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

**PSALMS-011**. **A GREAT QUESTION AND ITS ANSWER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? and who shall stand in His holy place?"*

*Psalm 24:3*

The psalm from which these words are taken flashes up into new beauty, if we suppose it to have been composed in connection with the bringing of the Ark into the Temple, or for some similar occasion. Whether it is David's or not is a matter of very small consequence. But if we look at the psalm as a whole, we can scarcely fail to see that some such occasion underlies it. So just exercise your imaginations for a moment, and think of the long procession of white-robed priests bearing the Ark, and followed by the joyous multitude chanting as they ascended, Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place? They are bethinking themselves of the qualifications needed for that which they are now doing. They reach the gates, which we must suppose to have been closed that they might be opened, and from the half-chorus outside there peals out the summons, Lift up your heads, O ye gates! and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in. Then from within another band of singers answers with the question, Who is this King of Glory who thus demands entrance? And triumphantly the reply rings out, The Lord, strong and mighty; the Lord, mighty in battle. Still reluctant, the question is put again, Who is this King of Glory? and the answer is given once more, The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory. There is no reference in the second answer to battle. The conflicts are over, and the dominion is established, and at the reiterated summons the ancient gates roll back on their hinges, burst as by a strong blow, and Jehovah enters into His rest, He and the Ark of His strength. If that is the general connection of the psalm--and I think you will admit that it adds to its beauty and dramatic force if we suppose it so--then this introductory question, sung as the procession climbed the steep, had realised what was needed for those who should get the entrance that they sought, and comes to be a very significant and important one. I deal now with the question and its answer.

**I. The question of questions.**

That question lies deep in all men's hearts, and underlies sacrifices and priesthoods and asceticisms and tortures of all sorts, and is the inner meaning of Hindoos swinging with hooks in their backs, and others of them measuring the road to the temple by prostrating themselves every yard or two as they advance. These self-torturers are all asking the same question: Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? It sometimes rises in the thoughts of the most degraded, and it is present always with some of the better and nobler of men.

Now, there are three places in the Old Testament where substantially the same question is asked. There is this psalm of ours; there is another psalm which is all but a duplicate, which begins with Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in Thy holy hill? And there is another shape into which the question is cast by the fervent and somewhat gloomy imagination of one of the prophets, who puts it thus: Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who shall dwell with the everlasting burnings? There never was a more disastrous misapplication of Scripture than the popular idea that these two last questions suggest the possibility of a creature being exposed to the torments of future punishment. They have nothing to do with that. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? If you want a commentary, remember the words, Our God is a consuming fire. That puts us on the right track, if we needed any putting on it, for answering this question, not in the gruesome and ghastly sense in which some people take it, but in all the grandeur of Isaiah's thought. He sees God as the everlasting burnings. Fire is the emblem of life as well as of death; fire is the means of quickening as well as of destroying; and when we speak of Him as the everlasting burnings we are reminded of the bush in the desert, where His own signature was set, burning and not consumed.

So the question in all the three places referred to is substantially the same--and what does it indicate? It indicates the deep consciousness that men have that they need to be in that home, that for life and peace and blessedness, they must get somehow to the side of God, and be quiet there, as children in their Father's house. We all know that this is true, whether our life is regulated by it or not. Very deep in every man's conscience, if he will attend to its voice, there is that which says, You are a pilgrim and a sojourner, and homeless and desolate until you nestle beneath the outspread wings in the Holy Place, and are a denizen of God's house.

The question further suggests another. The universal consciousness--which is, I believe, universal--though it is overlain and stifled by many of us, and neglected and set at nought by others--is that this fellowship with God, which is indispensable to a man's peace, is impossible to a man's impurity. So the question raises the thought of the consciousness of sin which comes creeping over a man when he is sometimes feeling after God, and seems to batter him in the face, and fling him back into the outer darkness, How can I enter in there? and conscience has no answer, and the world has none, and as I shall have to say presently, the answer which the Old Testament, as Law, gives is almost as hopeless as the answer which conscience gives. But at all events that this question should rise and insist upon being answered as it does proves these three things--man's need of God, man's sense of God's purity, man's consciousness of his own sin.

