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

**PROVERBS-021. TWO FORTRESSES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. 11. The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit."*

*Proverbs 18:10-11*

The mere reading of these two verses shows that, contrary to the usual rule in the Book of Proverbs, they have a bearing on each other. They are intended to suggest a very strong contrast, and that contrast is even more emphatic in the original than in our translation; because, as the margin of your Bibles will tell you, the last word of the former verse might be more correctly rendered, the righteous runneth into it, and is set on high. It is the same word which is employed in the next verse--a high wall.

So we have the strong tower and the strong city; the man lifted up above danger on the battlements of the one, and the man fancying himself to be high above it (and only fancying himself) in the imaginary safety of the other.

**I. Consider then, first, the two fortresses.**

One need only name them side by side to feel the full force of the intended contrast. On the one hand, the name of the Lord with all its depths and glories, with its blaze of lustrous purity, and infinitudes of inexhaustible power; and on the other, the rich man's wealth. What contempt is expressed in putting the two side by side! It is as if the author had said, Look on this picture and on that! Two fortresses! Yes! The one is like Gibraltar, inexpugnable on its rock, and the other is like a painted castle on the stage; flimsy canvas that you could put your foot through--solidity by the side of nothingness. For even the poor appearance of solidity is an illusion, as our text says with bitter emphasis--a high wall in his own conceit.

The name of the Lord, of course, is the Biblical expression for the whole character of God, as He has made it known to us, or in other words, for God Himself, as He has been pleased to reveal Himself to mankind. The syllables of that name are all the deeds by which He has taught us what He is; every act of power, of wisdom, of tenderness, of grace that has manifested these qualities and led us to believe that they are all infinite. In the name, in its narrower sense, the name of Jehovah, there is much of the name in its wider sense. For that name Jehovah, both by its signification and by the circumstances under which it was originally employed, tells us a great deal about God. It tells us, for instance, by virtue of its signification, that He is self-existent, depending upon no other creature. I AM THAT I AM! No other being can say that. All the rest of us have to say, I am that which God made me. Circumstances and a hundred other things have made me; God finds the law of His being and the fountain of His being within Himself.

He sits on no precarious throne,

Nor borrows leave to be.

His name proclaims Him to be self-existent, and as self-existent, eternal; and as eternal, changeless; and as self-existent, eternal, changeless, infinite in all the qualities by which He makes Himself known. This boundless Being, all full of wisdom, power, and tenderness, with whom we can enter into relations of amity and concord, surely He is a strong tower into which we may run and be safe.

But far beyond even the sweep of that great name, Jehovah, is the knowledge of God's deepest heart and character which we learn in Him who said, I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and will declare it. Christ in His life and death, in His meekness, sweetness, gentleness, calm wisdom, infinite patience, attractiveness; yearning over sinful hearts, weeping over rebels, in the graciousness of His life, in the sacredness and the power of His Cross, is the Revealer to our hearts of the heart of God. If I may so say, He has builded the strong tower broader, has expanded its area and widened its gate, and lifted its summit yet nearer the heavens, and made the name of God a wider name and a mightier name, and a name of surer defence and blessing than ever it was before.

And so, dear brethren! it all comes to this, the name that is the strong tower is the name My Father! a Father of infinite tenderness and wisdom and power. Oh! where can the child rest more quietly than on the mother's breast, where can the child be safer than in the circle of the father's arms? The name of the Lord is a strong tower.

Now turn to the other for a moment: The rich man's wealth is (with great emphasis on the next little word) his strong city, and as a high wall in his own conceit. Of course we have not to deal here only with wealth in the shape of money, but all external and material goods, the whole mass of the things seen and temporal, are gathered together here in this phrase.

Men use their imaginations in very strange fashion, and make, or fancy they make, for themselves out of the things of the present life a defence and a strength. Like some poor lunatic, out upon a moor, that fancies himself ensconced in a castle; like some barbarous tribes behind their stockades or crowding at the back of a little turf wall, or in some old tumble-down fort that the first shot will bring rattling down about their ears, fancying themselves perfectly secure and defended--so do men deal with these outward things that are given them for another purpose altogether: they make of them defences and fortresses.

It is difficult for a man to have them and not to trust them. So Jesus said to His disciples once: How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom; and when they were astonished at His words, He repeated them with the significant variation, How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the Kingdom of God. So He would teach that the misuse and not the possession of wealth is the barrier, but so, too, He would warn us that, nine times out of ten, the possession of them in more than a very modest measure, tempts a man into confidence in them.

