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

**PSALMS-023**. **THE ENCAMPING ANGEL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them."*

*Psalm 34:7*

If we accept the statement in the superscription of this psalm, it dates from one of the darkest hours in David's life. His fortunes were never lower than when he fled from Gath, the city of Goliath, to Adullam. He never appears in a less noble light than when he feigned madness to avert the dangers which he might well dread there. How unlike the terror and self-degradation of the man who scrabbled on the doors, and let the spittle run down his beard, is the heroic and saintly constancy of this noble psalm! And yet the contrast is not so violent as to make the superscription improbable, and the tone of the whole well corresponds to what we should expect from a man delivered from some great peril, but still surrounded with dangers. There, in the safety of his retreat among the rocks, with the bit of level ground where he had fought Goliath just at his feet in the valley, and Gath, from which he had escaped, away down at the mouth of the glen (if Conder's identification of Adullam be correct), he sings his song of trust and praise; he hears the lions roar among the rocks where Samson had found them in his day; he teaches his children, the band of broken men who there began to gather around him, the fear of the Lord; and calls upon them to help him in his praise. What a picture of the outlaw and his wild followers tamed into something like order, and lifted into something like worship, rises before us, if we follow the guidance of that old commentary contained in the superscription!

The words of our text gain especial force and vividness by thus localising the psalm. Not only the clefts of the rock but the presence of God's Angel is his defence; and round him is flung, not only the strength of the hills, but the garrison and guard of heaven.

It is generally supposed that the Angel of the Lord here is to be taken collectively, and that the meaning is--the bright-harnessed hosts of these divine messengers are as an army of protectors round them who fear God. But I see no reason for departing from the simpler and certainly grander meaning which results from taking the word in its proper force of a singular. True, Scripture does speak of the legions of ministering spirits, who in their chariots of fire were once seen by suddenly opened eyes round about a prophet in peril, and are ever ministering to the heirs of salvation. But Scripture also speaks of One, who is in an eminent sense the Angel of the Lord; in whom, as in none other, God sets His Name; whose form, dimly seen, towers above even the ranks of the angels that excel in strength; whose offices and attributes blend in mysterious fashion with those of God Himself. There may be some little incongruity in thinking of the single Person as encamping round about us; but that does not seem a sufficient reason for obliterating the reference to that remarkable Old Testament doctrine, the retention of which seems to me to add immensely to the power of the words.

Remember some of the places in which the Angel of the Lord appears, in order to appreciate more fully the grandeur of this promised protection. At that supreme moment when Abraham took the knife to slay his son, the voice that called to him out of heaven was the voice of the Angel of the Lord. He assumes the power of reversing a divine command. He says, Thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me, and then pronounces a blessing, in the utterance of which one cannot distinguish His voice from the voice of Jehovah. In like manner it is the Angel of the Lord that speaks to Jacob, and says, I am the God of Bethel. The dying patriarch invokes in the same breath the God which fed me all my life long, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, to bless the boys that stand before him, with their wondering eyes gazing in awe on his blind face. It was that Angel's glory that appeared to the outcast, flaming in the bush that burned unconsumed. It was He who stood before the warrior leader of Israel, sword in hand, and proclaimed Himself to be the Captain of the Lord's host, the Leader of the armies of heaven, and the true Leader of the armies of Israel; and His commands to Joshua, His lieutenant, are the commands of the Lord. And, to pass over other instances, Isaiah correctly sums up the spirit of the whole earlier history in words which go far to lift the conception of this Angel of the Lord out of the region of created beings--In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His face saved them, It is this lofty and mysterious Messenger, and not the hosts whom He commands, that our Psalmist sees standing ready to help, as He once stood, sword-bearing by the side of Joshua. To the warrior leader, to the warrior Psalmist, He appears, as their needs required, armoured and militant. The last of the prophets saw that dim, mysterious Figure, and proclaimed, The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple; even the Angel of the Covenant, whom ye delight in; and to his gaze it was wrapped in obscure majesty and terror of purifying flame. But for us the true Messenger of the Lord is His Son, whom He has sent, in whom He has put His name; who is the Angel of His face, in that we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; who is the Angel of the Covenant, in that He has sealed the new and everlasting covenant with His blood; and whose own parting promise, Lo! I am with you always, is the highest fulfilment to us Christians of that ancient confidence: The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him.

Whatever view we adopt of the significance of the first part of the text, the force and beauty of the metaphor in the second remain the same. If this psalm were indeed the work of the fugitive in his rocky hold at Adullam, how appropriate the thought becomes that his little encampment has such a guard. It reminds one of the incident in Jacob's life, when his timid and pacific nature was trembling at the prospect of meeting Esau, and when, as he travelled along, encumbered with his pastoral wealth, and scantily provided with means of defence, the angels of God met him, and he named the place Mahanaim, that is, two camps--his own feeble company, mostly made up of women and children, and that heavenly host that hovered above them. David's faith sees the same defence encircling his weakness, and though sense saw no protection for him and his men but their own strong arms and their mountain fastness, his opened eyes beheld the mountain full of the chariots of fire, and the flashing of armour and light in the darkness of his cave.

