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

**ISAIAH-035. THE FORTRESS OF THE FAITHFUL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks; bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure."*

*Isaiah 33:16*

This glowing promise becomes even more striking if we mark its connection with the solemn question in the previous context. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? is the prophet's question; who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? That question really means, Who is capable of communion with God? The prophet sketches the outline of the character in the subsequent verses, and then recurring to his metaphor of a habitation, and yet with a most lovely and significant modification, he says, he--the man that he has been sketching--shall dwell, not with the everlasting burnings, but on high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks, like some little hill, fort, or city, perched upon a mountain, and having within it ample provision and an unfailing spring of water. His bread shall, be given him, his water shall be sure. To dwell with the devouring fire is to dwell on high, to be safe and satisfied. So then, whilst the words before us have, of course, direct and immediate reference to the Assyrian invasion, and promise, in a literal sense, security and exemption from its evils to the righteous in Israel, they widen and deepen into a picturesque, but not less real, statement of what comes into the religious life, by communion with God. There are three things: elevation, security, satisfaction.

**I. He shall dwell on high.**

In the East, and in all unsettled countries, you will find that the sites of the cities are on the hilltops, for a very plain reason, and that is the fact that underlies the prophet's representation. To hold fellowship with God, to live in union with Him, to have His thoughts for my thoughts, and His love wrapping my heart, and His will enshrined in my will; to carry Him about with me into all the pettinesses of daily life, and, amidst the whirlpool of duties and changing circumstances, to sit in the centre, as it were the eye of the whirlpool where there is a dead calm, that lifts a man on high. Communion with God secures elevation of spirit, raising us clean above the flat that lies beneath. There are many ways by which men seek for lofty thoughts, and a general elevation above the carking cares and multiplied minutenesses of this poor, mortal, transient life; but while books and great thoughts, and the converse of the wise, and art, and music, and all these other elevating influences have a real place and a blessed efficiency in ennobling life, there is not one of them, nor all of them put together, that will give to the human spirit that strange and beautiful elevation above the world and the flesh and the devil, which simple communion with God will give. I have seen many a poor man who knew nothing about the lofty visions that shape and lift humanity, who had no side of him responsive to aesthetics or art or music, who was no thinker, no student, who never had spoken to anybody above the rank of a poor labouring man, and to whom all the wisdom of the nations was a closed chamber, who yet in his life, ay! and on his face, bore marks of a spirit elevated into a serene region where there was no tumult, and where nothing unclean or vicious could live. A few of the select spirits of the race may painfully climb on high by thought and effort. Get God into your hearts, and it will be like filling the round of a silken balloon with light air; you will soar instead of climbing, and dwell on high. When you are up there, the things below that look largest will dwindle and show, as Shakespeare has it, scarce so gross as beetles, looked at from the height, and the noises will sink to a scarcely audible murmur, and you will be able to see the lie of the country, and, as it says in the context, your eyes shall behold the land that is very far off. Yes! the hilltop is the place for wide views, and for understanding the course of the serpentine river, and it is the place to discover how small are the mightiest things at the foot, and how little a way towards the sun the noises of human praise or censure can ever travel. He shall dwell on high, and he will see a long way off, and understand the relative magnitude of things, and the strife of tongues will have ceased for him.

And more than that is implied in the promise. If we dwell on high, we shall come down with all the more force on what lies below. There is no greater caricature and misconception of Christianity than that which talks as if the spirit that lived in daily communion with God, high above the world, was remote from the world. Why, how do they make electricity nowadays? By the fall of water from a height, and the higher the level from which it descends, the mightier the force which it generates in the descent. So nobody will tell on the world like the man who lives above it. The height from which a weight rushes down measures the force of its dint where it falls, and of the energy with which it comes. He shall dwell on high; and only the man that stands above the world is able to influence it.

