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

**ISAIAH-033. THE HIDING PLACE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."*

*Isaiah 32:2*

We may well say, Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Here are distinctly attributed to one of ourselves, if we take the words in their simplicity and fulness, functions and powers which universal experience has taught us not to look for in humanity. And there have been a great many attempts--as it seems to me, altogether futile and baseless ones--to break the force of these words as a distinct prophecy of Jesus Christ. Surely the language is far too wide to have application to any real or ideal Jewish monarch, except one whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom? Surely the experience of a hundred centuries might teach men that there is one man, and one alone, who is the refuge from all dangers, the fruition of all desires, the rest and refreshment in all toils.

And I, for my part, have no hesitation in saying that the only reference of these words which gives full value to their wealth of blessing, is to regard them as a prophecy of the man--Christ Jesus; hiding in whom we are safe, coming to whom we never thirst, guarded and blest by whom no weariness can befall us, and dwelling in whom this weary world shall be full of refreshment and peace!

I do not need to point out the exquisite beauty of the imagery or the pathos and peace that breathe in the majestic rhythm of the words. There is something more than poetical beauty or rhetorical amplification of a single thought in those three clauses. The hiding-place and covert refer to one class of wants; the rivers of water in a dry place to yet another; and the shadow of a great rock in a weary land to yet a third. And, though they are tinged and dyed in Eastern imagery, the realities of life in Western lands, and in all ages, give them a deeper beauty than that of lovely imagery, and are the true keys to understanding their meaning. We shall, perhaps, best grasp the whole depth of that meaning according to the Messianic reference which we give to the text, if we consider the sad and solemn conception of man's life that underlies it; the enigmatical and obstinate hope which it holds out in the teeth of all experience--A man shall be a refuge; and the solution of the riddle in the man Christ Jesus.

**I. First, there underlies this prophecy a very sad but a very true conception of human life.**

The three classes of promises have correlative with them three phases of man's condition, three diverse aspects of his need and misery. The covert and the hiding-place imply tempest, storm, and danger; the river of water implies drought and thirst; the shadow of a great rock implies lassitude and languor, fatigue and weariness. The view of life that arises from the combination of these three bears upon its front the signature of truth in the very fact that it is a sad view.

For, I suppose, notwithstanding all that we may say concerning the beauty and the blessedness scattered broadcast round about us; notwithstanding that we believe, and hold as for our lives the happy faith that all which we behold is full of blessing, it needs but a very short experience of this life, and but a superficial examination of our own histories and our own hearts, in order to come to the conclusion that the world is full of strange and terrible sadness, that every life has dark tracts and long stretches of sombre tint, and that no representation is true to fact which dips its pencil only in light and flings no shadows on the canvas. There is no depth in a Chinese picture, because there is no shade. It is the wrinkles and marks of tear and wear that make the expression in a man's portrait. Life's sternest painter "is" its best. The gloomy thoughts which are charged against Scripture are the true thoughts about man and the world as man has made it. Not, indeed, that life needs to be so, but that by reason of our own evil and departure from God there have come in as a disturbing element the retributive consequences of our own godlessness, and these have made danger where else were safety, thirst where else were rivers of water, and weariness and lassitude where else were strength and bounding hope.

So then, look for a moment at these three points that come out of my text, in order to lay the foundation for subsequent considerations.

We live a life defenceless and exposed to many a storm and tempest. I need but remind you of the adverse circumstances--the wild winds that go sweeping across the flat level, the biting blasts that come down from the snow-clad mountains of destiny that lie round the low plain upon which we live. I need but remind you of the dangers that are lodged for our spiritual life in the temptations to evil that are round us. I need but remind you of that creeping and clinging consciousness of being exposed to a divinely commissioned retribution and punishment, which perverts the Name that ought to be the basis of all our blessedness into a Name unwelcome and terrible, because threatening judgment. I need but remind you how men's sins have made it needful that when the mighty God, even the Lord, appears before them, it shall be very tempestuous round about him. Men fear and ought to fear the blast of the breath of His nostrils, which must burn up all that is evil. And I need but remind you of that last wild wind of Death that whirls the sin-faded leaves into dark corners where they lie and rot.

