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

**ISAIAH-036. THE RIVERS OF GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby."*

*Isaiah 33:21*

One great peculiarity of Jerusalem, which distinguishes it from almost all other historical cities, is that it has no river. Babylon was on the Euphrates, Nineveh on the Tigris, Thebes on the Nile, Rome on the Tiber; but Jerusalem had nothing but a fountain or two, and a well or two, and a little trickle and an intermittent stream. The water supply to-day is, and always has been, a great difficulty, and an insuperable barrier to the city's ever having a great population.

That deficiency throws a great deal of beautiful light on more than one passage in the Old Testament. For instance, this same prophet contrasts the living stream, the waters of Siloam, as an emblem of the gentle sway of the divine King of Israel, with the river, strong and mighty, which was the symbol of Assyria; and a psalm that we all know well, sings, There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God,--a triumphant exclamation which is robbed of half its force, unless we remember that the literal Jerusalem had no river at all. The vision of living waters flowing from the Temple which Ezekiel saw is a variation of the same theme, and suggests that in the Messianic days the deficiency shall be made good, and a mysterious stream shall spring up from behind, and flow out from beneath, the temple doors, and then with rapid increase and depth and width, but with no tributaries coming into it, shall run fertilising and life-giving everywhere, till it pours itself into the noisome waters of the sullen sea of death and heals even them.

The same general representation is contained in the words before us. Isaiah's great vision is not, as I take it, of a future, but of what the Jerusalem of his day might he to the Israelite if he would live by faith. The mighty Lord, the glorious Lord, shall Himself be a place of broad rivers and streams.

**I. First, then, this remarkable promise suggests to me how in God there is the supply of all deficiencies.**

The city was perched on its barren, hot rock, with scarcely a drop of water, and its inhabitants must often have been tempted to wish that there had been running down the sun-bleached bed of the Kedron a flashing stream, such as laved the rock-cut temples and tombs of Thebes. Isaiah says, in effect, You cannot see it, but if you will trust yourselves to God, there will be such a river.

In like manner every defect in our circumstances, everything lacking in our lives--and we all have something which does not correspond with, or which falls beneath, our wishes and apparent needs--everything which seems to hamper us in some aspects, and to sadden us in others, may be compensated and made up if we will hold fast by God; and although to outward sense we dwell in a dry and barren land where no water is, the eye of faith will see, flashing and flowing all around, the rejoicing waters of the divine presence, and they will mirror the sky, and the reflections will teach us that there is a heaven above us.

If there is in any life a gap, that is a prophecy that God will fill it. If there is anything in your circumstances in regard to which you often feel sadly, and are sometimes tempted to feel bitterly, how much stronger and more fully equipped you would be, if it were otherwise, be sure that in God there is that which can supply the want, and that the consciousness of the want is a merciful summons to seek its supply from and in Him. If there is a breach in the encircling wall of your defences, God has made it in order that He Himself, and not an enemy, may enter your lives and hearts. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, and it did not matter though that mortal king was dead, for the true King was thereby revealed as living for ever, just as when the summer foliage, fluttering and green, drops from the tree, the sturdy stem and the strong branches are made the more visible. Our felt deficiencies are doors by which God may come in. Do you sometimes feel as if you would be better if you had easier worldly circumstances? Is your health precarious and feeble? Have you to walk a solitary path through this world, and does your heart often ache for companionship? You can have all your heart's desire fulfilled in deepest reality in God, in the same way that that riverless city had Jehovah for a place of broad rivers and streams.

**II. Take another side of the same thought. Here is a revelation of God and His sweet presence as our true defence.**

The river that lay between some strong city and the advancing enemy was its strongest fortification when the bridge of boats was taken away. One of the ancient cities to which I have referred is described by one of the prophets as being held as within the coils of a serpent, by which he means the various bendings and twistings of the Euphrates, which encompassed Babylon, and made it so hard to be conquered. The primitive city of Paris owed its safety in the wild old times when it was founded, to its being on an island. Venice has lived through many centuries, because it is girded about by its lagoons. England is what it is, largely because of the streak of silver sea. So God's city has a broad moat all round it. The prophet goes on to explain the force of his bold figure in regard to the safety promised by it, when he says: Wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. Not a keel of the enemy shall dare to cut its waters, nor break their surface with the wet plash of invading oars. And so, if we will only knit ourselves with God by simple trust and continual communion, it is the plainest prose fact that nothing will harm us, and no foe will ever get near enough to us to shoot his arrows against us.

