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

**ISAIAH-034. HOW TO DWELL IN THE FIRE OF GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"14. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? 15. He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil."*

*Isaiah 33:14-15*

*0* *He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God."*

*1 John 4:16*

I have put these two verses together because, striking as is at first sight the contrast in their tone, they refer to the same subject, and they substantially preach the same truth. A hasty reader, who is more influenced by sound than by sense, is apt to suppose that the solemn expressions in my first text, the devouring fire and everlasting burnings, mean hell. They mean God, as is quite obvious from the context. The man who is to dwell in the devouring fire is the good man. He that is able to abide the everlasting burnings is the man that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly, that despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil. The prophet has been calling all men, far and near, to behold a great act of divine judgment in which God has been manifested in flaming glory, consuming evil; now he represents the sinners in Zion, the unworthy members of the nation, as seized with sudden terror, and anxiously asking this question, which in effect means: Who among us can abide peacefully, joyfully, fed and brightened, not consumed and annihilated, by that flashing brightness and purity? The prophet's answer is the answer of common-sense--like draws to like. A holy God must have holy companions.

But that is not all. The fire of God is the fire of love as well as the fire of purity; a fire that blesses and quickens, as well as a fire that destroys and consumes. So the Apostle John comes with his answer, not contradicting the other one, but deepening it, expanding it, letting us see the foundations of it, and proclaiming that as a holy God must be surrounded by holy hearts, which will open themselves to the flame as flowers to the sunshine, so a loving God must be clustered about by loving hearts, who alone can enter into deep and true friendship with Him.

The two answers, then, of these texts are one at bottom; and when Isaiah asks, Who shall dwell with the everlasting fire?--the perpetual fire, burning and unconsumed, of that divine righteousness--the deepest answer, which is no stern requirement but a merciful promise, is John's answer, He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.

The simplest way, I think, of bringing out the force of the words before us will be just to take these three points which I have already suggested: the world's question, the partial answer of the prophet, the complete answer of the Apostle.

**I. The World's Question.**

I need only remind you how frequently in the Old Testament the emblem of fire is employed to express the divine nature. In many places, though by no means in all, the prominent idea in the emblem is that of the purity of the divine nature, which flashes and flames as against all which is evil and sinful. So we read in one grand passage in this book of Isaiah, the Light of Israel shall become a fire; as if the lambent beauty of the highest manifestation of God gathered itself together, intensified itself, was forced back upon itself, and from merciful, illuminating light turned itself into destructive and consuming fire. And we read, you may remember, too, in the description of the symbolical manifestation of the divine nature which accompanied the giving of the Law on Sinai, that the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain, and yet into that blaze and brightness the Lawgiver went, and lived and moved in it.

There is, then, in the divine nature a side of antagonism and opposition to evil, which flames against it, and labours to consume it. I would speak with all respect for the motives of many men in this day who dread to entertain the idea of the divine wrath against evil, lest they should in any manner trench upon the purity and perfectness of the divine love. I respect and sympathise with the motive altogether; and I neither respect nor sympathise with the many ferocious pictures of that which is called the wrath of God against sin, which much so-called orthodox teaching has indulged in. But if you will only remove from that word anger the mere human associations which cleave to it, of passion on the one hand, and of a wish to hurt its object on the other, then you cannot, I think, deny to the divine nature the possession of such passionless and unmalignant wrath, without striking a fatal blow at the perfect purity of God. A God that does not hate evil, that does not flame out against it, using all the energies of His being to destroy it, is a God to whose character there cleaves a fatal suspicion of indifference to good, of moral apathy. If I have not a God to trust in that hates evil because He loveth righteousness, then the pillared firmament itself were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble; nor were there any hope that this damnable thing that is killing and sucking the life-blood out of our spirits should ever be destroyed and cast aside. Oh! it is short-sighted wisdom, and it is cruel kindness, to tamper with the thought of the wrath of God, the everlasting burnings of that eternally pure nature wherewith it wages war against all sin.

But then, let us remember that, on the other side, the fire which is the destructive fire of perfect purity is also the fire that quickens and blesses. God is love, says John, and love is fire, too. We speak of the flame of love, of warm affections, and the like. The symbol of fire does not mean destructive energy only. And these two are one. God's wrath is a form of God's love; God hates because He loves.

