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

**PSALMS-018**. **BE … FOR THOU ART by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"2. Be Thou to me a strong Rock, an house of defence to save me. 3. For Thou art my Rock and my Fortress."*

*Psalm 31:2-3 (R.V.)*

It sounds strange logic, Be ... for Thou art, and yet it is the logic of prayer, and goes very deep, pointing out both its limits and its encouragements. The parallelism between these two clauses is even stronger in the original than in our Version, for whilst the two words which designate the Rock are not identical, their meaning is identical, and the difference between them is insignificant; one being a rock of any shape or size, the other being a perpendicular cliff or elevated promontory. And in the other clause, for a house of defence to save me, the word rendered defence is the same as that which is translated in the next clause fortress. So that if we were to read thus: Be Thou a strong Rock to me, for a house, a fortress, for Thou art my Rock and my Fortress, we should get the whole force of the parallelism. Of course the main idea in that of the Rock, and Fortress is only an exposition of one phase of the meaning of that metaphor.

**I. So let us look first at what God is.**

A rock, a fortress-house. Now, what is the force of that metaphor? Stable being, as it seems to me, is the first thought in it, for there is nothing that is more absolutely the type of unchangeableness and steadfast continuance. The great cliffs rise up, and the river glides at their base--it is a type of mutability, and of the fleeting generations of men, who are as the drops and ripples in its course--it eddies round the foot of the rocks to which the old man looks up, and sees the same dints and streaks and fissures in it that he saw when he was a child. The river runs onwards, the trees that root themselves in the clefts of the rock bear their spring foliage, and drop their leaves like the generations of men, and the Rock is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. And God the Unchangeable rises, if I may so say, like some majestic cliff, round the foot of which rolls for ever the tide of human life, and round which are littered the successive layers of the leaves of many summers.

Then besides this stable being, and the consequences of it, is the other thought which is attached to the emblem in a hundred places in Scripture, and that is defence. His place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks. When the floods are out, and all the plain is being dissolved into mud, the dwellers on it fly to the cliffs. When the enemy's banners appear on the horizon, and the open country is being harried and burned, the peasants hurry to the defence of the hills, and, sheltered there, are safe. And so for us this Name assures us that in Him, whatever floods may sweep across the low levels, and whatever foes may storm over the open land and the unwalled villages, there is always the fortress up in the hills, and thither no flood can rise, and there no enemy can come. A defence and a sure abode is his who dwells in God, and thus folds over himself the warm wings that stretch on either side, and shelter him from all assault. Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.

But the Rock is a defence in another way. If a hard-pressed fugitive is brought to a stand and can set his back against a rock, he can front his assailants, secure that no unseen foe shall creep up behind and deal a stealthy stab and that he will not be surrounded unawares. The God of Israel shall be your rearward, and he who has made the Most High his habitation is sheltered from the pestilence that walketh in darkness, as well as from the destruction that wasteth at noon-day, and will be cleansed from secret faults if he keeps up unbroken his union with God, for the faults which are not recognised as faults by his partially illuminated conscience are known to God. But the Rock is a defence in yet another way, for it is a sure foundation for our lives. Whoso builds on God need fear no change. When the floods rise, and the winds blow, and the rain storms down, the house that is on the Rock will stand.

And, then, in the Rock there is a spring, and round the spring there is the light of laughing flowers, amidst the stern majesty of the cliff. Just as the Law-giver of old smote the rock, and there gushed out the stream that satisfied the thirst of the whole travelling nation, so Paul would have us Christians repeat the miracle by our faith. Of us, too, it may be said, they drank of that Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. Stable being, secure defence, a fountain of refreshment and satisfaction: all these blessings lie in that great metaphor.

**II. Now, note our plea with God, from what He is.**

Be Thou to me a Rock ... for Thou art a Rock. Is that not illogical? No, for notice that little word, to me--be Thou to me what Thou art in Thyself, and hast been to all generations. That makes all the difference. It is not merely Be what Thou art, although that would be much, but it is be it to me, and let me have all which is meant in that great Name.

