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

**ISAIAH-040. THE KING'S HIGHWAY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there."*

*Isaiah 35:8-9*

We can fancy what it is to be lost in a forest where a traveller may ride round in a circle, thinking he is advancing, till he dies. But it is as easy to be lost in a wilderness, where there is nothing to see, as in a wood where one can see nothing. And there is something even more ghastly in being lost below the broad heavens in the open face of day than in the close covert of innumerous boughs. The monotonous swells of the sand-heaps, the weary expanse stretching right away to the horizon, no land-marks but the bleaching bones of former victims, the gigantic sameness, the useless light streaming down, and in the centre one tiny, black speck toiling vainly, rushing madly hither and thither--a lost man--till he desperately flings himself down and lets death bury him, that is the one picture suggested by the text. The other is of that same wilderness, but across it a mighty king has flung up a broad, lofty embankment, a highway raised above the sands, cutting across them so conspicuously that even an idiot could not help seeing it, so high above the land around that the lion's spring falls far beneath it, and the supple tiger skulks baffled at its base. It is like one of those roads which the terrible energy of conquering Rome carried straight as an arrow from the milestone in the Forum over mountains, across rivers and deserts, morasses and forests, to flash along them the lightning of her legions, and over whose solid blocks we travel to-day in many a land.

The prophet has seen in his vision the blind and deaf cured, the capacities of human nature destroyed by sin restored. He has told us that this miraculous change has come from the opening of a spring of new life in the midst of man's thirsty desert, and now he gets before us, in yet another image, another aspect of the glorious change which is to follow that coming of the Lord to save, which filled the farthest horizon of his vision. The desert shall have a plain path on which those diseased men who have been healed journey. Life shall no longer be trackless, but God will, by His coming, prepare paths that we should walk in them; and as He has given the lame man power to walk, so will he also provide the way by which His happy pilgrims will journey to their home.

**I. The pathless wandering of godless lives.**

The old, old comparison of life to a journey is very natural and very pathetic. It expresses life's ceaseless change; every day carries us into a new scene, every day the bends of the road shut out some happy valley where we fain would have rested, every day brings new faces, new associations, new difficulties, and even if the same recur, yet it is with such changes that they are substantially new, and of each day's march it is true, even when life is most monotonous, that ye have not passed this way heretofore. It expresses life's ceaseless effort and constant plodding. To-day's march does not secure to-morrow's rest, but, however footsore and weary, we have to move on, like some child dragged along by a careless nurse. It expresses the awful crumbling away of life beneath us. The road has an end, and each step takes us nearer to it. The numbers that face us on the milestones slowly and surely decrease; we pass the last and on we go, tramp, tramp, and we cannot stop till we reach the narrow chamber, cold and dark, where, at any rate, we have got the long march over.

But to many men, the journey of life is one which has no definite direction deliberately chosen, which has no all-inclusive aim, which has no steady progress. There may be much running hither and thither, but it is as aimless as the marchings of a fly upon a window, as busy and yet as uncertain as that of the ants who bustle about on an ant-hill.

Now that is the idea, which our text implies, of all the activity of a godless life, that it is not a steady advance to a chosen goal, but a rushing up and down in a trackless desert, with many immense exertions all thrown away. Then, in contrast, it puts this great thought: that God has come to us and made for us a path for our feet.

**II. The highway that God casts up.**

Of course that coming we take to be Christ's coming, and we have just to consider the manner in which His coming fulfils this great promise, and has made in the trackless wilderness a way for us to walk in.

**(a)** Christ gives us a Definite Aim for Life. I know, of course, that men may have this apart from Him, definite enough in all conscience. But such aims are unworthy of men's whole capacities. Not one of them is fit to be made the exclusive, all-embracing purpose of a life, and, taken together, they are so multifarious that in their diversity they come to be equal to none. How many we have all had! Most of us are like men who zig-zag about, chasing after butterflies! Nor are any such aims certain to be reached during life, and they all are certain to be lost at death.

Godless men are enticed on like some dumb creature lured to slaughter-house by a bunch of fodder--once inside, down comes the pole-axe.

But Christ gives us a definite aim which is worthy of a man, which includes all others; which binds this life and the next into one.

**(b)** Christ gives us distinct knowledge of whither we should go. It is not enough to give general directions; we need to know what our next step is to be. It is of no avail that we see the shining turrets far off on the hill, if all the valleys between are unknown and trackless. Well: we have Him to point us our course. He is the exemplar--the true ideal of human nature. Hour by hour His pattern fits to our lives. True, we shall often be in perplexity, but that perplexity will clear itself by patient thought, by holding our wills in suspense till He speaks, and by an honest wish to go right. There will no longer be doubt as to what is our law, though there may be as to the application of it. We are not to be guided by men's maxims, nor by the standards and patterns round us, but by Him.

**(c)** Christ gives means by which we can reach the aim. He does so by supplying a stimulus to our activity, in the motive of His love; by the removal of the hindrances arising from sin, through His redeeming work; by the gifts of new life from His Spirit.

The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city. But he that follows Jesus treads the right way to the city of habitation.

**(d)** Christ goes with us. The obscure words, It shall be for those are by some rendered, He shall be with them, and we may take them so, as referring to the presence with His happy pilgrims of the Lord Himself. Perhaps Isaiah may have been casting back a thought to the desert march, where the pillar led the host. But at all events we have the same companion to talk with us by the way, and make our hearts burn within us, as had the two disconsolate pedestrians on the road to Emmaus. It is Jesus who goes before us, whether He leads us to green pastures and waters of quietness or through valleys of the shadow of death, and we can be smitten by no evil, since He is with us.

**III. The travellers upon God's highway.**

Two conditions are laid down in the text. One is negative--the unclean can find no footing there. It is the way of holiness, not only because holiness is in some sense the goal to which it leads, but still more, because only holy feet can tread it, holy at least in the travellers aspiration and inward consecration, though still needing to be washed daily. One is positive--it is the simple who shall not err therein. They who distrust themselves and their own skill to find or force a path through life's jungle, and trust themselves to higher guidance, are they whose feet will be kept in the way.

No lion or ravenous beast can spring or creep up thereon. Simple keeping on Christ's highway elevates us above temptations and evils of all sorts, whether nightly prowlers or daylight foes.

This generation is boasting or complaining that old landmarks are blotted out, ancient paths broken, footmarks obliterated, stars hid, and mist shrouding the desert. But Christ still guides, and His promise still holds good: He that followeth Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life. The alternative for each traveller between life and death is to tread in His footsteps or to wander in the wilderness in a solitary way, hungry and thirsty, with fainting soul. Let us make the ancient prayer ours: See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.