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

**JUDGES-004. ALL THINGS ARE YOURS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera."*

*Judges 5:20*

*"For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee."*

*Job 5:23*

These two poetical fragments present the same truth on opposite sides. The first of them comes from Deborah's triumphant chant. The singer identifies God with the cause of Israel, and declares that heaven itself fought against those who fought against God's people. There may be an allusion to the tempest which Jewish tradition tells us burst over the ranks of the enemy, or there may be some trace of ancient astrological notions, or the words may simply be an elevated way of saying that Heaven fought for Israel. The silent stars, as they swept on their paths through the sky, advanced like an avenging host embattled against the foes of Israel and of God. All things fight against the man who fights against God.

The other text gives the other side of the same truth. One of Job's friends is rubbing salt into his wounds by insisting on the commonplace, which needs a great many explanations and limitations before it can be accepted as true, that sin is the cause of sorrow, and that righteousness brings happiness; and in the course of trying to establish this heartless thesis to a heavy heart he breaks into a strain of the loftiest poetry in describing the blessedness of the righteous. All things, animate and inanimate, are upon his side. The ground, which Genesis tells us is cursed for his sake, becomes his ally, and the very creatures whom man's sin set at enmity against him are at peace with him. All things are the friends and servants of him who is the friend and servant of God.

**I. So, putting these two texts together, we have first the great conviction to which religion clings, that God being on our side all things are for us, and not against us.**

Now, that is the standing faith of the Old Testament, which no doubt was more easily held in those days, because, if we accept its teaching, we shall recognise that Israel lived under a system in so far supernatural as that moral goodness and material prosperity were a great deal more closely and indissolubly connected than they are to-day. So, many a psalmist and many a prophet breaks out into apostrophes, warranted by the whole history of Israel, and declaring how blessed are the men who, apart from all other defences and sources of prosperity, have God for their help and Him for their hope.

But we are not to dismiss this conviction as belonging only to a system where the supernatural comes in, as it does in the Old Testament history, and as antiquated under a dispensation such as that in which we live. For the New Testament is not a whit behind the Old in insisting upon this truth. All things work together for good to them that love God. All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's. Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good? The New Testament is committed to the same conviction as that to which the faith of Old Testament saints clung as the sheet anchor of their lives.

That conviction cannot be struck out of the creed of any man, who believes in the God to whom the Old and the New Testament alike bear witness. For it rests upon this plain principle, that all this great universe is not a chaos, but a cosmos, that all these forces and creatures are not a rabble, but an ordered host.

What is the meaning of that great Name by which, from of old, God in His relations to the whole universe has been described--the Lord of Hosts? Who are the hosts of which He is the Lord, and to whom, as the centurion said, He says to this one, Go! and he goeth; and to another, Come! and he cometh; and to another, Do this! and he doeth it? Who are the hosts? Not only these beings who are dimly revealed to us as rational and intelligent, who excel in strength, because they hearken to the voice of His word', but in the ranks of that great army are also embattled all the forces of the universe, and all things living or dead. All are Thy servants; they continue this day--angels, stars, creatures of earth-- according to Thine ordinances.

And if it be true that the All is an ordered whole, which is obedient to the touch and to the will of that divine Commander, then all His servants must be on the same side, and cannot turn their arms against each other. As an old hymn says with another reference--

All the servants of our King

In heaven and earth are one,

and none of them can injure, wound, or slay a fellow-servant. If all are travelling in the same direction there can be no collision. If all are enlisted under the same standard they can never turn their weapons against each other. If God sways all things, then all things which God sways must be on the side of the men that are on the side of God. Thou shalt make a league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.

**II. Note the difficulties arising from experience, in the way of holding fast by this conviction of faith.**

The grim facts of the world, seen from their lowest level, seem to shatter it to atoms. Talk about the stars in their courses fighting for or against anybody! In one aspect it is superstition, in another aspect it is a dream and an illusion. The prose truth is that they shine down silent, pitiless, cold, indifferent, on battlefields or on peaceful homes; and the moonlight is as pure when it falls upon broken hearts as when it falls upon glad ones. Nature is utterly indifferent to the moral or the religious character of its victims. It goes on its way unswerving and pitiless; and whether the man who stands in its path is good or bad matters not. If he gets into a typhoon he will be wrecked; if he tumbles over Niagara he will be drowned. And what becomes of all the talk about an embattled universe on the side of goodness, in the face of the plain facts of life--of nature's indifference, nature's cruelty which has led some men to believe in two sovereign powers, one beneficent and one malicious, and has led others to say, God is a superfluous hypothesis, and to believe in Him brings more enigmas than it solves, and has led still others to say, Why, if there is a God, does it look as if either He was not all-powerful, or was not all-merciful? Nature has but ambiguous evidence to give in support of this conviction.

Then, if we turn to what we call Providence and its mysteries, the very book of Job, from which my second text is taken, is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the difficulty and to untie the knot; and I suppose everybody will admit that, whatever may be the solution which is suggested by that enigmatical book, the solution is by no means a complete one, though it is as complete as the state of religious knowledge at the time at which the book was written made possible to be attained. The seventy-third psalm shows that even in that old time when, as I have said, supernatural sanctions were introduced into the ordinary dealings of life, the difficulties that cropped up were great enough to bring a devout heart to a stand, and to make the Psalmist say, My feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped. Providence, with all its depths and mysteries, often to our aching hearts seems in our own lives to contradict the conviction, and when we look out over the sadness of humanity, still more does it seem impossible for us to hold fast by the faith that all which we behold is full of blessings.

