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

**PSALMS-026**. **SKY, EARTH, AND SEA: A PARABLE OF GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens; and Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. 6. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; Thy judgments are a great deep: O Lord, Thou preservest man and beast. 7. How excellent is Thy loving-kindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings."*

*Psalm 36:5-7*

This wonderful description of the manifold brightness of the divine nature is introduced in this psalm with singular abruptness. It is set side by side with a vivid picture of an evildoer, a man who mutters in his own heart his godlessness, and with obstinate determination plans and plots in forgetfulness of God. Without a word to break the violence of the transition, side by side with that picture, the Psalmist sets before us these thoughts of the character of God. He seems to feel that that character was the only relief in the contemplation of the miserable sights of which the earth is only too full. We should go mad when we think of man's wickedness unless we could look up and see, with one quick turn of the eye, the heaven opened and the throned Love that sits up there gazing on all the chaos, and working to soothe sorrow, and to purify evil.

Perhaps there is another reason for this dramatic and striking swiftness of contrast between the godless man and the revealed God. The true test of a life is its power to bear the light of God being suddenly let in upon it. How would yours look, my friend! if all at once a window in heaven was opened, and God glared in upon you? Set your lives side by side with Him. They always are side by side with Him whether you know it or not; but you had better bring your deeds to the light that they may be made manifest now, than to have to do it as suddenly, and a great deal more sorrowfully, when you are dragged out of the shows and illusions of time, and He meets you on the threshold of another world. Would a beam of light from God, coming in upon your life, be like a light falling upon a gang of conspirators, that would make them huddle all their implements under their cloaks, and scuttle out of the way as fast as possible? Or would it be like a gleam of sunshine upon the flowers, opening out their petals and wooing from them fragrance? Which?

But I turn from such considerations as these to the more immediate subject of my contemplations in this discourse. I have ventured to take so great words for my text, though each clause would be more than enough for many a sermon, because my aim now is a very modest one. I desire simply to give, in the briefest way, the connection and mutual relation of these wonderful words; not to attempt any adequate treatment of the great thoughts which they contain, but only to set forth the meaning and interdependence of these manifold names for the beams of the divine light, which are presented here. The chief part of our text sets before us God in the variety and boundlessness of His loving nature, and the close of it shows us man sheltering beneath God's wings. These are the two main themes for our present consideration.

**I. We have, first, God in the boundlessness of His loving nature.**

The one pure light of the divine nature is broken up, in the prism of the psalm, into various rays, which theologians call, in their hard, abstract way, divine attributes. These are mercy, faithfulness, righteousness. Then we have two sets of divine acts--judgments, and the preservation of man and beast; and finally we have again lovingkindness, as our version has unfortunately been misled, by its love for varying its translation, to render the same word which begins the series and is there called mercy.

Now that mercy or lovingkindness of which my text thus speaks, is very nearly equivalent to the New Testament love; or, perhaps, still more nearly equivalent to the New Testament grace. Both the one and the other mean substantially this--active love communicating itself to creatures that are inferior and that might have expected something else to befall them. Mercy is a modification of love, inasmuch as it is love to an inferior. The hand is laid gently upon the man, because if it were laid with all its weight it would crush him. It is the stooping goodness of a king to a beggar. And mercy is likewise love in its exercise to persons that might expect something else, being guilty. As a general coming to a body of mutineers with pardon and favour upon his lips, instead of with condemnation and death; so God comes to us forgiving and blessing. All His goodness is forbearance, and His love is mercy, because of the weakness, the lowliness, and the ill desert of us on whom the love falls.

Now notice that this same quality of mercy stands here at the beginning and at the end. All the attributes of the divine nature, all the operations of the divine hand lie within the circle of His mercy--like diamonds set in a golden ring. Mercy, or love flowing out in blessings to inferior and guilty creatures, is the root and ground of all God's character; it is the foundation and impulse of all His acts. Modern science reduces all modes of physical energy to one, for which it has no name but--energy. We are taught by God's own revelation of Himself--and most especially by His final and perfect revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ--to trace all forms of divine energy back to one which David calls mercy, which John calls love.

