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

**ISAIAH-047. UNFAILING STARS AND FAILING MEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... For that He is strong in power; not one faileth... . He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength."*

*Isaiah 40:26, 29*

These two verses set forth two widely different operations of the divine power as exercised in two sadly different fields, the starry heavens and this weary world. They are interlocked, as it were, by the recurrence in the latter of the emphatic words of the former. The one verse says, He is strong in power; the other, He giveth power. In the former verse, the greatness of His might sustains the stars; in the latter verse, a still diviner operation is set forth in that to them that have no might He increaseth strength. Thus there are three contrasts suggested: that between unfailing stars, and men that faint; that between the unwearied God and wearied men; and that between the sustaining power that is exercised in the heavens and the restoring power that is manifested on earth.

There is another interlocking between the latter of these two texts and its context, which is indicated by a similar recurrence of epithets. In my second text we read of the faint, and in the verse that follows it, again we find the expressions faint and weary, while in the verse before my text we read that the Lord fainteth not, neither is weary. So again the contrast between Him and us is set forth, but, in the verse that closes the chapter, we read how that contrast merges into likeness, inasmuch as the unfainting and unwearied God makes even the men that wait upon Him unwearied and unfainting. Here, then, we have lessons that we may well ponder.

Note, first--

**I. That sad contrast.**

The prophet in the former of these verses seems to be expanding the thoughts that lie in the name, the Lord of hosts, in so far as that name expresses the divine relation to the starry universe. The image that underlies both it and the words of the text is that of a captain who commands his soldiers, and they obey. Discipline and plan array them in their ranks; they are not a mob, but an army. The voice that reads the roll-call summons one after another to his place, and, punctually obedient, there they stand, ready for any evolution that may be prescribed. The plain prose of which is, that night by night above the horizon rise the bright orbs, and roll on their path obedient to the Sovereign will; because He is strong in might not one is lacking. Astronomers have taught us, what the prophet did not know, that even in the apparently serene spaces there are collisions and catastrophes, and that stars may dwindle and dim, and finally go out. But while Scripture deals with creation neither from the scientific nor from the aesthetic point of view, it leaves room for both of these--for all that the poet's imagination can see or say, for all that the scientist's investigation can discover, it sees that beneath the beauty is the Fountain of all loveliness, beneath and behind the number of the numberless stars works the infinite will of God. Surely an intelligible creation must have an intelligent source. Surely a universe in which Mind can apprehend order and number must have a Mind at the back of it. Wordsworth has nobly said of Duty what we may more truly say of God: Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong, And the most ancient heavens through Thee are fresh and strong. For that He is great in might, not one faileth. Scripture bids us think of God, not as a creative energy that set the universe in motion, and leaves it to roll or spin, but as of a Divine Presence--to use a word which can only be in a very modified sense applied to that mysterious, intelligent Entity--operating in, and being the sustaining Cause of, all that is. This Divine Presence stamps its signature on the unfailing strength of these bright creatures above.

But in our second text we drop from the illumination of the heavens to the shadowed plain of this low earth. It is as if a man, looking up into the violet sky, with all its shining orbs, should then turn to some reeking alley, with its tumult and its squalor. Just because man is greater than the stars, man fails, whilst they shine on unwearied. For what the prophet has in view as the clinging curse that cleaves to our greatness, is not merely the bodily fatigue which is necessarily involved in the very fact of bodily existence, since energy cannot be put forth without waste and weariness, but it is far more the weary heart, the heart that is weary of itself, the heart that is weary of toil, the heart that is weary of the momentary crises that demand effort, and wearier still of the effortless monotony of our daily lives; the heart that all of us carry, and which to all of us sometimes whispers, with a dark and gloomy voice which we cannot contradict, Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. I was going to say, happy are you if you do not know that weariness, but I check myself and say, tenfold more miserable are you if you have never been sober and wise enough to have felt the weariness and weight of all this unintelligible world, and of your own sorry selves.

For it is ever to be remembered that the faintness and the ebbing away of might, which is the truly tragic thing in humanity, does not depend upon physical constitution, but upon separation from the Source of all strength, breaking the union between ourselves and God. If a star could shake off its dependence, and shut out the influx of the sustaining power that by continual creation preserves it, it would die into darkness, or crumble into dust. It cannot, and we cannot, in so far as our physical being is concerned, but we can shake ourselves free from God, in so far as the life of the spirit is concerned, and the godless spirit bears the Cain-curse of restlessness and weariness ever upon it. So the contrast between the unfailing strengths that ever shine down upon us from the heavens, and the weariness of body and of mind afflicting the sleeping millions on whom they shine, is tragical indeed. But far more tragical is the contrast, of which the other is but an indication because it is a consequence, the contrast between the punctual obedience with which these hosts, summoned by the great Commander, appear and take their places, and the self-will which turns a man into a wandering star unto whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever. Above is peace and order, because above is the supremacy of an uncontested will. Below is tumult and weariness, because when God says Thou shalt, men respond, I will not.

