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

**ISAIAH-066. A CALL TO FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God."*

*Isaiah 50:10*

The persons addressed in this call to faith are those who fear the Lord, and obey the voice of His Servant. In that collocation is implied that these two things are necessarily connected, so that obedience to Christ is the test of true religion, and the fear of the Lord does not exist where the word of the Son is neglected or rejected.

But besides that most fruitful and instructive juxtaposition, other important thoughts come into view here. The fact that the call to faith is addressed to those who are regarded as already fearing God suggests the need for renewed and constantly repeated acts of confidence, at every stage of the Christian life, and opens up the whole subject of the growth and progress of individual religion, as secured by the continuous exercise of faith. The call is addressed to all at every stage of advancement. Of course it is addressed also to those who are disobedient and rebellious. But that wider aspect of the merciful invitation does not come into view here.

But there is another clause in the description of the persons addressed, Who walketh in darkness and hath no light. This is, no doubt, primarily a reference to the great sorrow that filled, like a gloomy thundercloud, the horizon of Jewish prophets, small and uninteresting as it seems to us, namely, the captivity of Israel and their expulsion from their land. The faithful remnant are not to escape their share in the national calamity. But while it lasts, they are to wait patiently on the Lord, and not to cast away their confidence, though all seems dark and dreary.

The exhortation thus regarded suggests the power and duty of faith even in times of disaster and sorrow. But another meaning has often been attached to these words, they have been lifted into another region, the spiritual, and have been supposed to refer to a state of feeling not unknown to devout hearts, in which the religious life is devoid of joy and peace. That is a phase of Christian experience, which meets any one who knows much of the workings of men's hearts, and of his own, when faith is exercised with but little of the light of faith, and the fear of the Lord is cherished with but scant joy in the Lord. Now if it be remembered that such an application of the words is not their original purpose, there can be no harm in using them so. Indeed we may say that, as the words are perfectly general, they include a reference to all darkness of life or soul, however produced, whether it come from the night of sorrow falling on us from without, or from mists and gloom rising like heavy vapours from our own hearts. So considered, the text suggests the one remedy for all gloom and weakness in the spiritual life.

Thus, then, we have three different sets of circumstances in which faith is enforced as the source of true strength and our all-embracing duty. In outward sorrow and trial, trust; in inward darkness and sadness, trust; in every stage of Christian progress, trust. Or I. Faith the light in the darkness of the world. II. Faith the light in the darkness of the soul. III. Faith the light in every stage of Christian progress.

**I. Faith our light in the darkness of the world.**

The mystery and standing problem of the Old Testament is the coexistence of goodness and sorrow, and the mystery still remains, and ever will remain, a fact. It is partially alleviated if we remember that one main purpose of all our sorrows is to lead us to this confidence.

**(a)** The call to faith is the true voice of all our sorrows.

It seems easy to trust when all is bright, but really it is just as hard, only we can more easily deceive ourselves, when physical well-being makes us comfortable. We are less conscious of our own emptiness, we mask our poverty from ourselves, we do not seem to need God so much. But sorrow reveals our need to us. Other props are struck away, and it is either collapse or Him. We learn the vanity, the transiency, of all besides.

Sorrow reveals God, as the pillar of cloud glowed brighter when the evening fell. Sorrow is meant to awaken the powers that are apt to sleep in prosperity.

So the true voice of all our griefs is Come up hither. They call us to trust, as nightfall calls us to light up our lamps. The snow keeps the hidden seeds warm; shepherds burn heather on the hillside that young grass may spring.

**(b)** The call to faith echoes from the voice of the Servant.

Jesus in His darkness rested on God, and in all His sorrows was yet anointed with the oil of gladness. In every pang He has been before us. The rack is sanctified because He has been stretched upon it.

**(c)** The substance of the call.

It is to trust, not to anything more. No attempts to stifle tears are required. There is no sin in sorrow. The emotions which we feel to God in bright days are not appropriate at such times. There are seasons in every life when all that we can say is, Truly this is a grief, and I will bear it.

What then is required? Assurance of God's loving will sending sorrow. Assurance of God's strengthening presence in it, assurance of deliverance from it. These, not more, are required; these are the elements of the faith here called for.

Such faith may co-exist with the keenest sense of loss. The true attitude in sorrow may be gathered from Christ's at the grave of Lazarus, contrasted with the excessive mourning of the sisters, and the feigned grief of the Jews.

There are times when the most that we can do is to trust even in the great darkness, Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him. Submissive silence is sometimes the most eloquent confession of faith. I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, because Thou didst it.

**(d)** The blessed results of such faith.

It is implied that we may find all that we need, and more, in God. Have we to mourn friends? In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne. Have we lost wealth? We have in Him a treasure that moth or rust cannot touch. Are our hopes blasted? Happy is He ... whose hope is in the Lord his God. Is our health broken? I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance. The Lord is able to give thee much more than these.

How can we face the troubles of life without Him? God calls us when in darkness, and by the darkness, to trust in His name and stay ourselves on Him. Happy are we if we answer Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation.

**II. Faith, our light in the darkness of the soul.**

No doubt there may be such a thing as true fear of God in the soul along with spiritual darkness, faith without the joy of faith. Now this condition seems contradictory of the very nature of the Christian life. For religion is union with God who is light, and if we walk in Him, we are in the light. How then can such experience be?

