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

**ISAIAH-080. THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto Me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. 3. Incline your ear, and come unto Me, hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. 4. Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people. 5. Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for He hath glorified thee. 6. Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near: 7. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. 8. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. 9. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. 10. For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: 11. So shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. 12. For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."*

*Isaiah 55:1-13*

The call to partake of the blessings of the Messianic salvation worthily follows the great prophecy of the suffering Servant. No doubt the immediate application of this chapter is to the exiled nation, who in it are summoned from their vain attempts to find satisfaction in the material prosperity realised in exile, and to make the only true blessedness their own by obedience to God's voice. But if ever the prophet spoke to the world he does so here. It is no unwarranted spiritualising of his invitation which hears in it the voice which invites all mankind to share the blessings of the gospel feast.

The glorious words need little exposition. What we have to do is to see that they do not fall on our ears in vain. They may be roughly divided into two sections--the invitation to the feast, with the promises to the obedient Israel (verses 1-5), and the summons to the necessary preparation for the feast, namely, repentance, with the reason for its necessity, and the encouragements to it in the might of God's faithful promises (verses 6-13).

**I.** Whose voice sounds so beseechingly and welcoming in this great call, which rings out to all thirsty souls? If we note the Me and I which follow, we shall hear God Himself thus taking the office of summoner to His own feast. By whatever media the gospel call reaches us, it is in reality God's own voice to our hearts, and that makes the responsibility of hearing more tremendous, and the folly of refusing more inexcusable.

Who are invited? There are but two conditions expressed in verse 1, and these are fulfilled in every soul. All are summoned who are thirsty and penniless. If we have in our souls desires that all the broken cisterns of earth can never slake--and we all have these--and if we have nothing by which we can procure what will still the gnawing hunger and burning thirst of our souls--and none of us has--then we are included in the call. Universal as are the craving for blessedness and the powerlessness to satisfy it, are the adaptation and destination of the gospel.

What is offered? Water, wine, milk--all the beverages of a simple civilisation, differing in their operation, but all precious to a thirsty palate. Water revives, wine gladdens and inspirits, milk nourishes. All that any man needs or desires is to be found in Christ. We shall not understand the nature of the feast unless we remember that He Himself is the gift of God. What these three draughts mean is best perceived when we listen to Him saying, in a plain quotation of this call, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. Nothing short of Himself can satisfy the thirst of one soul, much less of all the thirsty. Like the flow from the magic fountain of the legend, Jesus becomes to each what each most desires.

How does He become ours? The paradox of buying with what is not money is meant, by its very appearance of contradiction, to put in strongest fashion that the possession of Him depends on nothing in us but the sense of need and the willingness to accept. We buy Christ when we part with self, which is all that we have, in order to win Him. We must be full of conscious emptiness and desire, if we are to be filled with His fulness. Jesus interpreted the meaning of come to the waters when He said, He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst. Faith is coming, faith is drinking, faith is buying.

The universal call, with is clear setting forth of blessing and conditions of possessing, is followed by a pleading remonstrance as to the folly of lavishing effort and money on what is not bread. It is strange that men will cheerfully take more pains to continue thirsty than to accept the satisfaction which God provides. They toil and continue unsatisfied. Experience does not teach them, and all the while the one real good is waiting to be theirs for nothing.

'Tis heaven alone that is given away;

'Tis only God may be had for the asking.

Christ goes a-begging, and we spend our strength in vain toil to acquire what we turn away from when it is offered us in Him. When the great Father offers bread for nothing, we will not have it, but we are ready to give any price for a stone. It is not the wickedness, but the folly, of unbelief, which is the marvel.

The contrast between the heavy price at which men buy hunger, and the easy rate at which they may have full satisfaction, is further set forth by the call to incline the ear, which is all that is needed in order that life and nourishment which delights the soul may be ours. Hearken, and eat is equivalent to Hearken, and ye shall eat. The real good for man is only to be found in listening to and obeying the divine voice, whether it sound in invitation, promise, or command. The true life of the soul lies in that listening receptiveness which takes for one's own God's great gift of Christ, and yields glad obedience to His every word.

The exiled Israel was promised an everlasting covenant as the result of their acceptance of the invitation; and we know whose blood it is that has sealed the new covenant, which abides as long as Christ's fulness and men's need shall last. That covenant, of which we seldom hear in Isaiah, but which fills a prominent place in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, is further explained as being the sure mercies of David. This phrase and its context are difficult, but the general meaning is clear. The great promises of God's unfailing mercy, made to the historical founder of the royal house, shall be transferred and continued, with inviolable faithfulness, to those who drink of the gift of God.

This parallel between the great King and the whole mass of the true Israel is further set forth in verses 4 and 5. Each begins with Behold, and the similar form indicates similarity in contents. The son of Jesse was in some degree God's witness to the heathen nations, as is expressed in several psalms; and, what he was imperfectly, the ransomed Israel would be to the world. The office of the Christian Church is to draw nations that it knew not, to follow in the blessed path, in which it has found satisfaction and the dawnings of a more than natural glory transfiguring it. They who have themselves drunk of the unfailing fountain in Christ are thereby fitted and called to cry to others, Come ye to the waters. Experience of Christ's preciousness, and of the rest of soul which comes from partaking of His salvation, impels and obliges to call others to share the bliss.