And the wrath and the love differ much more in the difference of the eyes that look, than they do in themselves. Here are two bits of glass; one of them sifts out and shows all the fiery-red rays, the other all the yellow. It is the one same pure, white beam that passes through them both, but one is only capable of receiving the fiery-red beams of the wrath, and the other is capable of receiving the golden light of the love. Let us take heed lest, by destroying the wrath, we maim the love; and let us take heed lest, by exaggerating the wrath, we empty the love of its sweetness and its preciousness; and let us accept the teaching that these are one, and that the deepest of all the things that the world can know about God lies in that double saying, which does not contradict its second half by its first, but completes its first by its second--God is Righteousness, God is Love.

Well, then, that being so, the question rises to every mind of ordinary thoughtfulness: Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? A God fighting against evil; can you and I hope to hold familiar fellowship with Him? A God fighting against evil; if He rises up to exercise His judging and His punishing energies, can we meet Him? Can thy heart endure and thy hands be strong, in the day that I shall deal with thee? is the question that comes to each of us if we are reasonable people. I do not dwell upon it; but I ask you to take it, and answer it for yourselves.

To dwell with everlasting burnings means two things. First, it means to hold familiar intercourse and communion with God. The question which presents itself to thoughtful minds is--What sort of man must I be if I am to dwell near God? The lowliest bush may be lit by the divine fire and not be consumed by it; and the poorest heart may be all aflame with an indwelling God, if only it yield itself to Him, and long for His likeness. Electricity only flames into consuming fire when its swift passage is resisted. The question for us all is--How can I receive this holy fire into my bosom, and not be burned? Is any communion possible, and if it is, on what conditions? These are the questions which the heart of man is really asking, though it knows not the meaning of its own unrest.

To dwell with everlasting burnings means, secondly, to bear the action of the fire--the judgment of the present and the judgment of the future. The question for each of us is--How can we face that judicial and punitive action of that Divine Providence which works even here, and how can we face the judicial and punitive action in the future?

I suppose you all believe, or at least say that you believe, that there is such a future judgment. Have you ever asked yourselves the question, and rested not until you got a reasonable answer to it, on which, like a man leaning on a pillar, you can lean the whole weight of your expectations--How am I to come into the presence of that devouring fire? Have you any fireproof dress that will enable you to go into the furnace like the Hebrew youths, and walk up and down in the midst of it, well and at liberty? Have you? Who shall dwell amidst the everlasting fires?

That question has stirred sometimes, I know, in the consciences of every man and woman that is listening to me. Some of you have tampered with it and tried to throttle it, or laughed at it and shuffled it out of your mind by the engrossments of business, and tried to get rid of it in all sorts of ways: and here it has met you again to-day. Let us have it settled, in the name of common-sense (to invoke nothing higher), once for all, upon reasonable principles that will stand; and do you see that you settle it to-day.

**II. And now, look next at the prophet's answer.**

It is simple. He says that if a man is to hold fellowship with, or to face the judgment of, the pure and righteous God, the plainest dictate of reason and common-sense is that he himself must be pure and righteous to match. The details into which hid answer to the question runs out are all very homely, prosaic, pedestrian kind of virtues, nothing at all out of the way, nothing that people would call splendid or heroic. Here they are:--He that walks righteously,--a short injunction, easily spoken, but how hard!--and speaketh uprightly, he that despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, that shutteth his eyes from seeing evil. Righteous action, righteous speech, inward hatred of possessions gotten at my neighbour's cost, and a vehement resistance to all the seductions of sense, shutting one's hands, stopping one's ears, fastening one's eyes up tight so that he may not handle, nor hear, nor see the evil--there is the outline of a trite, everyday sort of morality which is to mark the man who, as Isaiah says, can dwell amongst the everlasting fires.

Now, if at your leisure you will turn to Psalms xv. and xxiv., you will find there two other versions of the same questions and the same answer, both of which were obviously in our prophet's mind when he spoke. In the one you have the question put: Who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? In the other you have the same question put: Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And both these two psalms answer the question and sketch the outline (and it is only an outline) of a righteous man, from the Old Testament point of view, substantially in the same fashion that Isaiah does here.

I do not need to remark upon the altogether unscientific and non-exhaustive nature of the description of righteousness that is set forth here. There are a great many virtues, plain and obvious, that are left out of the picture. But I ask you to notice one very special defect, as it might seem. There is not the slightest reference to anything that we call religion. It is all purely pedestrian, worldly morality; do righteous things; do not tell lies; do not cheat your neighbour; stop your ears if people say foul things in your hearing; shut your eyes if evil comes before you. These are the kind of duties enjoined, and these only. The answer of my text moves altogether on the surface, dealing only with conduct, not with character, and dealing with conduct only in reference to this world. There is not a word about the inner nature, not a word about the inner relation of a man to God. It is the minimum of possible qualifications for dwelling with God.