And what does that ascent to the hill of the Lord include? All the present life, for, unless we are dwelling in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives beholding His beauty and inquiring in His Temple, then we have little in life that is worth the having. The old Arab right of claiming hospitality of the Sheikh into whose tent the fugitive ran is used in Scripture over and over again to express the relation in which alone it is blessed for a man to live--namely, as a guest of God's. That is peace. That is all that we require, to sit at His fireside, if I may so say, to claim the rites of hospitality, which the Arab chief would not refuse to the veriest tatterdemalion, or the greatest enemy that he knew, if he came into his tent and sought it. God sits in the door of His tent, and is ready to welcome us.

The ascent to the hill of the Lord means more than that. It includes also the future. I suppose that when men think about another world--which I am afraid none of us think about as often as we ought to do, in order to make the best of this one--the question, in some shape or other, which this band of singers lifted up, rises to their lips, Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His Holy Place beyond the stars? Well, brethren! that is the question which concerns us all, more than anything else in the world, to have clearly and rightly answered.

**II. Note the answer to this great question.**

The psalm answers it in an instructive fashion, which we take as it stands. He that hath clean hands and a pure heart. Let me measure myself by the side of that requirement. Clean hands?--are mine clean? And a pure heart?--what about mine? Who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity--and where have my desires and thoughts so often gone? Nor sworn deceitfully. These are the qualifications that our psalm dashes down in front of us when we ask the question.

The other two occasions to which I have referred, where the same question is put, give substantially the same answer. It might be interesting, if one had time, or this was the place, to look at the differences in the replies, as suggesting the slight differences in the ideal of a good man as presented by the various writers, but that must be left untouched now. Taking these four conditions that are laid down here, we come to this, that psalmist and prophet with one voice say that same solemn thing: Holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. There is no faltering in the answer, and it is an answer to which the depths of conscience say Yes. We all admit, when we are wise, that for communion with God on earth, and for treading the golden pavements of that city into which nothing that is unclean shall enter, absolute holiness is necessary. Let no man deceive himself--that stands the irreversible, necessary condition.

Well, then, is anybody to go in? Let us read on in our psalm. An impossible requirement is laid down, broad and stern and unmistakable. But is that all? He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. So, then, the impossible requirement is made possible as a gift to be received. And although I do not know that this psalmist, in the twilight of revelation, saw all that was involved in what he sang, he had caught a glimpse of this great thought, that what God required, God would give, and that our way to get the necessary, impossible condition realised in ourselves is to receive it. He shall receive ... righteousness from the God of his salvation. Now, do you not see how, like some great star, trembling into the field of the telescope, and sending arrowy beams before it to announce its approach, the great central Christian truth is here dawning, germinant, prophesying its full rising? And the truth is this, that I might be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, but that which is of God through Christ. Ah, brethren! impossibilities become possible when God comes and says, I give thee that which thou canst not have. The old prophet asked the question, What doth God require of thee? and his answer was, That thou shouldst do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God. If he had gone on to ask a better question, What does God give thee? he would have said what all the New Testament says, He gives what He commands, and He bestows before He requires. And so in Jesus Christ there is the forgiveness that blots out the past, and there is the new life bestowed that will develop the righteousness far beyond our reach. And thus the question which evoked first the answer that might drive us to despair, evokes next a response that commands us to hope.

But that is not all, for the psalm goes on: This is the generation of them that seek Him, that seek Thy face. Yes; couched in germ there lies in that last word the great truth which is expanded in the New Testament, like a beech-leaf folded up in its little brown sheath through all the winter, and ready to break and give out its green plumelets as soon as the warm rains and sunshine of spring come. They that seek Him--if thou seek Him He will be found of thee. The requirement of righteousness, as I have said, is not abolished by the Gospel, as some people seem to think that it substitutes faith for righteousness; but it is made possible by the Gospel which through faith gives righteousness. And what the Psalmist meant by seeking we Christian people mean by faith. Earnest desire and confident application to Him are sure to obtain righteousness. To these there will never be returned a refusing answer. I have never said to any of the seed of Jacob, seek ye Me in vain. So, brethren! if we seek we shall receive; if we receive we shall be holy, if we are holy we shall dwell with God, in sweet and blessed communion, and be denizens of His house, and sit together in heavenly places with Him all the days of our lives, and then shall pass, when goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our lives, and dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.