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

**ISAIAH-032. THE LORD'S FURNACE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem."*

*Isaiah 31:9*

This very remarkable characterisation of God stands here as a kind of seal, set upon the preceding prophecy. It is the reason why that will certainly be fulfilled. And what precedes is mainly a promise of a deliverance for Israel, which was to be a destruction for Israel's enemies. It is put in very graphic and remarkable metaphors: Like as a lion roareth on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them: so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion. The enemies of Israel are picturesquely and poetically represented as a crowd of shepherds vainly trying to scare a lion by their shouts. He stands undaunted, with his strong paw on his prey, and the boldest of them durst not venture to drag it from beneath his claws. So, says Isaiah, with singularly daring imagery, God will put all His strength into keeping fast hold of Israel, and no one can pluck His people from His hands.

Then, with a sudden and striking change of metaphor, the prophet passes from a picture of the extreme of fierceness to one of the extreme of tenderness. As birds flying--mother birds fluttering over their nests--so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem, hovering over it and going from side to side to defend with His broad pinions, passing over, He will preserve it. These figures are next translated into the plain promise of utter discomfiture and destruction, panic and flight as the portion of the enemies of Israel, and the whole has this broad seal set to it, that He who promises is the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.

We shall not understand these great words if we regard them as only a revelation of destructive and terrible power. They are that indeed, but they are far more than that. It is the very beauty and completeness of this emblem that has a double aspect, and is no less rich in joy and blessing than pregnant with warning and terror. As Isaiah says in another place, Jerusalem is Ariel, which probably means the hearth of God. His presence in the city is as a fire for the comfort and defence of the happy inhabitants, and at the same time for the destruction of all evil and enemies. Far more truly than He dwelt in the city of David does God dwell in the Church, and His presence is its security. What, then, of instruction and hope may we gather from this wonderful emblem?

**I. In the Church, God is present as a great reservoir of fervid love.**

Every language has taken fire as the symbol of love and emotion. We speak so naturally of warm love, fervent feeling, glowing earnestness, ardent enthusiasm and the like, that we are scarcely aware of using figurative language. We do not usually ascribe emotion to God, but surely the deepest and most sacred of the senses in which it is true that fire is His emblem, is that He is love. His fire is in Zion. He dwells in His Church, a storehouse of blazing love, heated seventy times seven hotter than any creatural love, and pouring out its ardours for the quickening and gladdening of all who walk in the light of that fire, and thaw their coldness at its blaze.

Then, if so, how comes it that so many Christian Churches are ice-houses instead of furnaces? How comes it that they who profess to live in the Zion where this fire flames are themselves so cold? If God's blazing furnace is in Jerusalem, it should send the thermometer up in all the houses of the city. But what a strange contradiction it is for men to be in God's Church, the very focus and centre of His burning love, and themselves to be almost down below zero in their temperature! The Christian Church ought to be all aflame in all its members, with the fire of love kindled and alight from God Himself. Every community of Christian people ought to radiate warmth and light which it has absorbed from its present God. Our love ought to answer His, and, being caught and kindled from that mighty fire, should throw back to its source some of the heat received, in fervours of reflected love, and should pour the rest beneficently on all around. Love to God and love to man are regarded in Christian morals as beams of the same fire, only travelling in different directions. But what a miserable contrast to such an ideal the reality in so many of our churches is! A fiery furnace with its doors hung with icicles is no greater a contradiction and anomaly than a Christian Church or a single soul, which professes to have been touched by the infinite loving kindness of God, and yet lives as cold and unmoved as we do. The Lord's fire is in Zion. Are there any tokens of that fire amongst us, in our own hearts and in our collective temperature as Christian Churches?

There is no religion worth calling so which has not warmth in it. We hear a great deal from people against whom I do not wish to say a word, about the danger of an emotional Christianity. Agreed, if by that they mean a Christianity which has no foundation for its emotion in principle and intelligence; but not agreed if they mean to recommend a Christianity which professes to accept truths that might kindle a soul beneath the ribs of death and make the dumb sing, and yet is never moved one hair's-breadth from its quiet phlegmaticism. There is no religion without emotion. Of course it must be intelligent emotion, built upon the acceptance of divine truth, and regulated and guided by that, and so consolidated into principle, and it must be emotion which works for its living, and impels to Christian conduct. These two provisoes being attended to, then we can safely say that warmth is the test of life, and the readings of the thermometer, which measure the fervour, measure also the reality of our religion. A cold Christian is a contradiction in terms. If the adjective is certainly applicable, I am afraid the applicability of the noun is extremely doubtful. If there is no fire, what is there? Cold is death.

We want no flimsy, transitory, noisy, ignorant, hysterical agitation. Smoke is not fire. If the temperature were higher, and the fire more wisely fed, there would not be any. But we do want a more obvious and powerful effect of their solemn, glorious, and heart-melting beliefs on the affections and emotions of professing Christians, and that they may be more mightily moved by love, to all heroisms and service and enthusiasms and to consecration which shall in some measure answer to the glowing heart of that fire of God which flames in Zion.