It is last as well as first, the final upshot of all revelation. The last voice that speaks from Scripture has for its special message God is Love. The last voice that sounds from the completed history of the world will have the same message, and the ultimate word of all revelation, the end of the whole of the majestic unfolding of God's purposes will be the proclamation to the four corners of the universe, as from the trump of the Archangel, of the name of God as Love. The northern and the southern poles of the great sphere are one and the same, a straight axle through the very heart of it, from which the bounding lines swell out to the equator, and towards which they converge again on the opposite side of the world. So mercy is the strong axletree, the northern pole and the southern, on which the whole world of the divine perfections revolves and moves. The first and last, the Alpha and Omega of God, beginning and crowning and summing up all His being and His work, is His mercy, His lovingkindness.

But next to mercy comes faithfulness. Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. God's faithfulness is in its narrowest sense His adherence to His promises. It implies, in that sense, a verbal revelation, and definite words from Him pledging Him to a certain line of action. He hath said, and shall He not do it? He will not alter the thing that is gone out of His lips. It is only a God who has actually spoken to men who can be a faithful God. He will not palter with a double sense, keeping His word of promise to the ear, and breaking it to the hope.

But not only His articulate promises, but also His own past actions, bind Him. He is always true to these; and not only continues to do as He has done, but discharges every obligation which His past imposes on Him. The ostrich was said to leave its eggs to be hatched in the sand. Men bring men into positions of dependence, and then lightly shake responsibility from careless shoulders. But God accepts the cares laid upon Him by His own acts, and discharges them to the last jot. He is a faithful Creator. Creation brings obligations with it; obligations for the creature; obligations for the Creator. If God makes a being, God is bound to take care of the being that He has made. If He makes a being in a given fashion, He is bound to provide for the necessities that He has created. According to the old proverb, if He makes mouths it is His business to feed them. And He recognises the obligation. His past binds Him to certain conduct in His future. We can lay hold on the former manifestation, and we can plead it with Him. Thou hast been, and therefore Thou must be. Thou hast taught me to trust in Thee; vindicate and warrant my trust by Thy unchangeableness. So His word, His acts, and His own nature, bind God to bless and help. His faithfulness is the expression of His unchangeableness. Because He could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself.

Take, then, these two thoughts of God's lovingkindness and of God's faithfulness and weave them together, and see what a strong cord they are to which a man may cling, and in all His weakness be sure that it will never give nor break. Mercy might be transient and arbitrary, but when you braid in faithfulness along with it, it becomes fixed as the pillars of heaven, and immutable as the throne of God. Only when we are sure of God's faithfulness can we lift up thankful voices to Him, because His mercy endureth for ever. A despotic monarch may be all full of tenderness at this moment, and all full of wrath and sternness the next. He may have a whim of favour to-day, and a whim of severity to-morrow, and no man can say, What doest thou? But God is not a despot. He has, so to speak, decreed a constitution. He has limited Himself. He has marked out His path across the great wide region of possibilities of the divine action; He has buoyed out His channel on that ocean, and declared to us His purposes. So we can reckon on God, as astronomers can foretell the motions of the stars. We can plead His faithfulness along with His love, and feel that the one makes sure that the other shall be from everlasting to everlasting.

The next beam of the divine brightness is righteousness. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains. Righteousness is not to be taken here in its narrow sense of stern retribution which gives to the evildoer the punishment that he deserves. There is no thought here, whatever there may be in other places in Scripture, of any opposition between mercy and righteousness, but the notion of righteousness here is a broader and greater one. It is just this, to put it into other words, that God has a law for His being to which He conforms; and that whatsoever things are fair and lovely, and good, and pure down here, those things are fair, and lovely, and good, and pure up there; that He is the Archetype of all excellence, the Ideal of all moral completeness: that we can know enough of Him to be sure of this that what we call right He loves, and what we call right He practises.

Brethren! unless we have that for the very foundation of our thoughts of God, we have no foundation to rest on. Unless we feel and know that the Judge of all the earth doeth right, and is right, and law and righteousness have their home and seat in His bosom, and are the expression of His inmost being, then I know not where our confidence can be built. Unless Thy righteousness, like the great mountains, surrounds and guards the low plain of our lives, they will lie open to all foes.

Then, next, we pass from the divine character to the divine acts. Mercy, faithfulness, and righteousness all converge and flow into the great river of the divine judgments.