The vision of the divine presence ever takes the form which our circumstances most require. David's then need was safety and protection. Therefore he saw the Encamping Angel; even as to Joshua the leader He appeared as the Captain of the Lord's host; and as to Isaiah, in the year that the throne of Judah was emptied by the death of the earthly king, was given the vision of the Lord sitting on a throne, the King Eternal and Immortal. So to us all His grace shapes its expression according to our wants, and the same gift is Protean in its power of transformation; being to one man wisdom, to another strength, to the solitary companionship, to the sorrowful consolation, to the glad sobering, to the thinker truth, to the worker practical force--to each his heart's desire, if the heart's delight be God. So manifold are the aspects of God's infinite sufficiency, that every soul, in every possible variety of circumstance, will find there just what will suit it. That armour fits every man who puts it on. That deep fountain is like some of those fabled springs which give forth whatsoever precious draught any thirsty lip asked. He takes the shape that our circumstances most need. Let us see that we, on our parts, use our circumstances to help us in anticipating the shapes in which God will draw near for our help.

Learn, too, from this image, in which the Psalmist appropriates to himself the experience of a past generation, how we ought to feed our confidence and enlarge our hopes by all God's past dealings with men. David looks back to Jacob, and believes that the old fact is repeated in his own day. So every old story is true for us; though outward form may alter, inward substance remains the same. Mahanaim is still the name of every place where a man who loves God pitches his tent. We may be wandering, solitary, defenceless, but we are not alone. Our feeble encampment may lie open to assault, and we be all unfit to guard it, but the other camp is there too, and our enemies must force their way through it before they get at us. We are in its centre--as they put the cattle and the sick in the midst of the encampment on the prairies when they fear an assault from the Indians--because we are so weak. Jacob's experience may be ours: The Lord of Hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Only remember that the eye of faith alone can see that guard, and that therefore we must labour to keep our consciousness of its reality fresh and vivid. Many a man in David's little band saw nothing but cold gray stone where David saw the flashing armour of the heavenly Warrior. To the one all the mountain blazed with fiery chariots, to the other it was a lone hillside, with the wind moaning among the rocks. We shall lose the joy and the strength of that divine protection unless we honestly and constantly try to keep our sense of it bright. Eyes that have been gazing on earthly joys, or perhaps gloating on evil sights, cannot see the Angel presence. A Christian man, on a road which he cannot travel with a clear conscience, will see no angel, not even the Angel with the drawn sword in His hand, that barred Balaam's path among the vineyards. A man coming out of some room blazing with light cannot all at once see into the violet depths of the mighty heavens, that lie above him with all their shimmering stars. So this truth of our text is a truth of faith, and the believing eye alone beholds the Angel of the Lord.

Notice, too, that final word of deliverance. This psalm is continually recurring to that idea. The word occurs four times in it, and the thought still oftener. Whether the date is rightly given, as we have assumed it to be, or not, at all events that harping upon this one phrase indicates that some season of great trial was its birth-time, when all the writer's thoughts were engrossed and his prayers summed up in the one thing--deliverance. He is quite sure that such deliverance must follow if the Angel presence be there. But he knows too that the encampment of the Angel of the Lord will not keep away sorrows, and trial, and sharp need. So his highest hope is not of immunity from these, but of rescue out of them. And his ground of hope is that his heavenly Ally cannot let him be overcome. That He will let him be troubled and put in peril he has found; that He will not let him be crushed he believes. Shadowed and modest hopes are the brightest we can venture to cherish. The protection which we have is protection in, and not protection from, strife and danger. It is a filter which lets the icy cold water of sorrow drop numbing upon us, but keeps back the poison that was in it. We have to fight, but He will fight with us; to sorrow, but not alone nor without hope; to pass through many a peril, but we shall get through them. Deliverance, which implies danger, need, and woe, is the best we can hope for.

It is the least we are entitled to expect if we love Him. It is the certain issue of His encamping round about us. Always with us, He will strike for us at the best moment. The Lord God is in the midst of her always; the Lord will help her, and that right early. So like the hunted fugitive in Adullam we may lift up our confident voices even when the stress of strife and sorrow is upon us; and though Gath be in sight and Saul just over the hills, and we have no better refuge than a cave in a hillside; yet in prophecy built upon our consciousness that the Angel of the Covenant is with us now, we may antedate the deliverance that shall be, and think of it as even now accomplished. So the Apostle, when within sight of the block and the headsman's axe, broke into the rapture of his last words: The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me to His heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Was he wrong?