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

**ISAIAH-079. THE PASSING AND THE PERMANENT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee."*

*Isaiah 54:10*

There is something of music in the very sound of these words. The stately march of the grand English translation lends itself with wonderful beauty to the melody of Isaiah's words. But the thought that lies below them, sweeping as it does through the whole creation, and parting all things into the transient and eternal, the mortal and immortal, is still greater than the music of the words. These are removed; this abides. And the thing in God which abides is all-gentle tenderness, that strange love mightier than all the powers of Deity beside, permanent with the permanence of His changeless heart. The mountains shall depart, the emblems of eternity shall crumble and change and pass, and the hills be removed; but this immortal, impalpable, and, in some men's minds, fantastic and unreal something, My loving kindness and the covenant of My peace, shall outlast them all. And this great promise is stamped with the sign manual of Heaven, being spoken by the Lord that hath mercy on thee.

So then, dear friends, I think I shall most reverentially deal with these words if I handle them in the simplest possible way, and think, first of all, of that great antithesis that is set before us here--what passes and what abides; and, secondly, draw two or three plain, homely lessons and applications from the thoughts thus suggested.

**I. First, then, we have to deal with the contrast between the apparently enduring which passes, and that which truly abides.**

The mountains depart, the hills remove, My loving-kindness shall not depart, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed. Let me then say a word or two about that first thought--the mountains shall depart. There they tower over the plains, looking down upon the flat valley beneath as they did when the prophet spoke. The eternal buttresses of the hills stand to the eyes of the fleeting generations as emblems of permanence, and yet winter storms and summer heats, and the slow processes of decay which we call the gnawing of time, are ever working upon them, and changing their forms, and at last they shall pass. Modern science, whilst it has all but incalculably enlarged our conceptions of the duration of the material universe, emphasises, as faith alone never could, the thought of the ultimate perishing of this material world. For geology tells us that where rears the cliff there rolled the sea, that through the cycles of the shifting history of the world there have been elevations and depressions so that the ancient hills in many places are the newest of all things, and the world's form has changed many and many a time since first it circled as a planet. And researches into the ultimate constitution of matter have taught us to think of solids and liquids and gases, as being an infinite multitude of atoms all in rapid motion with inconceivable velocity, and have shown us the very atoms in the act of breaking up. So that the old guess of the infancy of physical science which divined that all things are in a state of flux is confirmed by its last utterances. Science prophesies too, and bids us expect that the earth shall one day become, like some of the stars, a burnt out mass of uniform temperature, incapable of change or of sustaining life, and shall end by falling into the diminished sun, and so the old word will be fulfilled that the earth and the works that are therein shall be burnt up. None should be able to utter the words of my text, The mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, with such emphasis of certitude as the present students of physical science.

But our text does not stop there. It brings into view the transiency of the transient, in order to throw into greater relief and prominence the perpetuity of the abiding. If we had nothing abiding beyond this perishable material universe, it would indeed be misery to exist. Life would be not only insignificant but wretched, and a ghastly irony, a meaningless, aimless ripple on the surface of that silent, shoreless sea. The great But of this text lifts the oppression from humanity with which the one-sided truth of the passing of all the Visible loads it.

And so turn for a moment to the other side of this great text. There stands out above all that is mortal, which, although it counts its existence by millenniums, is but for an instant, visible to the eye of faith, the Great Spirit who moves all the material universe, Himself unmoved, and lives undiminished by creation, and undiminished if creation were swept out of existence. Let that which may pass, pass; let that which can perish, perish; let the mountains crumble and the hills melt away; beyond the smoke and conflagration, and rising high above destruction and chaos, stands the calm throne of God, with a loving Heart upon it, with a council of peace and purpose of mercy for you and for me, the creatures of a day indeed, but who are to live when the days shall cease to be. My kindness! What a wonderful word that is, so far above all the cold delusion of so-called theism! My kindness! the tender-heartedness of an infinite love, the abounding favour of the Father of my spirit, His gentle goodness bending down to me, His tenderness round about me, eternal love that never can die; the thing that lasts in the universe is His kindness, which continues from everlasting to everlasting. What a revelation of God! Oh, dear friends, if only our hearts could open to the full acceptance of that thought, sorrow and care and anxiety, and every other form of trouble, would fade away and we should be at rest. The infinite, undying, imperishable love of God is mine. Older than the mountains, deeper than their roots, wider than the heavens, and stronger than all my sin, is the love that grasps me and keeps me and will not let me go, and lavishes its tenderness upon me, and beseeches me, and pleads with me, and woos me, and rebukes me, and corrects me when I need, and sent His Son to die for me. My kindness shall not depart from thee.

But even that great conception does not exhaust the encouragement which the prophet has to give to souls weighed upon with the transiency of the material. He speaks of the covenant of My peace. We are to think of this great, tender, changeless love of God, which underlies all things and towers above all things, which overlaps them all and fills eternity, as being placed, so to speak, under the guarantee of a solemn obligation. God's covenant is a great thought of Scripture which we far too little apprehend in the depth and power of its meaning. His covenant with you and me, poor creatures, is this, I promise that My love shall never leave thee. He makes Himself a constitutional monarch, so to speak, giving us a plighted word to which we can appeal and go to Him and say, There, that is the charter given by Thyself, given irrevocably for ever, and I hold Thee to it. Fulfil it, O Thou God of Truth.

