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

**PSALMS-035**. **THE CITY AND RIVER OF GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"4. There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. 5. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early. 6. The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: He uttered His voice, the earth melted. 7. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."*

*Psalm 46:4-7*

There are two remarkable events in the history of Israel, one or other of which most probably supplied the historical basis upon which this psalm rests. One is that wonderful deliverance of the armies of Jehoshaphat from the attacking forces of the bordering nations, which is recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Chronicles. There you will find that, by a singular arrangement, the sons of Korah, members of the priestly order, were not only in the van of the battle, but celebrated the victory by hymns of gladness. It is possible that this may be one of those hymns; but I think rather that the more ordinary reference is the correct one, which sees in this psalm and in the two succeeding ones, echoes of that supernatural deliverance of Israel in the time of Hezekiah, when

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,

and Sennacherib and all his army were,

by the blast of the breath of His nostrils,

swept into swift destruction.

The reasons for that historical reference may be briefly stated. We find, for instance, a number of remarkable correspondences between these three psalms and portions of the Book of the prophet Isaiah, who, as we know, lived in the period of that deliverance. The comparison, for example, which is here drawn with such lofty, poetic force between the quiet river which makes glad the city of God, and the tumultuous billows of the troubled sea, which shakes the mountain and moves the earth, is drawn by Isaiah in regard to the Assyrian invasion, when he speaks of Israel refusing the waters of Shiloah, which go softly, and, therefore, having brought upon them the waters of the river--the power of Assyria--which shall fill the breadth of Thy land, O Immanuel! Notice, too, that the very same consolation which was given to Isaiah, by the revelation of that significant appellation, Immanuel, God with us, appears in this psalm as a kind of refrain, and is the foundation of all its confident gladness, The Lord of Hosts is with us. Besides these obvious parallelisms, there are others to which I need not refer, which, taken together, seem to render it at least probable that we have in this psalm the devotional echo of the great deliverance of Israel from Assyria in the time of Hezekiah.

Now, these verses are the cardinal central portion of the song. We may call them The Hymn of the Defence and Deliverance of the City of God. We cannot expect to find in poetry the same kind of logical accuracy in the process of thought which we require in treatises; but the lofty emotion of devout song obeys laws of its own: and it is well to surrender ourselves to the flow, and to try to see with the Psalmist's eyes for a moment his sources of consolation and strength.

I take the four points which seem to be the main turning-points of these verses--first, the gladdening river; second, the indwelling Helper; third, the conquering voice; and fourth, the alliance of ourselves by faith with the safe dwellers in the city of God.

**I. First, we have the gladdening river--an emblem of many great and joyous truths.**

The figure is occasioned by, or at all events derives much of its significance from, a geographical peculiarity of Jerusalem. Alone among the great cities and historical centres of the world, it stood upon no broad river. One little perennial stream, or rather rill of living water, was all which it had; but Siloam was mightier and more blessed for the dwellers in the rocky fortress of the Jebusites than the Euphrates, Nile, or Tiber for the historical cities which stood upon their banks. One can see the Psalmist looking over the plain eastward, and beholding in vision the mighty forces which came against them, symbolised and expressed by the breadth and depth and swiftness of the great river upon which Nineveh sat as a queen, and then thinking upon the little tiny thread of living water that flowed past the base of the rock upon which the temple was perched. It seems small and unconspicuous--nothing compared to the dash of the waves and the rise of the floods of those mighty secular empires, still, There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God. Its waters shall never fail, and thirst shall flee whithersoever this river comes.

It is also to be remembered that the psalm is running in the track of a certain constant symbolism that pervades all Scripture. From the first book of Genesis down to the last chapter of Revelation, you can hear the dashing of the waters of the river. It went out from the garden and parted into four heads. Thou makest them drink of the river of Thy pleasures. Behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward, and everything shall live whithersoever the river cometh. He that believeth on me, out of His belly shall flow rivers of living water. And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. Isaiah, who has already afforded some remarkable parallels to the words of our psalm, gives another very striking one to the image now under consideration, when he says, The glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams, wherein shall go no galley with oars. The picture in that metaphor is of a stream lying round Jerusalem, like the moated rivers which girdle some of the cities in the plains of Italy, and are the defence of those who dwell enclosed in their flashing links.

Guided, then, by the physical peculiarity of situation which I have referred to, and by the constant meaning of Scriptural symbolism, I think we must conclude that this river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God, is God Himself in the outflow and self-communication of His own grace to the soul. The stream is the fountain in flow. The gift of God, which is living water, is God Himself, considered as the ever-imparting Source of all refreshment, of all strength, of all blessedness. This spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe should receive.