The illusion is one that besets us all. We are all tempted to make a defence of the things that we can see and handle. Is it not strange, and is it not sad, that most of us just turn the truth round about and suppose that the real defence is the imaginary, and that the imaginary one is the real? How many men are there in this chapel who, if they spoke out of their deepest convictions, would say: Oh yes! the promises of God are all very well, but I would rather have the cash down. I suppose that I may trust that He will provide bread and water, and all the things that I need, but I would rather have a good solid balance at the banker s. How many of you would rather honestly, and at the bottom of your hearts, have that than God's word for your defence? How many of you think that to trust in a living God is but grasping at a very airy and unsubstantial kind of support; and that the real solid defence is the defence made of the things that you can see?

My brother! it is exactly the opposite way. Turn it clean round, and you get the truth. The unsubstantial shadows are the material things that you can see and handle; illusory as a dream, and as little able to ward off the blows of fate as a soap bubble. The real is the unseen beyond--the things that are, and He who alone really is, and in His boundless and absolute Being is our only defence.

In one aspect or another, that false imagination with which my last text deals is the besetting sin of Manchester. Not the rich man only, but the poor man just as much, is in danger of it. The poor man who thinks that everything would be right if only he were rich, and the rich man who thinks that everything is right because he is rich, are exactly the same man. The circumstances differ, but the one man is but the other turned inside out. And all round about us we see the fierce fight to get more and more of these things, the tight grip of them when we have got them, the overestimate of the value of them, the contempt for the people who have less of them than ourselves. Our aristocracy is an aristocracy of wealth; in some respects, one by no means to be despised, because there often go a great many good qualities to the making and the stewardship of wealth; but still it is an evil that men should be so largely estimated by their money as they are here. It is not a sound state of opinion which has made what is he worth? mean how much of it has he? We are taught here to look upon the prizes of life as being mainly wealth. To win that is success--prosperity--and it is very hard for us all not to be influenced by the prevailing tone.

I would urge you, young men, especially to lay this to heart--that of all delusions that can beset you in your course, none will work more disastrously than the notion that the summum bonum, the shield and stay of a man, is the abundance of the things that he possesses. I fancy I see more listless, discontented, unhappy faces looking out of carriages than I see upon the pavement. And I am sure of this, at any rate, that all which is noble and sweet and good in life can be wrought out and possessed upon as much bread and water as will keep body and soul together, and as much furniture as will enable a man to sit at his meal and lie down at night. And as for the rest, it has many advantages and blessings, but oh! it is all illusory as a defence against the evils that will come, sooner or later, to every life.

**II. Consider next how to get into the true Refuge.**

The righteous runneth into it and is safe, says my text. You may get into the illusory one very easily. Imagination will take you there. There is no difficulty at all about that. And yet the way by which a man makes this world his defence may teach you a lesson as to how you can make God your defence. How does a man make this world his defence? By trusting to it. He that says to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence, has made it his fortress--and that is how you will make God your fortress--by trusting to Him. The very same emotion, the very same act of mind, heart, and will, may be turned either upwards or downwards, as you can turn the beam from a lantern which way you please. Direct it earthwards, and you trust in the uncertainty of riches. Flash it heavenwards, and you trust in the living God.

And that same lesson is taught by the words of our text, The righteous runneth into it. I do not dwell upon the word righteous. That is the Old Testament point of view, which could not conceive it possible that any man could have deep and close communion with God, except on condition of a pure character. I will not speak of that at present, but point to the picturesque metaphor, which will tell us a great deal more about what faith is than many a philosophical dissertation. Many a man who would be perplexed by a theologian's talk will understand this: The righteous runneth into the name of the Lord.

The metaphor brings out the idea of eager haste in betaking oneself to the shelter, as when an invading army comes into a country, and the unarmed peasants take their portable belongings and their cattle, and catch up their children in their arms, and set their wives upon their mules, and make all haste to some fortified place; or as when the manslayer in Israel fled to the city of refuge, or as when Lot hurried for his life out of Sodom. There would be no dawdling then; but with every muscle strained, men would run into the stronghold, counting every minute a year till they were inside its walls, and heard the heavy door close between them and the pursuer. No matter how rough the road, or how overpowering the heat--no time to stop to gather flowers, or even diamonds on the road, when a moment's delay might mean the enemy's sword in your heart!