But then, beyond that, let me point out to you how this prayer suggests to us that all true prayer will keep itself within God's revelation of what He is. We take His promises, and all the elements which make up His name or manifestation of His character to the world, whether by His acts or by the utterances of this Book, or by the inferences to be drawn from the life of Jesus Christ, the great Revealer, or by what we ourselves have experienced of Him. The ways by which God has revealed Himself to the world define the legitimate subjects, and lay down the firm foundation, of our petitions. In all His acts God reveals Himself, and if I may so say, when we truly pray, we catch these up, and send them back again to heaven, like arrows from a bow. It is only when our desires and prayers foot themselves upon God's revelation of Himself, and in essence are, in various fashions, the repetition of this prayer of my text: Be ... for Thou art, that we can expect to have them answered. Much else may call itself prayer, but it is often but petulant and self-willed endeavour to force our wishes upon Him, and no answer will come to that. We are to pray about everything; but we are to pray about nothing, except within the lines which are marked out for us by what God has told us, in His words and acts, that He Himself is. Catch these up and fling them back to Him, and for every utterance that He has made of Himself, I am so-and-so, let us go to Him and say Be Thou that to me, and then we may be sure of an answer.

So then two things follow. If we pray after the pattern of this prayer, Be Thou to me what Thou art, then a great many foolish and presumptuous wishes will be stifled in the birth, and, on the other hand, a great many feeble desires will be strengthened and made confident, and we shall be encouraged to expect great things of God. Have you widened your prayers, dear friend!--and I do not mean by that only your outward ones, but the habitual aspiration and expectation of your minds--have you widened these to be as wide as what God has shown us that He is? Have you taken all God's revelation of Himself, and translated it into petition? And do you expect Him to be to you all that He has ever been to any soul of man upon earth? Oh! how such a prayer as this, if we rightly understand it and feel it, puts to shame the narrowness and the poverty of our prayers, the falterings of our faith, and the absence of expectation in ourselves that we shall receive the fulness of God.

God owns that plea: Be ... what Thou art. He cannot resist that. That is what the Apostle meant when he said, He abideth faithful, He cannot deny Himself. He must be true to His character. He can never be other than He always has been. And that is what the Psalmist meant when he goes on, after the words that I have taken for my text, and says, For Thy Name's sake lead me and guide me, What is God's Name? The collocation of letters by which we designate Him? Certainly not. The Name of God is the sum total of what God has revealed Himself as being. And for the sake of the Name, that He may be true to that which He has shown Himself to be, He will always endorse this bill that you draw upon Him when you present Him with His own character, and say Be to me what Thou art.

**III. Lastly, we have here the plea with God drawn from what we have taken Him to be to us.**

That is somewhat different from what I have already been dwelling upon. Mark the words: Be Thou to me a strong Rock, for Thou art my Rock and my Fortress. What does that mean? It means that the suppliant has, by his own act of faith, taken God for his; that he has appropriated the great divine revelation, and made it his own. Now it seems to me that that appropriation is, if not the point, at least one of the points, in which real faith is distinguished from the sham thing which goes by that name amongst so many people. A man by faith encloses a bit of the common for his very own. When God says that He so loved the world that He gave His ... Son, I should say, He loved me, and gave Himself for me. When the great revelation is made that He is the Rock of Ages, my faith says: My Rock and my Fortress. Having said that, and claimed Him for mine, I can then turn round to Him and say, Be to me what I have taken Thee to be.

And that faith is expressed very beautifully and strikingly in one of the Old Testament metaphors, which frequently goes along with this one of the Rock. For instance, in a great chapter in Isaiah we find the original of that phrase the Rock of Ages. It runs thus, Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord JEHOVAH is the Rock of Ages. Now the word for trust there literally means, to flee into a refuge, and so the true idea of faith is to fly for refuge, as the Epistle to the Hebrews has it, to the Hope set before us,--that is (keeping to the metaphor), to the cleft in the Rock.

That act of trust or flight will make it certain that God will be to us for a house of defence, a fortress to save us. Other rock-shelters may crumble. They may be carried by assault; they may be riven by earthquakes. The mountains shall depart, and the hills shall be removed, but this Rock is impregnable, and all who take refuge in it are safe for ever.

And so the upshot of the whole matter is that God will be to us what we have faith to believe that He is, and our faith will be the measure of our possession of the fulness of God. If we can only say in the fulness of our hearts--and keep to the saying: Be Thou to me a Rock, for Thou art my Rock, then nothing shall ever hurt us; and dwelling in the secret place of the Most High we shall be kept in safety; our abode shall be the munitions of rocks, our bread shall be given us, and our water shall be made sure.