Secondly, my text suggests to us--

**II. Another sad contrast, melting into a blessed likeness.**

He fainteth not, neither is weary. He giveth power to the faint. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail, but waiting on God the curse removes, and faintness and weariness cease, and the humble man becomes in some measure participant of, and conformed to, that life which knows no exhausting, operates unspent, burns with an undying flame, works and never wearies. We may take to ourselves all the peace and strength that come from that transcendent hope, whilst we are still subject, as of course we must be, to the limitations imposed on spirits fettered, as well as housed, in body. Whilst toil leaves as its consequence fatigue, and as our days increase our strength wanes; whilst physical weariness remains unaffected, there may pour into our spirits the influx of divine power, by which they will remain fresh and strong through advancing years and heavy tasks and stiff battles. Is it not something to believe it possible that

In old age, when others fade,

We fruit still forth shall bring'

Is it not something to know it as a possibility that we may have that within us which has no tendency to decay, which neither perishes with the using nor is exhausted by exercise, which grows the more the longer we live, which has in it the pledge of immortality, because it has in it the impossibility of exhaustion? Thus to all of us who know how weary life sometimes is, thus to those of us who in the flush of our youth are deceived into thinking that the vigorous limbs will always be vigorous, and the clear eyesight will always be keen, and to those of us who, in the long weary levels of middle life, where there are few changes, are worn out by the eventless recurrence, day after day, of duties that have become burdensome, because they are so small, and to those of us who are learning by experience how inevitably early strength utterly fails; to us all surely it comes us a gospel, They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. It is true; and each of us may set to our seals, if we will, that the promise is faithful and sure.

Is that not a higher exercise of power than to preserve the stars from wrong? Is not the strength that restores mightier than the strength that sustains? Is not the hand that, put beneath the falling body, stops its plunge, and lifts it whence it fell, displaying a greater manifestation of strength, than the hand that held it unfailing at the height? The mighty miracle of the calm, steadfast heavens, with no vacant spaces where yesterday a star blazed, is less than the miracle of that restoring energy which, coming to men separated from the Fountain of power, re-establishes the connection between them, and out of the fainting creature makes one that is neither faint nor weary for ever. God is greater, in the miracle that He works upon you and me, poor strengthless souls, than when He rolls the stars along. Redemption is more than Creation, and to the hosts of the principalities and powers in heavenly places, is made known, by the Church, of restored and redeemed souls, the manifold wisdom of God.

What are the consequences that the prophet traces to this restoring power? They shall mount up with wings as eagles. Power to soar, to lift our heavy selves from earth, and to reach the heavenly places where we shall commune with God, that is the greatest of all gifts to strengthened spirits. And it is the foundation of all the others, for it is only they who know how to soar that can creep, and it is only they who have renewed their strength hour by hour, by communion with the Source of all energy and might, who when they drop with quivering wings, composed and still, down to the low earth, there live unwearied and unfainting.

They shall run and not be weary. Crises come--moments when circumstances demand from us more than ordinary energy and swifter rate of progress. We have often, in the course of our years, to make short spurts of unusual effort. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk. The bulk of our lives is a slow jog-trot, and it is harder to keep elasticity, buoyancy, freshness of spirit, in the eventless mill--horse round of our trivial lives than it is in the rarer bursts. Excitement helps us in the one; nothing but dogged principle, and close communion with God, mounting on wings as eagles, will help us in the other. But we may have Him with us in all the arid and featureless levels across which we have to plod, as well as in the height to which we sometimes have to struggle upwards, or in the depths into which we have sometimes to plunge. If we have the life of Christ within us, then neither the one nor the other will exhaust our energy or darken our spirits.

Lastly, one word as to--

**III. The way by which these contrasts can be reconciled, and this likeness secured.**

They that wait upon the Lord--that is the whole secret. What does waiting on the Lord include? Let me put it in three brief exhortations. Keep near Him; keep still; expect. If I stray away from Him, I cannot expect His power to come to me. If I fling myself about, in vain impatience, struggling, resisting providences, shirking duties, perturbing my soul, I cannot expect that the peace which brings strength, or the strength which brings peace, will come to me. It must be a windless sea that mirrors the sunshine and the blue, and the troubled heart has not God's strength in it. If I do not expect to get anything from Him, He will not give me anything; not because He will not, but because He cannot. Take the old Psalmist's words, I have quieted myself as a weaned child, and nestle on the great bosom, and its warmth, its fragrance, its serenity will be granted to you. Keep hold of God's hand in expectation, in submission, in close union, and the contact will communicate something of His own power. In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength. The bitter contrasts may all be harmonised, and the miraculous assimilation of humanity to divinity may, in growing measure according to our faith, be realised in us. And though we must still bear the limitations of our present corporeal condition, and though life's tasks must still oftentimes be felt by us as toils, and life's burdens as too burdensome for our feeble shoulders, yet we shall be held up. As thy day so shall thy strength be, and at last, when we mount up further than eagle's wings have ever soared, and look down upon the stars that are rolled together as a scroll, we shall through eternal ages run and not be weary and walk and not faint.