We must dwell for a moment or two still further upon these words, and mark how this metaphor, in a most simple and natural way, sets forth very grand and blessed spiritual truths with regard to this communication of God's grace to them that love Him and trust Him. First, I think we may see here a very beautiful suggestion of the manner, and then of the variety, and then of the effects of that communication of the divine love and grace.

We have only to read the previous verses to see what I mean. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. There you can hear the wild waves dashing round the base of the firm hills, sapping their strength, and toppling their crests down in the bubbling, yeasty foam. Remember how, not only in Scripture but in all poetry, the sea has been the emblem of endless unrest. Its waters, those barren, wandering fields of foam, going moaning round the world with unprofitable labour, how they have been the emblem of unbridled power, of tumult and strife, and anarchy and rebellion! Then mark how our text brings into sharpest contrast with all that hurly-burly of the tempest, and the dash and roar of the troubled waters, the gentle, quiet flow of the river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God; the translucent little ripples purling along beds of golden pebbles, and the enamelled meadows drinking the pure stream as it steals by them. Thus, says our psalm, not with noise, not with tumult, not with conspicuous and destructive energy, but in silent, secret underground communication, God's grace, God's love, His peace, His power, His almighty and gentle Self flow into men's souls. Quietness and confidence on our sides correspond to the quietness and serenity with which He glides into the heart. Instead of all the noise of the sea you have within the quiet impartations of the voice that is still and small, wherein God dwells. The extremest power is silent. The mightiest force in all the universe is the force which has neither speech nor language. The parent of all physical force, as astronomers seem to be more and more teaching us, is the great central sun which moveth all things, which operates all physical changes, whose beams are all but omnipotent, and yet fall so quietly that they do not disturb the motes that dance in their path. Thunder and lightning are child's play compared with the energy that goes to make the falling dews and quiet rains. The power of the sunshine is the root power of all force which works in material things. And so we turn, with the symbol in our hands, to the throne of God, and when He says, Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, we are aware of an energy, the signature of whose might is its quietness, which is omnipotent because it is gentle and silent. The seas may roar and be troubled, the tiny thread of the river is mightier than them all.

And then, still further, in this first part of our text there is also set forth very distinctly the number and the variety of the gifts of God. The streams whereof, literally, the divisions whereof,--that is to say, going back to Eastern ideas, the broad river is broken up into canals that are led off into every man's little bit of garden ground; coming down to modern ideas, the water is carried by pipes into every man's household and chamber. The stream has its divisions; listen to words that are a commentary upon the meaning of this verse, All these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing unto every man severally as He will--an infinite variety, an endless diversity, according to all the petty wants of each that is supplied thereby. As you can divide water all but infinitely, and it will take the shape of every containing vessel, so into every soul according to its capacities, according to its shape, according to its needs, this great gift, this blessed presence of the God of our strength, will come. The varieties of His gifts are as much the mark of His omnipotence as the gentleness and stillness of them.

And then I need only touch upon the last thought, the effects of this communicated God. The streams make glad--with the gladness which comes from refreshment, with the gladness which comes from the satisfying of all thirsty desires, with the gladness which comes from the contact of the spirit with absolute completeness; of the will, with perfect authority; of the heart, with changeless love; of the understanding, with pure incarnate truth; of the conscience, with infinite peace; of the child, with the Father; of my emptiness, with His fulness; of my changeableness, with His immutability; of my incompleteness, with His perfectness. They to whom this stream passes shall know no thirst; they who possess it from them it shall come. Out of him shall flow rivers of living water. That all-sufficient Spirit not only becomes to its possessor the source of individual refreshment, and slakes his own thirst, but flows out from him for the gladdening of others.

The least flower with a brimming cup may stand,

And share its dew-drop with another near.

The city thus supplied may laugh at besieging hosts. With the deep reservoir in its central fortress, the foe may do as they list to all surface streams, its water shall be sure, and no raging thirst shall ever drive it to surrender. The river breaks from the threshold of the Temple, within its walls, and when all beyond that safe enclosure is cracked and parched in the fierce heat, and no green thing can be seen in the dry and thirsty land, that stream shall make glad the city of our God, and everything shall live whithersoever the river cometh. Thou shalt be as a well-watered garden, and as a river whose streams fail not.

**II. Then notice, secondly, substantially the same general thought, but modified and put in plain words--the indwelling Helper.**

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early, or, as the latter clause had better be translated, as it is given in the margin of some of our Bibles, God shall help her at the appearance of the morning. There are two promises here: first of all, the constant presence; and second, help at the right time. Whether there be actual help or no, there is always with us the potential help of God, and it flashes into energy at the moment that He knows to be the right one. The appearing of the morning He determines; not you or I. Therefore, we may be confident that we have God ever by our sides. Not that that Presence is meant to avert outward or inward trouble and trial, and painfulness and weariness; but in the midst of these, and while they last, here is the assurance, She shall not be moved; and that it will not always last, here is the ground of the confidence, God shall help her when the morning dawns.

