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

**PSALMS-021**. **HID IN LIGHT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thou shall hide them in the secret of Thy presence from the pride of man; Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues."*

*Psalm 31:20*

The word rendered presence is literally face, and the force of this very remarkable expression of confidence is considerably marred unless that rendering be retained. There are other analogous expressions in Scripture, setting forth, under various metaphors, God's protection of them that love Him. But I know not that there is any so noble and striking as this. For instance, we read of His hiding His children in the secret of His tabernacle, or tent; as an Arab chief might do a fugitive who had eaten of his salt, secreting him in the recesses of his tent whilst the pursuers scoured the desert in vain for their prey. Again, we read of His hiding them beneath the shadow of His wing; where the divine love is softened into the likeness of the maternal instinct which leads a hen to gather her chickens beneath the shelter of her own warm and outspread feathers. But the metaphor of my text is more vivid and beautiful still. Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face. The light that streams from that countenance is the hiding-place for a poor man. These other metaphors may refer, perhaps, the one to the temple, and the other to the outstretched wings of the cherubim that shadowed the Mercy-seat. And, if so, this metaphor carries us still more near to the central blaze of the Shekinah, the glory that hovered above the Mercy-seat, and glowed in the dark sanctuary, unseen but once a year by one trembling high priest, who had to bear with him blood of sacrifice, lest the sight should slay. The Psalmist says, into that fierce light a man may go, and stand in it, bathed, hid, secure. Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face.

**I. Now, then, let us notice, first, this hiding-place.**

The face of God is so strongly figurative an expression that its metaphorical character cannot but be obvious to the most cursory reader. The very frankness, and, we may say, the grossness of the image, saves it from all misconception, and as with other similar expressions in the Old Testament, at once suggests its meaning. We read, for example, of the arm, the hand, the finger of God, and everybody feels that these mean His power. We read of the eye of God, and everybody knows that that means His omniscience. We read of the ear of God, and we all understand that that holds forth the blessed thought that He hears and answers the cry of such as be sorrowful. And, in like manner, the face of God is the apprehensible part of the divine nature which turns to men, and by which He makes Himself known. It is roughly equivalent to the other Old and New Testament expression, the name of the Lord, the manifested and revealed side of the divine nature. And that is the hiding-place into which men may go.

We have the other expression also in Scripture, the light of Thy countenance, and that helps us to apprehend the Psalmist's meaning. The light of Thy face is secret. What a paradox! Can light conceal? Look at the daily heavens--filled with blazing stars, all invisible till the night falls. The effulgence of the face is such that they that stand in it are lost and hid, like the lark in the blue sky. A glorious privacy of light is Thine. There is a wonderful metaphor in the New Testament of a woman clothed with the sun, and caught up into it from her enemies to be safe there. And that is just an expansion of the Psalmist's grand paradox, Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face. Light conceals when the light is so bright as to dazzle. They who are surrounded by God are lost in the glory, and safe in that seclusion, the secret of Thy face.

A thought may be suggested, although it is somewhat of a digression from the main purpose of my text, but it springs naturally out of this paradox, and may just deserve a word. Revelation is real, but revelation has its limits. That which is revealed is the face of God, but we read, no man can see My face. After all revelation He remains hidden. After all pouring forth of His beams He remains the God that dwelleth in the thick darkness, and the light which is inaccessible is also a darkness that can be felt. Apprehension is possible; comprehension is impossible. What we know of God is valid and true, but we never shall know all the depths that lie in that which we do know of Him. His face is the secret; and though men may malign Him when they say, Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel! and He answers them, I have not spoken in secret in a dark place of the earth, it still remains true that revelation has its mysteries born of the greatness of its effulgence, and that all which we know of God is dark with excess of light.

But that is aside from our main purpose. Let me rather remind you of how the thought of the secret of God's face being the secure hiding-place of them that love Him points to this truth--that that brightness of light has a repellent power which keeps far away from all intermingling with it everything that is evil. The old Greek mythologies tell us that the radiant arrows of Apollo shot forth from his far-reaching bow, wounded to death the monsters of the slime and unclean creatures that crawled and revelled in darkness. And the myth has a great truth in it. The light of God's face slays evil, of whatsoever kind it is; and just as the unlovely, loathsome creatures that live in the dark and find themselves at ease there writhe and wriggle in torment, and die when their shelter is taken away and they are exposed to the light beating on their soft bodies, so the light of God's face turned upon evil things smites them into nothingness. Thus the secret of His countenance is the shelter of all that is good.