Well, now, do you achieve that minimum? Suppose we waive for the moment all reference to God; suppose we waive for the moment all reference to motive and inward nature; suppose we keep ourselves only on the outside of things, and ask what sort of conduct a man must have that is able to walk with God? We have heard the answer.

Now, then, is that me? Is this sketch here, admittedly imperfect, a mere black-and-white swift outline, not intended to be shaded or coloured, or brought up to the round; is this mere outline of what a good man ought to be, at all like me? Yes or no? I think we must all say No to the question, and acknowledge our failure to attain to this homely ideal of conduct. The requirement pared down to its lowest possible degree, and kept as superficial as ever you can keep it, is still miles above me, and all I have to say when I listen to such words is, God be merciful to me a sinner.

My dear friends, take this one thought away with you:--the requirements of the most moderate conscience are such as no man among us is able to comply with. And what then? Am I to be shut up to despair? am I to say: Then nobody can dwell within that bright flame? Am I to say: Then when God meets man, man must crumble away into nothing and disappear? Am I to say, for myself: Then, alas for me! when I stand at His judgment bar?

**III. Let us take the Apostle's answer.**

God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God. Now, to begin with, let us distinctly understand that the New Testament answer, represented by John's great words, entirely endorses Isaiah's; and that the difference between the two is not that the Old Testament, as represented by psalmist and prophet, said, You must be righteous in order to dwell with God, and that the New Testament says, You need not be. Not at all! John is just as vehement in saying that nothing but purity can bind a man in thoroughly friendly and familiar conjunction with God as David or Isaiah was. He insists as much as anybody can insist upon this great principle, that if we are to dwell with God we must be like God, and that we are like God when we are like Him in righteousness and love.

He that saith he hath fellowship with Him, and walketh in darkness, is a liar! That is John's short way of gathering it all up. Righteousness is as essential in the gospel scheme for all communion and fellowship with God as ever it was declared to be by the most rigid of legalists; and if any of you have the notion that Christianity has any other terms to lay down than the old terms--that righteousness is essential to communion--you do not understand Christianity. If any of you are building upon the notion that a man can come into loving and familiar friendship with God as long as he loves and cleaves to any sin, you have got hold of a delusion that will wreck your souls yet,--is, indeed, harming, wrecking them now, and will finally destroy them if you do not got rid of it. Let us always remember that the declaration of my first text lies at the very foundation of the declaration of my second.

What, then, is the difference between them? Why, for one thing it is this--ISAIAH tells us that we must he righteous, John tells us how we may be. The one says, There are the conditions, the other says, Here are the means by which you can have the conditions. Love is the productive germ of all righteousness; it is the fulfilling of the law. Get that into your hearts, and all these relative and personal duties will come. If the deepest, inmost life is right, all the surface of life will come right. Conduct will follow character, character will follow love.

The efforts of men to make themselves pure, and so to come into the position of holding fellowship with God, are like the wise efforts of children in their gardens. They stick in their little bits of rootless flowers, and they water them; but, being rootless, the flowers are all withered to-morrow and flung over the hedge the day after. But if we have the love of God in our hearts, we have not rootless flowers, but the seed which will spring up and bear fruit of holiness.

But that is not all. Isaiah says Righteousness, John says Love, which makes righteousness. And then he tells us how we may get love, having first told us how we may get righteousness: We love Him because He first loved us. It is just as impossible for a man to work himself into loving God as it is for a man to work himself into righteous actions. There is no difference in the degree of impossibility in the two cases. But what we can do is, we can go and gaze at the thing that kindles the love; we can contemplate the Cross on which the great Lover of our souls died, and thereby we can come to love Him. John's answer goes down to the depths, for his notion of love is the response of the believing soul to the love of God which was manifested on the Cross of Calvary. To have righteousness we must have love; to have love we must look to the love that God has to us; to look rightly to the love that God has to us we must have faith. Now you have gone down to the very bottom of the matter. Faith is the first step of the ladder, and the second step is love and the third step is righteousness.

And so the New Testament, in its highest and most blessed declarations, rests itself firmly upon these rigid requirements of the old law. You and I, dear brethren, have but one way by which we can walk in the midst of that fire, rejoicing and unconsumed, namely that we shall know and believe the love which God hath to us, love Him back again with pure hearts fervently, and in the might of that receptive faith and productive love, become like Him in holiness, and ourselves be baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Thus, fire-born and fiery, we shall dwell as in our native home, in God Himself.