I need not point out to you the contrast here between the tranquillity of the city which has for its central Inhabitant and Governor the omnipotent God, and the tumult of all that turbulent earth. The waves of the troubled waters break everywhere,--they run over the flat plains and sweep over the mountains of secular strength and outward might, and worldly kingdoms, and human polities and earthly institutions, acting on them all either by slow corrosive action at the base, or by the tossing floods swirling against them, until they shall be lost in the ocean of time. For the history of the world is the judgment of the world. When He wills the plains are covered and mountains disappear, but one rock stands fast--The mountain of the Lord's house is exalted above the top of the mountains; and when everything is rocking and swaying in the tempests, here is fixity and tranquillity. She shall not be moved. Why? Because of her citizens? No. Because of her guards and gates? No! Because of her polity? No! Because of her orthodoxy? No! But because God is in her, and she is safe, and where He dwells no evil can come. Thou carriest Caesar and his fortunes. The ship of Christ carries the Lord and His fortunes; and, therefore, whatsoever becomes of the other little ships in the wild dash of the tempest, this with the Lord on board arrives at its desired haven--God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved.

Then, still further, that Presence which is always the pledge of stability, and unmoved calm, even while causes of agitation are storming around, will, as I said, flash into energy, and be a Helper and a Deliverer at the right moment. And when will that right moment be? At the appearing of the morning. And when they arose early in the morning, they were all dead corpses; in the hour of greatest extremity, but ere the foe has executed his purposes; not too soon for fear and faith, not too late for hope and help; when the morning dawns, when the appointed hour of deliverance, which He alone determines, has struck. It is not for you to know the times and seasons; but this we may know, that He who is the Lord of time will ever save at the best possible moment. He will not come so quickly as to prevent us from feeling our need; He will not tarry so long as to make us sick with hope deferred, or so long as to let the enemy fulfil his purposes of destruction. Lord, behold! he whom Thou lovest is sick. Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When He had heard therefore that he was sick, He abode two days still in the same place where He was... . Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again... . And he that was dead came forth.

The Lord may seem to sleep on His hard wooden pillow in the stern of the little fishing boat, and even while the frail craft begins to fill may show no sign of help. But ere the waves have rolled over her, the cry of fear that yet trusts, and of trust that yet fears, wakes Him who knew the need, even while He seemed to slumber, and one mighty word, as of a master to some petulant slave, Peace! be still, hushes the confusion, and rebukes the fear, and rewards the faith.

The Lord is in the midst of her--that is the perennial fact. The Lord shall help her, and that right early--that is the grace for seasonable help.

**III. The psalm having set forth these broad grounds of confidence, goes on to tell the story of actual deliverance which confirms them, and of which they are indeed but the generalised expression.**

The condensed narrative moves to its end by a series of short crashing sentences like the ring of the destructive axe at the roots of trees. We see the whole sequence of events as by lightning flashes, which give brief glimpses and are quenched. The grand graphic words seem to pant with haste, as they record Israel's deliverance. That deliverance comes from the Conquering Voice. The heathen raged (the same word, we may note, as is found a verse or two back, Though the waters thereof roar'), the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted. With what vigour these hurried sentences describe, first, the wild wrath and formidable movements of the foe, and then the One Sovereign Word which quells them all, as well as the instantaneous weakness that dissolves the seeming solid substance when the breath of His lips smites it!

And where will you find a grander or loftier thought than this, that the simple word--the utterance of the pure will of God conquers all opposition, and tells at once in the sphere of material things? He speaks, and it is done. At the sound of that thunder-voice, hushed stillness and a pause of dread fall upon all the wide earth, deeper and more awe-struck than the silence of the woods with their huddling leaves, when the feebler peals roll through the sky. The depths are congealed in the heart of the sea--as if you were to lay hold of Niagara in its wildest plunge, and were with a word to freeze all its descending waters and stiffen them into immovableness in fetters of eternal ice. So He utters His voice, and all meaner noises are hushed. The lion hath roared, who shall not fear? He speaks--no weapon, no material vehicle is needed. The point of contact between the pure divine will and the material creatures which obey its behests is ever wrapped in darkness, whether these be the settled ordinances which men call nature, or the less common which the Bible calls miracle. In all alike there is, to every believer in a God at all, an incomprehensible action of the spiritual upon the material, which allows of no explanations to bridge over the gulf recognised in the broken utterances of our psalm, He uttered His voice: the earth melted.

