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

**ISAIAH-041. WHAT LIFE'S JOURNEY MAY BE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The redeemed shall walk there: And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."*

*Isaiah 35:9-10*

We have here the closing words of Isaiah's prophecy. It has been steadily rising, and now it has reached the summit. Men restored to all their powers, a supernatural communication of a new life, a pathway for our journey--these have been the visions of the preceding verses, and now the prophet sees the happy pilgrims flocking along the raised way, and hears some faint strains of their glad music, and he marks them, rank after rank, entering the city of their solemnities, and through the gates can behold them invested with joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing, like some night-loving birds shrinking from the blaze of that better sun which lights the city, spread their black wings and flee away.

The noble rhythm of our English version rises here to a strain of pathetic music, the very cadence of which stirs thoughts that lie too deep for tears, and one shrinks from taking these lofty words of immortal hope--which life's sorrows have interpreted, I trust, for many of us--as the text of a sermon. But I would fain try whether some of their gracious sweetness and power may not survive even our rude handling of them.

The prophet here is not only speaking of the literal return of his brethren from captivity. The place which this prophecy holds at the very close of the book, the noble loftiness of the language, the entire absence of any details or specific allusions which compel reference to the Captivity, would be sufficient of themselves to make us suspect that there was very much more here. The structure of prophecy is misunderstood unless it be recognised that all the history of Israel was itself a prediction, a great supernatural system of types and shadows, and that all the interventions of the divine hand are one in principle, and all foretell the great intervention of redeeming love, in the person of Jesus Christ. Nor need that be unlikely in the eyes of any who believe that Christ's coming is the centre of the world's history, and that there is in prophecy a supernatural element. We are not reading our own fancies into Scripture; we are not using, in allowable freedom, words which had another meaning altogether, to adorn our own theology, but we are apprehending the innermost meaning of prophecy, when we see in it Christ and His salvation (1 Peter i. 10).

We have then here a picture of what Christ does for us weary journeyers on life's road,

**I. Who are the travellers?**

Redeemed, ransomed of the Lord. Israel had in its past history one great act, under the imagery of which all future deliverances were prophesied. The events of the Exodus were the great storehouse from which prophets drew the clothing of their brightest hopes; and that is a lesson for us of how to use the history of God's past deliverances. They believed that each transitory act was a revelation of an unchanging purpose and an unexhausted power, and that it would be repeated over and over again. Experience supplied the material out of which Hope wove its fairest webs, but Faith drove the shuttle. Here the names which describe the pilgrims come from the old story. They are slaves, purchased or otherwise set free from captivity by a divine act. The epithets are transferred to the New Testament, and become the standing designation for those who have been delivered by Christ.

That designation, ransomed of the Lord, opens out into the great evangelical thoughts which are the very life-blood of vital Christianity.

Emancipation from bondage is the first thing that we all need. He that committeth sin is the slave of sin. An iron yoke presses on every neck.

The needed emancipation can only be obtained by a ransom price. The question of to whom the ransom is paid is not in the horizon of prophet or apostle or of Jesus Himself, in using this metaphor. What is strongly in their minds is that a great surrender must be greatly made by the Emancipator.

* Jesus conceived of Himself as giving His life a ransom for the many.
* The emancipation must be a divine act. It surpasses any created power.
* There can be no happy pilgrims unless they are first set free.

**II. The end of the journey.**

They shall come to Zion. It is one great distinctive characteristic and blessedness of the Christian conception of the future that it takes away from it all the chilling sense of strangeness, arising from ignorance and lack of experience, and invests it with the attraction of being the mother-city of us all. So the pilgrims are not travelling a dreary road into the common darkness, but are like colonists who visit England for the first time, and are full of happy anticipations of going home, though they have never seen its shores.

That conception of the future perfect state as a city includes the ideas of happy social life, of a settled polity, of stability and security. The travellers who were often solitary on the march will all be together there. The nomads, who had to leave their camping-place each morning and let the fire that cheered them in the night die down into a little ring of grey ashes, will go no more out, but yet make endless progress within the gates. The defenceless travellers, who were fain to make the best laager they could, and keep vigilant watch for human and bestial enemies crouching beyond the ring of light from the camp-fires, are safe at last, and they that swallowed them up shall be far away.

Contrast the future outlook of the noblest minds in heathenism with the calm certainty which the gospel has put within the reach of the simplest! Blessed are your eyes, for they see.

**III. The joy of the road.**

The pilgrims do not plod wearily in silence, but, like the tribes going up to the feasts, burst out often, as they journey, into song. They are like Jehoshaphat's soldiers, who marched to the fight with the singers in the van chanting Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever. The Christian life should be a joyful life, ever echoing with the high praises of God. However difficult the march, there is good reason for song, and it helps to overcome the difficulties. A merry heart goes all the day, a sad heart tires in a mile. Why should the ransomed pilgrims sing? For present blessings, for deliverance from the burden of self and sin, for communion with God, for light shed on the meaning of life, and for the sure anticipation of future bliss.

Everlasting joy on their heads. Other joys are transitory. It is not only we poets who in our youth begin with gladness, whereof cometh in the end despondency and madness; but, in a measure, these are the outlines of the sequence in all godless lives. The world's festal wreathes wilt and wither in the hot fumes of the banqueting house, and the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot. But joy of Christ's giving shall remain, and even before we sit at the feast, we may have our brows wreathed with a garland that fadeth not away.

**IV. The perfecting of joy at last.**

They shall obtain joy and gladness: but had they not had it on their heads as they marched? Yes; but at last they have it in perfect measure and manner. The flame that burned but dimly in the heavy air of earth flashes up into new brightness in the purer atmosphere of the city.

And one part of its perfecting is the removal of all its opposites. Sorrow ends when sin and the discipline that sin needs have ended. The inhabitant shall not say: I am sick; the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity. Sighing ends when weariness, loss, physical pain, and all the other ills that flesh is heir to have ceased to vex and weigh upon the spirit. Life purges the dross of imperfection from character. Death purges the alloy of sorrow and sighing from joy, and leaves the perfected spirit possessor of the pure gold of perfect and eternal gladness.