Nor need I remind you how, in another aspect of the phrase, the light of His face, is the expression for His favour and loving regard, and how true it is that in that favour and loving regard is the impregnable fortress into which, entering, any man is safe. I said that the expression the face of the Lord roughly corresponded to the other one, the name of the Lord, inasmuch as both meant the revealed aspect of the divine nature. You may remember how we read, The name of the Lord is a strong tower into which the righteous runneth and is safe. The light of the face of the Lord is His favour and loving regard falling upon men. And who can be harmed with that lambent light--like sunshine upon water, or upon a glittering shield--playing around Him?

Only let us remember that for us the face of God is Jesus Christ. He is the arm of the Lord; He is the name of the Lord; He is the face. All that we know of God we know through and in Him; all that we see of God we see by the shining upon us of Him who is the eradiation of His glory and the express image of His person. So the open secret of the face of God is Jesus, the hiding-place of our souls.

**II. Secondly, notice God's hidden ones.**

My text carries us back, by that word them, to the previous verse, where we have a double description of those who are thus hidden in the inaccessible light of His countenance. They are such as fear Thee, and such as trust in Thee. Now, that latter expression is congruous with the metaphor of my text, in so far as the words on which we are now engaged speak about a hiding-place, and the word which is translated trust literally means to flee to a refuge. So they that flee to God for refuge are those whom God hides in the secret of His face. Let us think of that for a moment.

I said, in the beginning of these remarks, that there was here an allusion, possibly, to the Temple. All temples in ancient times were asylums. Whosoever could flee to grasp the horns of the altar, or to sit, veiled and suppliant, before the image of the god, was secure from his foes, who could not pass within the limits of the Temple grounds, in which strife and murder were not permissible. We too often flee to other gods and other temples for our refuges. Ay! and when we get there we find that the deity whom we have invoked is only a marble image that sits deaf, dumb, motionless, whilst we cling to its unconscious skirts. As one of the saddest of our modern cynics once said, looking up at that lovely impersonation of Greek beauty, the Venus de Milo, Ah! she is fair; but she has no arms, so we may say of all false refuges to which men betake themselves. The goddess is powerless to help, however beautiful the presentment of her may have seemed to our eyes. The evils from which we have fled to these false deities and shelterless sanctuaries will pursue us across the threshold; and as Elijah did with the priests of Baal upon Carmel, will slay us at the very foot of the altar to which we have clung, and vexed with our vain prayers. There is only one shrine where there is a sanctuary, and that is the shrine above which shines the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; into the brightness of which poor men may pass and therein may hide themselves. God hides us, and His hiding is effectual, in the secret of the light and splendour of His face.

I said, too, that there was an allusion, as there is in all the psalms that deal with men as God's guests, to the ancient customs of hospitality, by which a man who has once entered the tent of the chief, and partaken of food there, is safe, not only from his pursuers, but from his host himself, even though that host should be the kinsman-avenger. The red-handed murderer, who has eaten the salt of the man whose duty it otherwise would have been to slay him where he stood, is safe from his vengeance. And thus they who cast themselves upon God have nothing to fear. No other hand can pluck them from the sanctuary of His tent. He Himself, having admitted them to share His hospitality, cannot and will not lift a hand against them. We are safe from God only when we are safe in God.

But remember the condition on which this security comes. Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face. Whom? Those that flee for refuge to Thee. The act of simple faith is set forth there, by which a poor man, with all his imperfections on his head, may yet venture to put his foot across the boundary line that separates the outer darkness from the beam of light that comes from God's face. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? That question does not mean, as it is often taken to mean--What mortal can endure the punishments of a future life? but, Who can venture to be God's guests? and it is equivalent to the other interrogation, Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place? The answer is, If you go to Him for refuge, knowing your danger, feeling your impurity, you may walk amidst all that light softened into lambent beauty, as those Hebrew children did in the furnace of fire, being at ease there, and feeling it well with themselves, and having nothing about them consumed except the bonds that bound them.

