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

**ISAIAH-091. THE SYMPATHY OF GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"In all their afflictions He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them."*

*Isaiah 63:9*

**I. The wonderful glimpse opened here into the heart of God.**

It is not necessary to touch upon the difference between the text and margin of the Revised Version, or to enter on the reason for preferring the former. And what a deep and wonderful thought that is, of divine sympathy with human sorrow! We feel that this transcends the prevalent tone of the Old Testament. It is made the more striking by reason of the other sides of the divine nature which the Old Testament gives so strongly; as, for instance, the unapproachable elevation and absolute sovereignty of God, and the retributive righteousness of God.

Affliction is His chastisement, and is ever righteously inflicted. But here is something more, tender and strange. Sympathy is a necessary part of love. There is no true affection which does not put itself in the place and share the sorrows of its objects. And His sympathy is none the less because He inflicts the sorrow. These afflictions wherein He too was afflicted, were sent by Him. Like an earthly father who suffers more than the child whom he chastises, the Heavenly Father feels the strokes that He inflicts.

That sympathy is consistent with the blessedness of God. Even in the pain of our human sympathy there is a kind of joy, and we may be sure that in His nature there is nothing else.

Contrast with other thoughts about God.

* The vague agnosticism of the present day, which knows only a dim Something of which we can predicate nothing.
* The God of the philosophers--whom we are bidden to think of as passionless and unemotional. No wave of feeling ever ripples that tideless sea. The attribute of infinitude or sovereign completeness is dwelt on with such emphasis as to obscure all the rest.
* The gods of men's own creation are careless in their happiness, and cruel in their vengeance.

But here is a God for all the weary and the sorrowful. What a thought for us in our own burdened days!

**II. The mystery of the divine salvation.**

Of course the salvation here spoken of is the deliverance from Egyptian bondage. This is a summary of the Exodus. But we must mark well that significant expression, the angel of His face or presence. We can only attempt a partial and bald enumeration of some of the very remarkable references to that mysterious person, the angel of the Lord or of the presence. The dying Jacob ascribed his being redeemed from all evil to the Angel, and invoked his blessing on the lads. The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses out of the midst of the burning bush. On Sinai, Jehovah promised to send an angel in whom was His own name, before the people. The promise was renewed after Israel's sin and repentance, and was then given in the form, My presence shall go with thee. Joshua saw a man with a drawn sword in his hand, who declared himself to be the Captain of the Lord's host. The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah and his wife, withheld his name from them because it was wonderful or secret, accepted their sacrifice, and went up to heaven in its flame. Wherefore Manoah said, We have seen God. Long after these early visions, a psalmist knows himself safe because the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him. Hosea, looking back on the story of Jacob's wrestling at Peniel, says, first, that he had power with God, yea, he had power over the angel, and then goes on to say that there He spake with us, even Jehovah. And Malachi, on the last verge of Old Testament prophecy, goes furthest of all in seeming to run together the conceptions of Jehovah and the Angel of Jehovah, for he says, The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple; and the angel of the covenant ... behold, he cometh. From this imperfect resume, we see that there appears in the earliest as in the latest books of the Old Testament, a person distinguished from the hosts of angels, identified in a very remarkable manner with Jehovah, by alternation of names, in attributes and offices, and in receiving worship, and being the organ of His revelation. That special relation to the divine revelation is expressed by both the representation that Jehovah's name is in him, and by the designation in our text, the angel of His presence, or literally, of His face. For name and face are in so far synonymous that they mean the side of the divine nature which is turned to the world.

For the present I go no further than this. It is clear, then, that our text is at all events remarkable, in that it ascribes to this angel of His presence the praise of Jehovah's saving work. The loving heart, afflicted in all their afflictions, sends forth the messenger of His face, and by Him is salvation wrought. The whole sum of the deliverance of Israel in the past is attributed to Him. Surely this must have been felt by a devout Jew to conceal some great mystery.

**III. The crowning revelation both of the heart of God and of His saving power.**

**(a)** Jesus Christ is the true angel of the face.

I do not need to enter on the question of whether in the Old Testament the angel of the Covenant was indeed a pre-manifestation of the eternal Son. I am disposed to answer it in the affirmative. But be that as it may, all that was spoken of the angel is true of Him. God's name is in Him, and that not in fragments or half-syllables but complete. The face of God looks lovingly on men in Him, so that Jesus could declare, He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. His presence brings God's presence, and He can venture to say, We will come and make our abode with Him. He is the agent of the divine salvation.

The identity and the difference are here in their highest form.

**(b)** The mystery of God's sharing our sorrows is explained in Him.

We may find a difficulty in the thought of a suffering and sympathising God. But if we believe that My name is in Him, then the sympathy and gentleness of Jesus is the compassion of God. This is a true revelation. So tears at the grave sighs in healing, and all the sorrows which He bore are an unveiling of the heart of God.

That sharing our sorrows is the very heart of His work. We might almost say that He became man in order to increase His power of sympathy, as a prince might temporarily become a pauper. But certainly He became man that He might bear our burdens. Himself took our infirmities. Forasmuch as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He himself also likewise took part of the same.

The atoning death is the climax of Christ's being afflicted with our afflictions. His priestly sympathy flows out now and for ever to us all.

So complete is His unity with God, that He works the salvation which is God's, and that God's name is in Him. So complete is His union with us, that our sorrows touch Him and His life becomes ours. Ye have done it unto Me. Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?

For us in all our troubles there are no darker rooms than Christ has been in before us. We are like prisoners put in the same cell as some great martyr. He drank the cup, and we can put the rim to our lips at the place that His lips have touched. But not only may we have our sufferings lightened by the thought that He has borne the same, and that we know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, but we have the further alleviation of being sure that He makes our afflictions His by perfect sympathy, and, still more wonderful and blessed, that there is such unity of life and sensation between the Head and the members that our afflictions are His, and are not merely made so.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,

And thy Saviour is not by;

Think not thou canst shed a tear

And thy Saviour is not near.

Do not front the world alone. In all our afflictions He is with us; out of them all He saves.