By judgments are not meant merely the acts of God's punitive righteousness, the retributions that destroy evildoers, but all God's decisions and acts in regard to man. Or, to put it into other and briefer words, God's judgments are the whole of the ways, the methods of the divine government. So Paul, alluding to this very passage when he says How unsearchable are Thy judgments! adds, as a parallel clause, meaning the same thing, and Thy ways past finding out. That includes all which men call, in a narrower sense, judgments, but it includes, too, all acts of kindness and loving gifts. God's judgments are the expressions of His thoughts, and these thoughts are thoughts of good and not of evil.

But notice, in the next place, the boundlessness of all these characteristics of the divine nature.

Thy mercy is in the heavens, towering up above the stars, and dwelling there, like some divine ether filling all space. The heavens are the home of light, the source of every blessing, arching over every head, rimming every horizon, holding all the stars, opening into abysses as we gaze, with us by night and by day, undimmed by the mist and smoke of earth, unchanged by the lapse of centuries; ever seen, never reached, bending over us always, always far above us. So the mercy of God towers above us, and stoops down towards us, rims us all about and arches over us all, sheds down its dewy benedictions by night and by day; is filled with a million stars and light-points of duty and of splendour; is near us ever to bless and succour and help, and holds us all in its blue round.

Thy faithfulness reacheth to the clouds. Strange that God's fixed faithfulness should be compared to the very emblems of mutation. The clouds are unstable, they whirl and melt and change. Strange to think of the unalterable faithfulness as reaching to them! May it not be that the very mutability of the mutable may be the means of manifesting the unalterable sameness of God's faithful purpose, of His unchangeable love, and of His ever consistent dealings? May not the apparent incongruity be a part of the felicity of the bold words? Is it not true that earthly things, as they change their forms and melt away, leaving no track behind, phantomlike as they are, do still obey the behests of that divine faithfulness, and gather and dissolve and break in brief showers of blessing, or short, sharp crashes of storm, at the bidding of that steadfast purpose which works out one unalterable design by a thousand instruments, and changeth all things, being in itself unchanged? The thing that is eternal, even the faithfulness of God, dwells amid, and shows itself through, the things that are temporal, the flying clouds of change.

Again, Thy righteousness is like the great mountains. Like these, its roots are fast and stable; like these, it stands firm for ever; like these, its summits touch the fleeting clouds of human circumstance; like these, it is a shelter and a refuge, inaccessible in its steepest peaks, but affording many a cleft in its rocks, where a man may hide and be safe. But, unlike these, it knew no beginning, and shall know no end. Emblems of permanence as they are, though Olivet looks down on Jerusalem as it did when Melchizedek was its king, and Tabor and Hermon stand as they did before human lips had named them, they are wearing away by winter storms and summer heats. But, as Isaiah has taught us, when the earth is old, God's might and mercy are young; for the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from thee. The earth shall wax old like a garment, but My righteousness shall not be abolished. It is more stable than the mountains, and firmer than the firmest things upon earth.

Then, with wonderful poetical beauty and vividness of contrast, there follows upon the emblem of the great mountains of God's righteousness the emblem of the mighty deep of His judgments. Here towers Vesuvius; there at its feet lie the waters of the bay. So the righteousness springs up like some great cliff, rising sheer from the water's edge, while its feet are laved by the sea of the divine judgments, unfathomable and shoreless. The mountains and the sea are the two grandest things in nature, and in their combination sublime; the one the home of calm and silence, the other in perpetual motion. But the mountain's roots are deeper than the depths of the sea, and though the judgments are a mighty deep, the righteousness is deeper, and is the bed of the ocean.

The metaphor, of course, implies obscurity, but what sort of obscurity? The obscurity of the sea. And what sort of obscurity is that? Not that which comes from mud, or anything added, but that which comes from depth. As far as a man can see down into its blue-green depths they are clear and translucent; but where the light fails and the eye fails, there comes what we call obscurity. The sea is clear, but our sight is limited.

And so there is no arbitrary obscurity in God's dealings, and we know as much about them as it is possible for us to know; but we cannot see to the bottom. A man on the cliff can look much deeper into the ocean than a man on the level beach. The higher you climb the further you will see down into the sea of glass mingled with fire that lies placid before God's throne. Let us remember that it is a hazardous thing to judge of a picture before it is finished; of a building before the scaffolding is pulled down, and it is as hazardous for us to say about any deed or any revealed truth that it is inconsistent with the divine character. Wait a bit; wait a bit! Thy judgments are a great deep. The deep will be drained off one day, and you will see the bottom of it. Judge nothing before the time.

