to keep Thee from falling bruised on the stones of the Temple-court. Christ's answer was: Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. You will not get God's protection in ways of your own choosing.

And so, brethren, all things work together for good to them that love, to them that trust, to them that keep close, to them that obey. And for such the old faithful promise will be faithful and new once more, Because He hath set His love upon Me, therefore will I deliver Him--that will be the summing up of our lives; and I will set Him on high because He hath known My Name, that will be the meaning of our deaths.