Now that metaphor is frequently used to express the resolved and swift act by which, recognising in Jesus Christ, who declares the name of the Lord, our hiding-place, we shelter ourselves in Him, and rest secure. One of the picturesque words by which the Old Testament expresses trust means literally to flee to a refuge. The Old Testament trust is the New Testament faith, even as the Old Testament Name of the Lord answers to the New Testament Name of Jesus. And so we run into this sure hiding-place and strong fortress of the name of the Lord, when we betake ourselves to Jesus and put our trust in Him as our defence.

Such a faith--the trust of mind, heart, and will--laying hold of the name of the Lord, makes us righteous, and so capable of dwelling with the devouring fire of God's perfect purity. The Old Testament point of view was righteousness, in order to abiding in God. The New Testament begins, as it were, at an earlier stage in the religious life, and tells us how to get the righteousness, without which, it holds as strongly as the Old Testament, no man shall see the Lord. It shows us that our faith, by which we run into that fortress, fits us to enter the fortress, because it makes us partakers of Christ's purity.

So my earnest question to you all is--Have you fled for refuge to lay hold on that Saviour in whom God has set His name? Like Lot out of Sodom, like the manslayer to the city of refuge, like the unwarlike peasants to the baron's tower, before the border thieves, have you gone thither for shelter from all the sorrows and guilt and dangers that are marching terrible against you? Can you take up as yours the old grand words of exuberant trust in which the Psalmist heaps together the names of the Lord, as if walking about the city of his defence, and telling the towers thereof, The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower? If you have, then because you have made the Lord your refuge, there shall no evil befall you.

**III. So we have, lastly, what comes of sheltering in these two refuges.**

As to the former of them, I said at the beginning of these remarks that the words is safe were more accurately as well as picturesquely rendered by is set aloft. They remind us of the psalm which has many points of resemblance with this text, and which gives the very same thought when it says, I will set him on high, because he hath known My name. The fugitive is taken within the safe walls of the strong tower, and is set up high on the battlements, looking down upon the baffled pursuers, and far beyond the reach of their arrows. To stand upon that tower lifts a man above the region where temptations fly, above the region where sorrow strikes; lifts him above sin and guilt and condemnation and fear, and calumny and slander, and sickness, and separation and loneliness and death; and all the ills that flesh is heir to.

Or, as one of the old Puritan commentators has it: The tower is so deep that no pioneer can undermine it, so thick that no cannon can breach it, so high that no ladder can scale it. The righteous runneth into it, and is perched up there; and can look down like Lear from his cliff, and all the troubles that afflict the lower levels shall show scarce so gross as beetles from the height where he stands, safe and high, hidden in the name of the Lord.

I say little about the other side. Brethren! the world in any of its forms, the good things of this life in any shape, whether that of money or any other, can do a great deal for us. They can keep a great many inconveniences from us, they can keep a great many cares and pains and sorrows from us. I was going to say, to carry out the metaphor, they can keep the rifle-bullets from us. But, ah! when the big siege-guns get into position and begin to play; when the great trials that every life must have, sooner or later, come to open fire at us, then the defence that anything in this outer world can give comes rattling about our ears very quickly. It is like the pasteboard helmet which looked as good as if it had been steel, and did admirably as long as no sword struck it.

There is only one thing that will keep us peaceful and unharmed, and that is to trust our poor shelterless lives and sinful souls to the Saviour who has died for us. In Him we find the hiding-place, in which secure, as beneath the shadow of a great rock, dreaded evils will pass us by, as impotent to hurt as savages before a castle fortified by modern skill. All the bitterness of outward calamities will be taken from them before they reach us. Their arrows will still wound, but He will have wiped the poison off before He lets them be shot at us. The force of temptation will be weakened, for if we live near Him we shall have other tastes and desires. The bony fingers of the skeleton Death, who drags men from all other homes, will not dislodge us from our fortress-dwelling. Hid in Him we shall neither fear going down to the grave, nor coming up from it, nor judgment, nor eternity. Then, I beseech you, make no delay. Escape! flee for your life! A growing host of evil marches swift against you. Take Christ for your defence and cry to Him,

Lo! from sin and grief and shame,

Hide me, Jesus! in Thy name.