**II.** The second part of the chapter begins with an urgent call to repentance, based upon the difference between God's ways and man's, and on the certainty that the divine promises will be fulfilled. The summons in verses 6 and 7 is first couched in most general terms, which are then more closely defined. To seek the Lord is to direct conduct and heart to obtain possession of God as one's own. Of that seeking, the chief element is calling upon Him; since such is His desire to be found of us that it only needs our asking in order to receive. As surely as the mother hears her child's cry, so surely does He catch the faintest voice addressed to Him. But, men being what they are, a change of ways and of their root in thoughts is indispensable. Seeking which is not accompanied by forsaking self and an evil past is no genuine seeking, and will end in no finding. But this forsaking is only one side of true repentance; the other is return to God, as is expressed in the New Testament word for it, which implies a change of mind, purpose, and conduct. The faces which were turned earthward and averted from God are to be turned God-ward and diverted from earth. Whosoever thus seeks may be confident of finding and of abundant pardon. The belief in God's loving forgivingness is the strongest motive to repentance, and the most melting argument to listen to the call to seek Him. But there is another motive of a more awful kind; namely, the consideration that the period of mercy is limited, and that a time may come, and that soon, when God no longer may be found nor is near.

The need for such a radical change in conduct and mind is further enforced, in verses 8 and 9, by the emphatic statement of present discord between the exiled Israel and God. Mark that the deepest seat of the discord is first dealt with, and then the manifestation of it in active life. Mark also that the order of comparison is inverted in the two successive clauses in verse 8. God's thoughts have not entered into Israel's mind and become theirs. The thinkings not being regulated according to God's truth, nor the desires and sentiments brought into accord with His will and mind, a contrariety of ways must follow, and the paths which men choose for themselves cannot run parallel with God's, nor be pleasing to Him. Therefore the stringent urgency of the call to forsake the crooked, wandering ways in which we live, and to come back to the path of righteousness which is traced by God for our feet.

But divergence which necessitates repentance is not the only relation between our ways and God's. There is elevation, transcendency, like that of the eternal heavens, high, boundless, the home of light, the storehouse of beneficent influences which fertilise. If we think of the dreary, flat plains where the exiles were, and the magnificent sweep of the sky over them, we shall feel the beauty of the figure. If My thoughts are not your thoughts was all that was to be said, repentance would be of little use, and there would be little to encourage to it; but if God's thoughts of love and ways of blessing arch themselves above our low lives as the sky bends, pitying and bestowing, above squalor, barrenness, and darkness, then penitence is not in vain, and the low earth may be visited with gifts from the highest heaven.

The certainty that such gifts will be bestowed is the last thought of this magnificent summons. The prophet dilates on that assurance to the end of the chapter. He seems to catch fire, as it were, from the introduction of that grand figure of the lofty heavens domed above the flat earth. In effect, what he says is: They are high and inaccessible, but think what pours down from them, and how all fertility depends on their gifts of rain and snow, and how the moisture which they drop is turned into seed to the sower, and bread to the eater. Thinking of that continuous benefaction and miracle, we should see in it a symbol of the better gifts from the higher heavens. So does God's word come down from His throne. So does it turn barrenness into nodding harvest. So does it quicken undreamed of powers of fruitfulness in human nature and among the forces of the world. So does it supply nourishment for hungry souls, and germs which shall bear fruit in coming years. No complicated machinery nor the most careful culture can work what the gentle dropping rain effects. There is mightier force in it than in many thunder-clouds. The gospel does with ease and in silence what nothing else can do. It makes barren souls fruitful in all good works, and in all happiness worthy of men. Therefore the summons to drink of the springing fountain and to turn from evil ways and thoughts is recommended by the assurance that God's word is faithful, and all His promises firm.

The final verses (verses 12, 13) give the glowing picture of the return from exile amid the jubilation of a transformed world, as the strongest motive to the obedient hearkening to God's voice, to which the chapter has summoned, and as the great instance of God's keeping His word.

The flight from Egypt was in haste (Deut. xvi. 3); but this shall be a triumphal exodus, without conflict or alarms. All nature shall participate in the joy. Mountains and hills shall raise the shrill note of rejoicing, and the trees wave their branches, as if clapping hands in delight. This is more than mere poetic rhetoric. A redeemed humanity implies a glorified world. Nature has been involved in the consequences of sin, and will share in the results of redemption, and have some humble reflected light from the liberty of the glory of the sons of God.

The fulfilment of this final promise is not yet. All earlier returns of the exiled Israel from the Babylon of their bondage to God and the city of God, such as the historical one which the prophet foretold, and the spiritual one which is repeated age by age in the history of the Christian Church and of single penitent souls, point on to that last triumphant day when the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and the world be transfigured to match the glory that they inherit. That fair world without poison or offence, and the nations of the saved who inhabit its peaceful spaces, shall be, in the fullest stretch of the words, to the Lord for a name, and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. The redemption of man and his establishing amid the felicities of a state correspondent to His God-given glory shall be to all eternity and to all possible creations the highest evidence of what God is, and His token to all beings.