Remember that Jesus Christ is the Hiding-place, and that to flee to Him for refuge is the condition of security, and all they who thus, from the snares of life, from its miseries, disappointments, and burdens, from the agitation of their own hearts, from the ebullition of their own passions, from the stings of their own conscience, or from other of the ills that flesh is heir to, make their hiding-place--by the simple act of faith in Jesus Christ--in the light of God's face, are thereby safe for evermore.

But the initial act of fleeing to the refuge must be continued by abiding in the refuge. It is of no use to take shelter in the light unless we abide in the light. It is of no use to go to the Temple for sanctuary unless we continue in it for sacrifice and worship. We must walk in the light as God is in the light. That is to say, the condition of being hid in God is, first of all, to take refuge in Jesus Christ, and then to abide in Him by continual communion. Your life is hid with Christ in God. Unless we have a hidden life, deep beneath, and high above, and far beyond the life of sense, we have no right to think that the shelter of the Face will be security for us. The very essence of Christianity is the habitual communion of heart, mind, and will with God in Christ. Do you live in the light, or have you only gone there to escape what you are afraid of? Do you live in the light by the continual direction of thought and heart to Him, cultivating the habit of daily and hourly communion with Him amidst the distractions of necessary duty, care, and changing circumstances?

But not only by communion, but also by conduct, must we keep in the light. The fugitive found outside the city of refuge was fair game for the avenger, and if he strayed beyond its bounds there was a sword in his back before he knew where he was. Every Christian, by each sin, whether it be acted or only thought, casts himself out of the light into the darkness that rings it round, and out there he is a victim to the beasts of prey that hunt in darkness. An eclipse of the sun is not caused by any change in the sun, but by an opaque body, the offspring and satellite of the earth, coming between the earth and sun. And so, when Christian men lose the light of God's face, it is not because there is any variableness or shadow of turning in Him, but because between Him and them has come the blackness--their own offspring--of their own sin. You are not safe if you are outside the light of His countenance. These are the conditions of security.

**III. Lastly, note what the hidden ones find in the light.**

This burst of confidence in my text comes from the Psalmist immediately after plaintively pouring out his soul under the pressure of afflictions. His experience may teach us the interpretation of his glad assurance.

God will keep all real evil from us if we keep near Him; but He will not keep the externals that men call evil from us. I do not know whether there is such a thing as filtering any poisons or malaria by means of light, but I am sure that the light of God filters our atmosphere for us. Though it may leave the external form of evil it takes all the poison out of it and turns it into a harmless minister for our good. The arrows that are launched at us may be tipped with venom when they leave the bow, but if they pass through the radiant envelope of divine protection that surrounds us--and they must have passed through that if they reach us--it cleanses all the venom from the points though it leaves the sharpness there. The evil is not an evil if it has got our length; and its having touched us shows that He who lets it pass into the light where His children safely dwell, knows that it cannot harm them.

But, again, we shall find if we live in continual communion with the revealed Face of God, that we are elevated high above all the strife of tongues and the noise of earth. We shall outsoar the shadow of the night, and be lifted to an elevation from which all the clamours of earth will sound faint and poor, like the noises of the city to the dwellers on the mountain peak. Nor do we find only security there, for the word in the second clause of my text, Thou shalt keep them secretly, is the same as is employed in the previous verse in reference to the treasures which God lays up for them that fear Him. The poor men that trust in God, and the wealth which He has to lavish upon them, are both hid, and they are hid in the same place. The goodness wrought before the sons of men has not emptied the reservoir. After all expenditure the massy ingots of gold in God's storehouse are undiminished. The mercy still to come is greater than that already received. To-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant. This river broadens as we mount towards its source.

Brethren! the Face of God must be either our dearest joy or our greatest dread. There comes a time when you and I must front it, and look into His eyes. It is for us to settle whether at that day we shall call upon the rocks and the hills to hide us from it, or whether we shall say with rapture, Thou hast made us most blessed with Thy countenance! Which is it to be? It must be one or other. When He says, Seek ye My Face, may our hearts answer, Thy Face, Lord, will I seek, that when we see it hereafter, shining as the sun in his strength, its light may not be darkness to our impure and horror-struck eyes.