**II. Again, here is another blessing of the Christian life, put in a picturesque form: His defence shall be munitions of rocks.**

That is a promise of security from assailants, which in its essence is true always, though its truth may seem doubtful to the superficial estimate of sense. The experience of the South African war showed how impregnable the munitions of rocks were. The Boers lay safe behind them, and our soldiers might fire lyddite at them all day and never touch them. So, the man who lives in communion with God has between him and all evil the Rock of Ages, and he lies at the back of it, quiet and safe, whatever foe may rage on the other side of it.

Now, of course, the prophet meant to tell his countrymen that, in the theocracy of which they were parts, righteousness and nothing else was the national security, and if a man or a nation lived in communion with God, it bore a charmed life. That is a great deal more true, in regard to externals, in the miraculous dispensation, as it is called, of the Old Testament than it is now, and we are not to take over these promises in their gross literal form into the Christian era, as if they were unconditional and absolutely to be fulfilled. But at the same time, if you reflect how many of our troubles do come to us mainly because we break our communion with God, I think we shall see that this old word has still an application to our daily lives and outward circumstances. Deduct from any man's life all the discomfort and trouble and calamity which have come down upon him because he was not in touch with God, and there will not be very much left. Yet there will be some, and the deepest and sorest of all our sorrows are not to be interpreted as occasioned by defects in our dwelling in God. Then has my text no application to them? Yes, because what still remains of earthly cares and sorrows and evils would, in communion with God, change its character. The rind is the same; but all the interior contents have been, as children will do with a fruit, scooped out, and another kind of thing has been put inside, so that though the outward appearance is the same, what is at the heart of it is utterly different. It is no longer some coarse, palate-biting, common vegetable, but a sweet confection, made by God's own hands, and put into the gourd, which has been hollowed out and emptied of its evil. That is, perhaps, a very violent figure, but take a plain case as illustration. Suppose two men, each of them going to his wife's funeral. The two hearses pass inside the cemetery gates, one after the other. Outwardly the two afflictions are the same, but the one man says, The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; the other man says, They have taken away my gods, and what shall I do more? Are the two things the same? He shall dwell on high, his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks, and if we do hide ourselves in the cleft, then no evil shall befall us, nor any plague come nigh our dwelling.

But there is another truth contained in this great promise, viz., that in regard to all the real evils which beset men, and these are all summed up in the one, the temptation to do wrong, their arrows will be blunted, and their force be broken, if we keep our minds in touch with God through humble communion and lowly obedience. Dear brethren, the way by which we can conquer temptations around, and silence inclinations within which riotously seek to yield to the temptations is, I believe, far more by cultivating a consciousness of communion with God, than by specific efforts directed to the overcoming of a given and particular temptation. Keep inside the fortress, and no bullet will come near you. Array yourselves in the most elaborate precautions and step out from its shadow, and every bullet will strike and wound. Let me keep up my fellowship with God, and I may laugh at temptation. Security depends on continual communion with God by faith, love, aspiration, and obedience.

**III. Now, I need not say more than a word about the last element in these promises, the satisfaction of desires.**

His bread shall be given him, and his water shall be sure. In ancient warfare sieges were usually blockades; and strong fortresses were reduced by famine much more frequently than by assault. Mafeking and Ladysmith and Port Arthur were in most danger from that cause. The promise here assures us that we shall have all supplies in our abode, if God is our abode. Wherever he who dwells in God goes, he carries with him his provisions, and he does not need elaborate arrangements of pipes or reservoirs, because there is a fountain in the courtyard that the enemy cannot get at. They may stop the springs throughout the land, they may cut off all water supplies, so that there shall be no fruit in the vine, and the labour of the olive shall fail, but they cannot touch the fountain. His water shall be sure, and he can say, In the days of famine I shall be satisfied.

God is and gives all that we need for sustenance, for growth, for refreshment, for satisfaction of our desires. Keep near Him, and you will find in the heart of the devouring fire a shelter, and you will have all that you want for life here. My text will be true about us, in the measure in which we do thus dwell, and if we thus dwell here, and so dwell on high, with the munitions of rocks for our fortress, and the bread of God that came down from heaven for our food, and the water of life for our refreshment, then, when there is no longer any need of places for defence, the other saying will be true, They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them ... and shall lead them to living fountains of waters, and God, the Lord, shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.