My covenant of peace. Dear friends, the prophet spoke a deeper thing than he knew when he uttered these words. Let me remind you of the large meaning which the New Testament puts into them. Now the God of Peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, through the blood of the everlasting Covenant, make us perfect in every good work, to do His will. God has bound Himself by His promise to give you and me the peace that belongs to His own nature, and that covenant is sealed to us in the blood of Jesus Christ upon the Cross, and so we sinful men, with all the burden of our evil upon us, with all our sins known to us, with all our manifest failings and infirmities, can turn to Him and say, Thou hast pledged Thyself to forgive and accept, and that covenant is made sure to me because Thy Son hath died, and I come and ask Thee to fulfil it. And be sure of this, that no poor creature upon earth, however lame his hand, who puts out that hand to grasp that peaceful covenant--that new covenant in the blood of Christ--can plead in vain.

My brother, have you done that? Have you entered into this covenant of peace with God--peace in believing, peace by the blood of Christ, peace that fills a new heart, peace that rules amidst all the perturbations and disappointments of life? Then you may be sure that that covenant will stand for evermore, though the mountains depart and the hills be removed.

**II. Now turn with me to a few practical lessons which we may gather from these great contrasts here, between the perishable mortal and the immortal divine love.**

Surely the first plain one is a warning against fastening our love, our hope, or our trust on these transient things.

What folly it is for a man to risk his peace and the strength and the joy of his life upon things that crumble and change, when all the while there is lying before him open for his entrance, and wooing him to come into the eternal home of his spirit, this covenant! Here are we, from day to day, plunged into these passing vanities, and always tempted to think that they are the true abiding things, and it needs great discipline and watchfulness to live the better life. There is nothing that will help us to do it like a firm grasp of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Then we can hold these mortal joys with a loose hand, knowing that they are only for a little time, and feeling that they are passing whilst we look at them, and are changing like the scenery in the sky on a summer's night, with its cliffs and hills in the clouds, even while we gaze. Where there was a mountain a moment ago up there, there is now a depression, and the world and everything in it lasts very little longer than these. It is only a film on the surface of the great sea of eternity--there is no reality about it. It is but a dream--a vision, slipping, slipping, slipping away, and you and I slipping along with it. How foolishly, how obstinately, we all cling to it, though even the very grasp of our hands tends to make it pass away, as the children coming in from the fields with their store of buttercups and daisies in their hot hands, which by their very clutch hasten the withering. And that is just our position. We have them for a brief moment, and they all perish in the using. Oh, brother, have you set your heart on that which is not, when all the while there, longing to bless and love us, stands the Eternal God, with His unchanging love and faithful covenant of His perpetual peace? Surely it were wiser--wiser, to put it on the lowest ground--to seek the things that are above, and, knowing as we do that the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, so make our portion the kindness which shall not depart, and seek our share in the peace that shall not pass away.

But there is another lesson to be put in the same simple fashion. Surely we ought to use thoughts like these of my text in order to stay the soul in seasons which come to every one sometimes, when we are made painfully conscious of the transiency of this Present. Meditative hours come to us all--moments when perhaps some strain of music gives us back childhood's days; when perhaps some perfume of a flower reminds us of long-vanished gardens and hands that have crumbled into dust; when some touch of a sunset sky, or some word of a book, or some providence of our lives, comes upon the heart and mind, reminding us how everything is passing. You have all had these thoughts. Some of us stifle them--they are not pleasant to many of us; some of us brood over them unwholesomely, and that is not wise; but the best use of them is to bear us onward into the peaceful region where we clasp to our troubled hearts that which cannot go. If any of us are making experience to-day of earthly change, if any of us have hearts heavy with earthly losses, if any of us are bending under the weight of that awful law, that everything becomes part and parcel of that dreadful past, if any of us are looking at our empty hands and saying, They have taken away my god and what have I more? let us listen to the better voice that says, My kindness shall not depart from thee, and so, whatever goes, thou canst not be desolate if thou hast Me.

And then, still further, let me remind you that this same thought may avail to give to us hopes of years as immortal as itself. We do not belong to the mountains and hills that shall depart, or to the order of things to which they belong. There is coming a very solemn day, I believe, not by any mere processes of natural decay as I take it, but by the action of God Himself, the Judge that day of the Lord that shall come as a thief in the night--when the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed, and the throne of judgment shall be set, and you and I will be there. My brother, lay your hand on that covenant of peace which is made for us all in Christ Jesus the Lord, and then calm as the summer's ocean we shall be, and all the wreck of nature cannot disturb us, for we shall abide unshaken as the throne of God. The mountains may pass, the hills be removed, but herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment, for that kindness shall not depart from us, and God's gentle tenderness is eternal as Himself. Then we shall not depart from it either, and we are immortal as the tenderness that encloses us. God's endless love must have undying creatures on whom to pour itself out, and if to-day I possess--as we all may possess in however feeble a measure--some sips and prelibations of that great flood of love that is in God, I can look unblanched right into the eyes of death and say, Thou hast no power at all over me, I am eternal because the God that loves me is so, and since He hath loved me with an everlasting love, His loving-kindness shall not depart from me. Therefore, seeing that all these things shall be dissolved, I know that I have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, and because He lives I shall live also. The hope that is built upon the eternal love of God in Christ is the true guarantee to me of immortal existence, and this hope is ours if, and only if, we come into the covenant--the covenant of peace. God says, I will love thee, I will bless thee, I will keep thee, I will pardon thee, I will save thee, I will glorify thee, and there is My bond on that Cross, the new covenant in His blood. Close with the covenant that God is ready to make with you, and then life and death, principalities and powers, things present and things to come, height and depth, and every other creature shall be impotent to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.