My brother, you have not lived thus long without learning how defenceless you are against the storm of adverse circumstances. You have not lived thus long without learning that though, blessed be God! there do come in all our lives long periods of halcyon rest, when birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave, and the heavens above are clear as sapphire, and the sea around is transparent as opal--yet the little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, may rise on the horizon, and may thicken and blacken and grow greater and nearer till all the sky is dark, and burst in lightning and rain and fierceness of wind, till through the torn sail the wild tempest is streaming, and the white crests of the waves are like the mane of Death's pale horse leaping upon the broken ship. We have all learnt in how profound a sense, by reason of outward adverse circumstances and inward temptations, by reason of the fears of a Justice which we know is throned at the centre of the creation, by reason of a death which to us is a terror, and by reason of that universal fear of after death the judgment, storm and tempest swoop upon our paths. God made the sunshine, and we have made it a storm. God made life blessed and full of safety and peace, and we have wrenched ourselves from Him and stand defenceless amidst its dangers.

Then, there is another aspect and conception of life which underlies these words of my text. The image of the desert was before the prophet's rapt vision. He saw the sand whirled into mad dancing columns before the blast which swept across the unsheltered flat, with nothing, for a day's march, to check its force. But the wilderness is not only shelterless, it is waterless too--a place in which wild and ravening thirst finds no refreshing draughts, and the tongue cleaves to the blackening gums.

Rivers of water in a dry place; and what is the prose fact of that? That you and I live in the midst of a world which has no correspondence with, nor power of satisfying, our truest and deepest selves--that we bear about with us a whole set of longings and needs and weaknesses and strengths and capacities, all of which, like the climbing tendrils of some creeping plant, go feeling and putting out their green fingers to lay hold of some prop and stay--that man is so made that for his rest and blessedness he must have an external object round which his spirit may cling, on which his desires may fasten and rest, by which his heart may be blessed, which shall be authority for his will, peace for his fears, sprinkling and cleansing for his conscience, light for his understanding, shall be in complete correspondence with his inward nature--be water for his thirst, and bread for his hunger.

And as thus, on the very nature which each of us carries, there is stamped the signature of dependence, and the necessity of finding an external object on which to rest; and as, further, men will not be tutored even by their own miseries or by the voice of their own wants, and ever confound their wishes with their wants and their whims with their needs, therefore it comes to pass that the appetite which was only meant to direct us to God, and to be as a wholesome hunger in order to secure our partaking with relish and delight of the divine food that is provided for it, becomes unsatisfied, a torture, and unslaked, a ravening madness; and men's needs become men's misery; and men's hunger becomes men's famine; and men's thirst becomes men's death. We do dwell in a dry land where no water is.

All about us there are these creatures of God, bright and blessed and beautiful, fit for their functions and meant to minister to our gladness. They are meant to be held in subordination. It is not meant that we should find in them the food for our souls. Wealth and honour and wisdom and love and gratified ambition and successful purpose, and whatsoever other good things a man may gather about him and achieve--he may have them all, and yet in spite of them all there will be a great aching, longing vacuity in his soul. His true and inmost being will be groping through the darkness, like a plant growing in a cellar, for the light which alone can tinge its pale petals and swell its shrivelling blossoms to ripeness and fruit.

A dry place, as well as a dangerous place--have not you found it so? I believe that every soul of man has, if he will be honest with himself, and that there is not one among us who would not, if he were to look into the deepest facts and real governing experience of his life, confess--I thirst: my soul thirsteth. And oh, brethren, why not go on with the quotation, and make that which is else a pain, a condition of blessedness? Why not recognise the meaning of all this restless disquiet, and say My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God?

And then there is the other idea also underlying these words, yet another phase of this sad life of ours--not only danger and drought, but also weariness and languor. The desert stretches before us again, where there is no shelter from the blast and no trickling stream amid the yellowing sand; where the fierce ball above beats down cruelly, and its hot rays are flung up cruelly into our faces, and the glare blinds us, and the stifling heat wearies us, and work is a torture and motion is misery, and we long for nothing so much as to be quiet and to hide our heads in some shade.