How grandly, too, these last words give the impression of immediate and utter dissolution of all opposition! All the Titanic brute forces are, at His voice, disintegrated, and lose their organisation and solidity. The hills melted like wax; The mountains flowed down at Thy presence. The hardness and obstinacy is all liquefied and enfeebled, and parts with its consistency and is lost in a fluid mass. As two carbon points when the electric stream is poured upon them are gnawed to nothingness by the fierce heat, and you can see them wasting before your eyes, so the concentrated ardour of His breath falls upon the hostile evil, and lo! it is not.

The Psalmist is generalising the historical fact of the sudden and utter destruction of Sennacherib's host into a universal law. And it is a universal law--true for us as for Hezekiah and the sons of Korah, true for all generations. Martin Luther might well make this psalm the battle cry of the Reformation, and we may well make our own the rugged music and dauntless hope of his rendering of these words:--

And let the Prince of ill

Look grim as e'er he will,

He harms us not a whit.

For why? His doom is writ.

A word shall quickly slay him.

**IV. Then note, finally, how the psalm shows us the act by which we enter the City of God.**

The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. It is not enough to lay down general truths, however true and however blessed, about the safe and sacred city of God--not enough to be theoretically convinced of the truth of the supreme governance and ever-present aid of God. We must take a further step that will lead us far beyond the regions of barren intellectual apprehension of the great truths of God's love and care. These truths are nothing to us, brethren! unless, like the Psalmist here, we make them our own, and losing the burden of self in the very act of grasping them by faith, unite ourselves with the great multitude who are joined together in Him, and say, He is my God: He is our refuge. That living act of appropriating faith presupposes, indeed, the presence of these truths in our understandings, but in the very act they are changed into powers in our lives. They pass into the affections and the will. They are no more empty generalities. Bread nourishes, not when it is looked at, but when it is eaten. He that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me. We feed on Christ when we make Him ours by faith, and each of us is sustained and blessed by Him when we can say, My Lord and my God! Mark, too, how there is here set forth the twofold ground for our calmest confidence in these two mighty names of God.

The Lord of Hosts is with us. That majestic name includes all the deepest and most blessed thoughts of God which the earlier revelation imparted. That name of Jehovah proclaims at once His Eternal Being and His covenant relation--manifesting Him by its mysterious meaning as He who dwells above time, the tideless sea of absolute unchanging existence, from whom all the stream of creatural life flows forth many-coloured and transient, to whom it all returns, who, Himself unchanging, changeth all things, and declaring Him, by the historical associations connected with it, as having unveiled His purposes in firm words, to which men may trust, and as having entered into that solemn league with Israel which underlay their whole national life. He is the Lord the Eternal,--the covenant name.

He is the Lord of Hosts, the Imperator, absolute Master and Commander, Captain and King of all the combined forces of the universe, whether they be personal or impersonal, spiritual or material, who, in serried ranks, wait on Him, and move harmonious, obedient to His will. And this Eternal Master of the legions of the universe is with us, weak and poor, and troubled and sinful as we are. Therefore, we will not fear: what can man do unto us?

Again, when we say, The God of Jacob is our refuge, we reach back into the past, and lay hold of the mercies promised to, and received by, the long vanished generations who trusted in Him and were lightened. As, by the one name, we appeal to His own Being and uttered pledge, so, by the other, we appeal to His ancient deeds--past as we call them, but present with Him, who lives and loves in the undivided eternity above the low fences of time. All that He has been, He is; all that He has done, He is doing. We on whom the ends of the earth are come have the same Helper, the same Friend that the world's grey fathers had. They that go before do not prevent them that come after. The river is full still. The van of the pilgrim host did, indeed, long, long ago drink and were satisfied, but the bright waters are still as pellucid, still as near, still as refreshing, still as abundant as they ever were. Nay, rather, they are fuller and more accessible to us than to patriarch and Psalmist, God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

For we, brethren! have a fuller revelation of that mighty name, and a more wondrous and closer divine presence by our sides. The psalm rejoices in that The Lord of Hosts is with us; and the choral answer of the Gospel swells into loftier music, as it tells of the fulfilment of psalmists hopes and prophets visions in Him who is called Immanuel, which is, being interpreted, God with us. The psalm is confident in that God dwelt in Zion, and our confidence has the more wondrous fact to lay hold of, that even now the Word who dwelt among us makes His abode in every believing heart, and gathers them all together at last in that great city, round whose flashing foundations no tumult of ocean beats, whose gates of pearl need not be closed against any foes, with whose happy citizens God will dwell, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God.