**II. God's revelation of Himself, and presence in His Church, are an instrument of cleansing.**

Fire purifies. In our great cities now there are disinfecting ovens, where infected articles are taken, and exposed to a high temperature which kills the germs of disease, so that tainted things come out sweet and clean. That is what God's furnace in Zion is meant to do for us. The true way of purifying is by fire. To purify by water, as John the Baptist saw and said, is but a poor, cold way of getting outward cleanliness. Water cleanses the surface, and becomes dirty in the process. Fire cleanses within and throughout, and is not tainted thereby. You plunge some foul thing into the flame, and, as you look, the specks and spots melt out of it. Raise the temperature, and you kill the poison germs. That is the way that God cleanses His people; not by external application, but by getting up the heat. The fire of His love, the fire of His spirit, is, as St. Bernard says, a blessed fire, which consumes indeed, but does not hurt; which sweetly burns and blessedly lays waste, and so puts forth the force and fire against our vices, as to display the operation of the anointing oil upon our souls. The Hebrew captives were flung into the fiery furnace. What did it burn? Only their bonds. They themselves lived and rejoiced in the intense heat. So, if we have any real possession of the divine flame, it will burn off our wrists the bands and chains of our old vices, and we shall stand pure and clean, emancipated by the fire which will consume only our sins, and be for our true selves as our native home, where we walk at liberty and expatiate in the genial warmth. That is the blessed and effectual way of purifying, which slays only the death that we carry about with us in our sin, and makes us the more truly living for its death. Cleansing is only possible if we are immersed in the Holy Ghost and in fire, as some piece of foul clay, plunged into the furnace, has all the stains melted out of it. For all sinful souls seeking after cleansing, and finding that the damned spot will not out for all their washing, it is surely good news and tidings of great joy that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and that its purifying power will burn out all their sin.

**III. Further, there is suggested another thought: that God, in His great revelation of Himself, by which He dwells in His Church, is a power of transformation.**

Fire turns all which it seizes into fire. Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire (R.V.). The heap of green wood with the sap in it needs but a tiny light pushed into the middle, and soon it is all ablaze, transformed into ruddy brightness, and leaping heavenwards. However heavy, wet, and obstinate may be the fuel, the fire can change it into aspiring and brilliant flame.

And so God, coming to us in His Spirit of burning, turns us into His own likeness, and makes us possessors of some spark of Himself. Therefore it is a great promise, He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost, and in fire. He shall plunge you into the life-giving furnace, and so make His ministers like a flame of fire, like the Lord whom they serve. The seraphim who stand round the throne are burning spirits, and the purity which shines, the love which glows, the swift life which flames in them, are all derived from that unkindled and all-animating Fire who is their and our God. The transformation of all the dwellers in Zion into miniature likenesses of this fire is the very highest hope that springs from the solemn and blessed truth that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.

**IV. But, further, this figure teaches that the same divine fire may become destructive.**

The emblem of fire suggests a double operation, and the very felicity of it as an emblem is that it has these two sides, and with equal naturalness may stand for a power which quickens, and for one which destroys. The difference in the effects springs not from differences in the cause, but in the objects with which the fire plays. The same God is the fire of life, the fire of love, of purifying and transformation and glad energy to whosoever will put his trust in Him, and a fire of destruction and anger unto whosoever resists Him. The alternative stands before every soul of man, to be quickened by fire or consumed by it. We may make the furnace of God our blessedness and the reservoir of a far more joyful and noble life than ever we could have lived in our coldness; or we may make it terror and destruction. There lie the two possibilities before every one of us. We cannot stand apart from Him; we have relations with Him, whether we will or no; He is something to us. He is, and must be for all, a flaming fire. We can settle whether it shall be a fire which is life-giving unto life, or a fire which is death-giving unto death.

Here are two buildings: the one the life of the man that lives apart from God, and therefore has built only with wood, hay, and stubble; the other the life of the man that lives with God and for Him, and so has built with gold, silver, and precious stones. The day and the fire come; and the fates of these two are opposite effects of the same cause. The licking tongues surround the wretched hut, built of combustibles, and up go wood and hay and stubble, in a smoking flare, and disappear. The flames play round the gold and silver and precious stones, and every leap of their light is answered by some facet of the gems that flash in their brilliancy, and give back the radiance.

You can settle which of these two is to be your fate. The Lord's fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem. To those who, by faith in that dear Lord who came to cast fire on earth, have opened their hearts, to the entrance of that searching, cleansing flame, and who therefore burn with kindred and answering fervours, it is joy to know that their God is a consuming fire, for therein lies their hope of daily purifying and ultimate assimilation. To those, on the other hand, who have closed their hearts to the warmth of His redeeming love in Christ, and the quickening of His baptism by fire, what can the knowledge be but terror, what can contact with God in judgment be but destruction? The day cometh, it burneth as a furnace; and all the proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall burn them up. What will that day do for you?