I was reading recently one of our last books of travel in the wilderness of the Exodus, in which the writer told how, after toiling for hours under a scorching sun, over the hot, white, marly flat, seeing nothing but a beetle or two on the way, and finding no shelter anywhere from the pitiless beating of the sunshine, the weary travellers came at last to a little Retem bush only a few feet high, and flung themselves down and tried to hide, at least, their heads, from those sunbeams like swords, even beneath its ragged shade. And my text tells of a great rock, with blue dimness in its shadow, with haply a fern or two in the moist places of its crevices, where there is rest, and a man can lie down and be cool, while all outside is burning sun, and burning sand, and dancing mirage.

Oh! the weariness felt by us all, of plod, plod, plodding across the sand! That fatal monotony into which every man's life stiffens, as far as outward circumstances, outward joys and pleasures go! the depressing influence of custom which takes the edge off all gladness and adds a burden to every duty! the weariness of all that tugging up the hill, of all that collar-work which we have to do! Who is there that has not his mood, and that by no means the least worthy and man-like of his moods, wherein he feels not, perhaps, that all is vanity, but--how infinitely wearisome it all is.

And so every race of man that ever has lived has managed out of two miseries to make a kind of shadowy gladness; and, knowing the weariness of life and the blackness of death, has somewhat lightened the latter by throwing upon it the thought of the former, and has said, Well, at any rate, if the grave be narrow and dark, and if outside "the warm precincts of the cheerful day" there be that ambiguous night, at least it is the place for sleep; and, if we cannot be sure of anything more, we shall rest then, at any rate. So the hope of long disquiet merged in rest becomes almost bright, and man's weariness finds most pathetic expression in his thinking of the grave as a bed where he can stretch himself and be still. Life is hard, life is dry, life is dangerous.

**II. But another thought suggested by these words is--The Mysterious Hope which shines through them.**

One of ourselves shall deliver us from all this evil in life. A man shall be a refuge, rivers of water, the shadow of a great rock. Such an expectation seems to be right in the teeth of all experience and far too high-pitched ever to be fulfilled. It appears to demand in him who should bring it to pass powers which are more than human, and which must in some inexplicable way be wide as the range of humanity and enduring as the succession of the ages.

It is worth while to realise to ourselves these two points which seem to make such words as these of our text a blank impossibility. Experience contradicts them, and common-sense demands for their fulfilment an apparently impossible human character.

All experience seems to teach--does it not?--that no human arm or heart can be to another soul what these words promise, and what we need. And yet the men who have been disappointed and disenchanted a thousand times do still look among their fellows for what their fellows, too, are looking for, and none have ever found. Have we found what we seek among men? Have we ever known amongst the dearest that we have clung to, one arm that was strong enough to keep us in all danger? Has there ever been a human love to which we can run with the security that there is a strong tower where no evil can touch us? There have been many delights in all our lives mediated and ministered to us by those that we loved. They have taught us, and helped us, and strengthened us in a thousand ways. We have received from them draughts of wisdom, of love, of joy, of guidance, of impulse, of comfort, which have been, as water in the desert is, more precious than gold. Our fellow-travellers have shared their store with us, letting down their pitchers upon their hand, and giving us drink; but has the draught ever slaked the thirst? They carry but a pitcher, and a pitcher is not a fountain. Have there been any in all the round of those that we have loved and trusted, to whom we have trusted absolutely, without having been disappointed? They, like us, are hemmed in by human limitations. They each bear a burdened and thirsty spirit, itself needing such supplies. And to the truest, happiest, most soul-sufficing companionship, there comes at last that dread hour which ends all sweet commerce of giving and receiving, and makes the rest of life, for some of us, one monotonous ashen-grey wilderness where no water is. These things make it impossible for us to find anywhere amongst men our refuge and our fruition.