That is a truth for faith, and not for sense. Many a man, truly compassed about by God, has to go through fiery trial and sorrow and affliction. But I venture to appeal to every heart that has known grief most acutely, protractedly, and frequently, and has borne it in the faith of God, and with submission to Him; and I know that they who are the experts, and who alone have the right to speak with authority on the subject, will confirm the statement that I make, that sorrows recognised as sent from God are the truest blessings of our lives. No real evil befalls us, because, according to the old superstition that money bewitched was cleansed if it was handed across running water, our sorrows only reach us across the river that defends.

Isaiah is full of symbols of various kinds for the impregnability of Zion. Sometimes, as in my text, he falls back upon the thought of the bright waters of the moat on which no enemy can venture to sail. Sometimes he draws his metaphor from the element opposed to water, and speaks of a wall of fire round about us. But the simple reality that lies below all the poetry is, that trust in God brings His presence around me, and that makes it impossible that any evil should befall me, and certain that whatever does befall me is His messenger, His loving messenger, for my good. If we believed that, and lived on the belief, the whole world would be different.

**III. Take, again, another aspect of this same thought, which suggests to us God's presence as our true refreshment and satisfaction.**

The waterless city depended on cisterns, and they were often broken, and were always more or less foul, and sometimes the water fell very low in them. Isaiah says to us: Even when you are living in external circumstances like that:

When all created streams are dry,

Thy fulness is the same.

The fountain of living waters--if we may slightly vary the metaphor of my text--never sinks one hair's-breadth in its crystal basin, however many thirsty lips may be glued to its edge, and however large may be their draughts from it. This metaphor, turned to the purpose of suggesting how in God every part of our nature finds its appropriate nourishment and refreshment which it does not find anywhere besides, has become one of the commonplaces of the pulpit. Would it were the commonplace of our lives! It is easy to talk about Him as being the fountain of living waters; it is easy to quote and to admire the words which the Master spoke to the Samaritan woman when He said, I would have given thee living water, and the water which I give will be a fountain springing up into everlasting life. We repeat or learn such sayings, and then what do we do? We go away and try to slake our thirst at broken cisterns, and every draught which we take is like the salt water from which a shipwrecked-boat's crew in its madness will sometimes not be able to refrain, each drop increasing the raging thirst and hastening the impending death.

If we believed that God was the broad river from which we could draw and draw, and drink and drink, for ever and ever, should we be clinging with such desperate tenacity, as most of us exhibit, to earthly goods? Should we whimper with such childish regrets, as most of us nourish, when these goods are diminished or withdrawn? Should we live as we constantly do, day in and day out, seldom applying ourselves to the one source of strength and peace and refreshment, and trying, like fools, to find what apart from Him the world can never give? The rivers in northern Tartary all lose themselves in the sand. Not one of them has volume or force enough to get to the sea. And the rivers from which we try to drink are sand-choked long before our thirst is slaked. So, if we are wise, we shall take Isaiah's hint, and go where the water flows abundantly, and flows for ever.

**IV. There is a last point that I would also suggest, namely, the manifold variety in the results of God's presence.**

It shapes itself into many forms, according to our different needs. The glorious Lord shall be a place of broad rivers. Yes; but notice the next words--and streams. Now, the word which is there translated streams means little channels for irrigation and other purposes, by which the water of some great river is led off into the melon patches, and gardens, and plantations, and houses of the inhabitants. So we have not only the picture of the broad river in its unity, but also that of the thousand little rivulets in their multiplicity, and in their direction to each man's plot of ground. It is the same idea that is in the psalm which I have already quoted: There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of our God. You can divide the river up into very tiny trickles, according to the moment's small wants. If you make but a narrow channel, you will get but a shallow streamlet; and if you make your channel broad and deep, you will get much of Him.

It is of no profit that we live on the river's bank if we let its waters go rolling and flashing past our door, or our gardens, or our lips. Unless you have a sluice, by which you can take them off into your own territory, and keep the shining blessing to be the source of fertility in your own garden, and of coolness and refreshment to your own thirst, your garden will be parched, and your lips will crack. There is a broad river, and there are also streams; which, being brought down to its simplest expression, just comes to this--that we may and must make God our very own property. It is useless to say our God, the God of Israel, the God of the Church, the Great Creator, the Universal Father, and so on, unless we say my God and my Saviour, my Refuge and my Strength. How much of the river have you dipped up in your own vessel? How much of it have you taken with which to water your own vineyard and refresh your own souls?

The time comes when Isaiah's prophecy shall be perfectly fulfilled, according to the great words in the closing hook of Scripture, about the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb. But, till that time comes, we do not need to wander thirsty in a desert; but all round us we may hear the mighty waters rolling everywhere, and drink deep draughts of delight and supply for all our needs, from the very presence of God Himself.