But as an aid to patience and faith hearken how the Psalmist finishes up his contemplations: O Lord! Thou preservest man and beast. Very well then, all this mercy, faithfulness, righteousness, judgment, high as the heavens, deep as the ocean, firm as the hills, it is all working for this--to keep the millions of living creatures round about us, and ourselves, in life and well-being. The mountain is high, the deep is profound. Between the mountain and the sea there is a strip of level land. God's righteousness towers above us; God's judgments go down beneath us; we can scarcely measure adequately the one or the other. But upon the level where we live there are the green fields where the cattle browse, and the birds sing, and men live and till and reap and are fed. That is to say, we all have enough in the plain, patent facts of creation and preservation of man and animal life in this world to make us quite sure of what is the principle that prevails up to the very top of the inaccessible mountains, and down to the very bottom of the unfathomable deep. What we know of Him, in the blessings of His love and providence, ought to interpret for us all that is perplexing. What we understand is good and loving. Let us be sure that what we do not yet understand is good and loving too. The web is of one texture throughout. The least educated ear can catch the music of the simpler melodies which run through the Great Composer's work. We shall one day be able to appreciate the yet fuller music of the more recondite parts, which to us at present seem only jangling and discord. It is not His melody but our ears that are at fault. But we may well accept the obscurity of the mighty deep of God's judgment, when we can see plainly that, after all, the earth is full of His mercy, and that the eyes of all things wait on God, and He giveth them their meat in due season.

**II. So much, then, for the great picture here of these boundless characteristics of the divine nature. Now let us look for a moment at the picture of man sheltering beneath God's wings.**

How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings. God's lovingkindness, or mercy, as I explained the word might be rendered, is precious, for that is the true meaning of the word translated excellent. We are rich when we have that for ours; we are poor without it. Our true wealth is to possess God's love, and to know in thought and realise in feeling and reciprocate in affection His grace and goodness, the beauty and perfectness of His wondrous character. That man is wealthy who has God on his side; that man is a pauper who has not God for his.

How precious is Thy lovingkindness, therefore the children of men put their trust. There is only one thing that will ever win a man's heart to love God, and that is that God should love him first, and let him see it. We love Him because He first loved us, is the New Testament teaching. Is it not all adumbrated and foretold in these words: How precious is Thy loving-kindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust?

We may be driven to worship after a sort by power; we may be smitten into some cold admiration, into some kind of reluctant subjection and trembling reverence, by the manifestation of divine perfections. But there is only one thing that wins a man's heart, and that is the sight of God's heart; and it is only when we know how precious His lovingkindness is that we shall be drawn towards Him.

And then this last verse tells us how we can make God our own: They put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings. The word here rendered, and accurately rendered, put their trust, has a very beautiful literal meaning. It means to flee for refuge, as the manslayer might flee into the strong city, or as Lot did out of Sodom to the little city on the hill, or as David did into the cave from his enemies. So, with such haste, with such intensity, staying for nothing, and with the effort of your whole will and nature, flee to God. That is trust. Go to Him for refuge from all evil, from all harm, from your own souls, from all sin, from hell, and death, and the devil.

Put your trust under the shadow of His wings. That is a beautiful image, drawn, probably, from the grand words of Deuteronomy, where God is likened to the eagle stirring up her nest, fluttering over her young, with tenderness in her fierce eye, and protecting strength in the sweep of her mighty pinion. So God spreads the covert of His wing, strong and tender, beneath which we may all gather ourselves and nestle.

And how can we do that? By the simple process of fleeing unto Him, as made known to us in Christ our Saviour; to hide ourselves there. For let us not forget how even the tenderness of this metaphor was increased by its shape on the tender lips of the Lord: How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings! The Old Testament took the emblem of the eagle, sovereign, and strong, and fierce; the New Testament took the emblem of the domestic fowl, peaceable, and gentle, and affectionate. Let us flee to that Christ, by humble faith with the plea on our lips--

Cover my defenceless head

With the shadow of Thy wing;

and then all the Godhead in its mercy, its faithfulness, its righteousness, and its judgments will be on our side; and we shall know how precious is the lovingkindness of the Lord, and find in Him the home and hiding-place of our hearts for ever.