I doubt not that there are many of ourselves whose lives, shadowed, darkened, hemmed in, perplexed, or made solitary for ever, seem to them to be hard to reconcile with this cheerful faith upon which I am trying to insist. Brethren, cling to it even in the darkness. Be sure of this, that amongst all our mercies there are none more truly merciful than those which come to us shrouded in dark garments, and in questionable shapes. Let nothing rob us of the confidence that all things work together for good.

**III. I come, lastly, to consider the higher form in which this conviction is true for ever.**

I have said that the facts of life seem often to us, and are felt often by some of us, to shatter it to atoms; to riddle it through and through with shot. But, if we bring the Pattern-life to bear upon the illumination of all life, and if we learn the lessons of the Cradle and the Cross, and rise to the view of human life which emerges from the example of Jesus Christ, then we get back the old conviction, transfigured indeed, but firmer than ever. We have to alter the point of view. Everything always depends on the point of view. We have to alter one or two definitions. Definitions come first in geometry and in everything else. Get them right, and you will get your theorems and problems right.

So, looking at life in the light of Christ, we have to give new contents to the two words good and evil, and a new meaning to the two words for and against. And when we do that, then the difficulties straighten themselves out, and there are not any more knots, but all is plain; and the old faith of the Old Testament, which reposed very largely upon abnormal and extraordinary conditions of life, comes back in a still nobler form, as possible to be held by us amidst the commonplace of our daily existence.

For everything is my friend, is for me and not against me, that helps me nearer to God. To live for Him, to live with Him, to be conscious ever of communion with Himself, to feel the touch of His hand on my hand, and the pressure of His breast against mine, at all moments of my life, is my true and the highest good. And if it is true that the river of the water of life which flows from the Throne of God is the only draught that can ever satisfy the immortal thirst of a soul, then whatever drives me away from the cisterns and to the fountain, is on my side. Better to dwell in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is, if it makes me long for the water that rises at the gate of the true Bethlehem--the house of bread--than to dwell in a land flowing with milk and honey, and well watered in every part! If the cup that I would fain lift to my lips has poison in it, or if its sweetness is making me lose my relish for the pure and tasteless river that flows from the Throne of God, there can be no truer friend than that calamity, as men call it, which strikes the cup from my hands, and shivers the glass before I have raised it to my lips. Everything is my friend that helps me towards God.

Everything is my friend that leads me to submission and obedience. The joy of life, and the perfection of human nature, is an absolutely submitted will, identified with the divine, both in regard to doing and to enduring. And whatever tends to make my will flexible, so that it corresponds to all the sinuosities, so to speak, of the divine will, and fits into all its bends and turns, is a blessing to me. Raw hides, stiff with dirt and blood, are put into a bath of bitter infusion of oak-bark. What for? For the same end as, when they are taken out, they are scraped with sharp steels,--that they may become flexible. When that is done the useless hide is worth something.

Our wills are ours, we know not how;

Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.

And whatever helps me to that is my friend.

Everything is a friend to the man that loves God, in a far sweeter and deeper sense than it can ever be to any other. Like a sudden burst of sunshine upon a gloomy landscape, the light of union with God and friendship with Him flooding my daily life flashes it all up into brightness. The dark ribbon of the river that went creeping through the black copses, when the sun glints upon it, gleams up into links of silver, and the trees by its bank blaze out into green and gold. Brethren! Who follows pleasure follows pain; who follows God finds pleasure following him. There can be no surer way to set the world against me than to try to make it for me, and to make it my all They tell us that if you want to count those stars that like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid make up the Pleiades, the surest way to see the greatest number of them is to look a little on one side of them. Look away from the joys and friendships of creatural things right up to God, and you will see these sparkling and dancing in the skies, as you never see them when you gaze at them only. Make them second and they are good and on your side. Make them first, and they will turn to be your enemies and fight against you.

This conviction will be established still more irrefragably and wonderfully in that future. Nothing lasts but goodness. He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. To oppose it is like stretching a piece of pack-thread across the rails before the express comes; or putting up some thin wooden partition on the beach on one of the Western Hebrides, exposed to the whole roll of the Atlantic, which will be battered into ruin by the first winter's storm. Such is the end of all those who set themselves against God.

But there comes a future in which, as dim hints tell us, these texts of ours shall receive a fulfilment beyond that realised in the present condition of things. Then comes the statelier Eden back to man, and in a renewed and redeemed earth they shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; and the ancient story will be repeated in higher form. The servants shall be like the Lord who, when He had conquered temptation, was with the wild beasts that forgot their enmity, and angels ministered unto Him. That scene in the desert may serve as a prophecy of the future when, under conditions of which we know nothing, all God's servants shall, even more markedly and manifestly than here, help each other; and every man that loves God will find a friend in every creature.

If we take Him for our Commander, and enlist ourselves in that embattled host, then all weathers will be good; stormy winds, fulfilling His word, will blow us to our port; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom as the rose; and the whole universe will be radiant with the light of His presence, and ringing with the music of His voice. But if we elect to join the other army--for there is another army, and men have wills that enable them to lift themselves up against God, the Ruler of all things--then the old story, from which my first text is taken, will fulfil itself again in regard to us--the stars in their courses will fight against us; and Sisera, lying stiff and stark, with Jael's tent-peg through his temples, and the swollen corpses being swirled down to the stormy sea by that ancient river, the river Kishon, will be a grim parable of the end of the men that set themselves against God, and so have the universe against them. Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.