We must dismiss the notion of God's desertion of the trusting soul. He is always the same; He has never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain. But while putting aside that false explanation, we can see how such darkness may be. If our religious life was in more vigorous exercise, more pure, perfect and continuous, there would be no separation of faith and the joy of faith. But we have not such unruffled, perfect, uninterrupted faith, and hence there may be, and often is, faith without much joy of faith. I would not say that such experience is always the fruit of sin. But certainly we are not to blame Him or to think of Him as breaking His promises, or departing from His nature. No principles, be they ever so firmly held, ever so undoubtingly received, ever so passionately embraced, exert their whole power equally at all moments in a life. There come times of languor when they seem to be mere words, dead commonplaces, as unlike their former selves as sapless winter boughs to their summer pride of leafy beauty. The same variation in our realising grasp affects the truths of the Gospel. Sometimes they seem but words, with all the life and power sucked out of them, pale shadows of themselves, or like the dried bed of a wady with blazing, white stones, where flashing water used to leap, and all the flowerets withered, which once bent their meek little heads to drink. No facts are always equally capable of exciting their correspondent emotions. Those which most closely affect our personal life, in which we find our deepest joys, are not always present in our minds, and when they are, do not always touch the springs of our feelings. No possessions are always equally precious to us. The rich man is not always conscious with equal satisfaction of his wealth. If, then, the way from the mind to the emotions is not always equally open, there is a reason why there may be faith without light of joy. If the thoughts are not always equally concentrated on the things which produce joy, there is a reason why there may be the habit of fearing God, though there be not the present vigorous exercise of faith, and consequently but little light.

* Another reason may lie in the disturbing and saddening influence of earthly cares and sorrows. There are all weathers in a year. And the highest hope and nearest possible approach to joy is sometimes Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness. Our lives are sometimes like an Arctic winter in which for many days is no sun.
* Another reason may be found in the very fact that we are apt to look impatiently for peace and joy, and to be more exercised with these than with that which produces them.
* Another may be errors or mistakes about God and His Gospel.
* Another may be absorption with our own sin instead of with Him. To all these add temperament, education, habit, example, influence of body on the mind, and of course also positive inconsistencies and a low tone of Christian life.

It is clear then that, if these be the causes of this state, the one cure for it is to exercise our faith more energetically.

* Trust, do not look back. We are tempted to cast away our confidence and to say: What profit shall I have if I pray unto Him? But it is on looking onwards, not backwards, that safety lies.
* Trust, do not think about your sins.
* Trust, do not think so much about your joy.

It is in the occupation of heart and mind with Jesus that joy and peace come. To make them our direct aim is the way not to attain them. Though now there seems a long wintry interval between seed time and harvest, yet in due season we shall reap if we faint not.

In the fourth watch of the night Jesus came unto them.

**III. Faith our guiding light in every stage of Christian progress.**

Those who already fear God are in the text exhorted to trust.

In the most advanced Christian life there are temptations to abandon our confidence. We never on earth come to such a point as that, without effort, we are sure to continue in the way. True, habit is a wonderful ally of goodness, and it is a great thing to have it on our side, but all our lives long, there will be hindrances without and within which need effort and self-repression. On earth there is no time when it is safe for us to go unarmed. The force of gravitation acts however high we climb. Not till heaven is reached will love be its own security, and nature coincide with grace. And even in heaven faith abideth, but there it will be without effort.

**(a)** The most advanced Christian life needs a perpetual renewal and repetition of past acts of faith.

It cannot live on a past any more than the body can subsist on last year's food. The past is like the deep portions of coral reefs, a mere platform for the living present which shines on the surface of the sea, and grows. We must gather manna daily.

The life is continued by the same means as that by which it was begun. There is no new duty or method for the most advanced Christian; he has to do just what he has been doing for half a century. We cannot transcend the creatural position, we are ever dependent. To hoar hairs will I carry you. The initial point is prolonged into a continuous line.

**(b)** The most advanced and mature faith is capable of increase, in regard to its knowledge of its object, and in intensity, constancy, power. At first it may be a tremulous trust, afterwards it should become an assured confidence. At first it may be but a dim recognition, as in a glass darkly, of the great love which has redeemed us at a great price; afterwards it should become the clear vision of the trusted Friend and lifelong companion of our souls, who is all in all to us. At first it may be an interrupted hold, afterwards it should become such a grasp as the roots of a tree have on the soil. At first it may be a feeble power ruling over our rebel selves, like some king beleaguered in his capital, who has no sway beyond its walls, afterwards it should become a peaceful sovereign who guides and sways all the powers of the soul and outgoings of the life. At first it may be like a premature rose putting forth pale petals on an almost leafless bough, afterwards the whole tree should be blossomed over with fragrant flowers, the homes of light and sweetness. The highest faith may be heightened, and the spirits before the throne pray the prayer, Lord, increase our faith.

For us all, then, the merciful voice of the servant of the Lord calls to His light. Our faith is our light in darkness, only as a window is the light of a house, or the eye, of the body, because it admits and discerns that true light. He calls us each from the darkness. Do not try to make fires for yourselves, ineffectual and transient, but look to Him, and you shall not walk in darkness, even amid the gloom of earth, but shall have light in your darkness, till the time come when, in a clearer heaven and a lighter air, Thy sun shall no more go down, neither shall thy moon withdraw itself, for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.