And yet how strange, how pathetic, is the fact that after all disappointments, men still obstinately continue to look among their fellows for guidance and for light, for consolation, for defence, and for strength! After a thousand failures they still hope. Does not the search at once confess that hitherto they have not found, else why be seeking still?--and that they yet believe they will yet find, else why not cease the vain quest? And surely He who made us, made us not in vain, nor cursed us with immortal hopes which are only persistent lies. Surely there is some living Person who will vindicate these unquenchable hopes of humanity, and receive and requite our love and trust, and satisfy our longings, and explain the riddle of our lives. If there be not, nor ever has been, nor ever can be a man who shall satisfy us with his love, and defend us with his power, and be our all-sufficient satisfaction and our rest in weariness, then much of man's noblest nature is a mistake, and many of his purest and profoundest hopes are an illusion, a mockery, and a snare. The obstinate hope that, within the limits of humanity, we shall find what we need is a mystery, except on one hypothesis, that it, too, belongs to the unconscious prophecies that God has lodged in all men's hearts.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, how such functions as those of which my text speaks not only seem to be contradicted by all experience, but manifestly and obviously to transcend the possibilities of human nature. A man to defend me; and he himself--does he need no defence? A man to supply my wants; and is his spirit, then, other than mine, that it can become the all-sufficient fulness for my emptiness? He that can do this for one spirit must be greater than the spirit for which he doeth it. He that can do it for the whole race of man, through all ages, in all circumstances, down to the end of time, in every latitude, under every condition of civilisation--who must he be who, for the whole world, evermore and always, is their defence, their gladness, their shelter, and their rest?

The function requires a divine power, and the application of the power requires a human hand. It is not enough that I should be pointed to a far-off heaven, where there dwells an infinite loving God--I believe that we need more than that. We need both of the truths: God is my refuge and my strength, and A man shall be a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest.

**III. That brings me to the last point to be noticed, namely:--The solution of the mystery in the person of Jesus Christ.**

That which seemed impossible is real. The forebodings of humanity have not fathomed the powers of Divine Love. There is a man, our brother, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, who can be to single souls the adequate object of their perfect trust, the abiding home of their deepest love, the unfailing supply for their profoundest wants. There is one man to whom it is wise and blessed to look as the exclusive source of all our peace, the absolute ruler of all our lives. There is a man in whom we find all that we have vainly sought in men. There is a man, who can be to all ages and to the whole race their refuge, their satisfaction, their rest. It behoved Him to be made in all points like unto His brethren, that His succour might be ever near, and His sympathy sure. The man Christ Jesus who, being man, is God manifest in the flesh, exercises in one and the same act the offices of divine pity and human compassion, of divine and human guardianship, of divine and human love.

And so the Word had breath, and wrought

With human hands the creed of creeds

In loveliness of perfect deeds,

More strong than all poetic thought.

The dreams of weary hearts that have longed for an impossible perfection are all below the reality. The fact surpasses all expectation. It is more than all prophecies, it is more than all hopes, it is more than all praise. It is God's unspeakable gift. Well might an angel voice proclaim the mystery of love, Unto you is born a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. The ancient promise of our text is history now. A man has been and is all these things for us.

A refuge and a hiding-place from every storm--adverse circumstances sweep upon us, and His mighty hand is put down there as a buckler, behind which we may hide and be safe. Temptations to evil storm upon us, but if we are enclosed within Him they never touch us. The fears of our own hearts swirl like a river in flood against the walls of our fortress home, and we can laugh at them, for it is founded upon a rock! The day of judgment rises before us solemn and certain, and we can await it without fear, and approach it with calm joy. I call upon no mountains and hills to cover me.

Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.

Rivers of water in a dry place,--hungry and thirsty, my soul fainted within me. I longed for light, and behold darkness. I longed for help, and there was none that could come close to my spirit to succour and to give me drink in the desert. My conscience cried in all its wounds for cleansing and stanching, and no comforter nor any balm was there. My heart, weary of limited loves and mortal affections, howsoever sweet and precious, yearned and bled for one to rest upon all-sufficient and eternal. I thirsted with a thirst that was more than desire, that was pain, and was coming to be death, and I heard a voice which said, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.

The shadow of a great rock in a weary land,--and my heart was weary by reason of the greatness of the way, and duties and tasks seemed toils and burdens, and I was ready to say, Wherefore has Thou made me and all men in vain? Surely all this is vanity and vexation of spirit, and I heard One that laid His hand upon me and said, Come unto Me, and I will give thee rest. I come to Thee, O Christ, faint and perishing, defenceless and needy, with many a sin and many a fear; to Thee I turn for Thou hast died for me, and for me thou dost live. Be Thou my shelter and strong tower. Give me to drink of living water. Let me rest in Thee while in this weary land, and let Thy sweet love, my Brother and my Lord, be mine all on earth and the heaven of my heaven!