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

**PSALMS-036**. **THE LORD OF HOSTS, THE GOD OF JACOB by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge."*

*Psalm 46:11*

Some great deliverance, the details of which we do not know, had been wrought for Israel, and this psalmist comes forth, like Miriam with her choir of maidens, to hymn the victory. The psalm throbs with exultation, but no human victor's name degrades the singer's lips. There is only one Conqueror whom he celebrates. The deliverance has been the work of the Lord; the desolations that have been made on the earth He has made. This great refrain of the song, which I have chosen for my text, takes the experience of deliverance as a proof in act of an astounding truth, and as a hope for the future. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge.

There is in these words a significant duplication of idea, both in regard to the names which are given to God, and to that which He is conceived as being to us; and I desire now simply to try to bring out the force of the consolation and strength which lie in these two epithets of His, and in the double wonder of His relation to us men.

**I. First, then, I ask you to look at the twin thoughts of God that are here. The Lord of hosts ... The God of Jacob.**

Now, with regard to the former of these grand names, it may be observed that it does not occur in the earliest stages of Revelation as recorded in the Old Testament. The first instance in which we find it is in the song of Hannah in the beginning of the first Book of Samuel; and it re-appears in the Davidic psalms and in psalms and prophecies of later date.

What hosts are they of which God is the Lord? Is that great title a mere synonym for the half-heathenish idea of the God of battles? By no means. True! He is the Lord of the armies of Israel, but the hosts which the Psalmist sees ranged in embattled array, and obedient to the command of the great Captain, are far other and grander than any earthly armies. If we would understand the whole depth and magnificent sweep of the idea enshrined in this name, we cannot do better than recall one or two other Scripture phrases. For instance, the account of the Creation in the Book of Genesis is ended by, Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. Then, remember that, throughout the Old Testament, we meet constantly with the idea of the celestial bodies as being the hosts of heaven. And, still further, remember how, in one of the psalms, we hear the invocation to all ye His hosts, ye ministers of His that do His pleasure, the angels that excel in strength, to praise and bless Him. If we take account of all these and a number of similar passages, I think we shall come to this conclusion, that by that title, the Lord of hosts, the prophets and psalmists meant to express the universal dominion of God over the whole universe in all its battalions and sections, which they conceived of as one ranked army, obedient to the voice of the great General and Ruler of them all.

So the idea contained in the name is precisely parallel with that to which the heathen centurion in the Gospels had come, by reflecting upon the teaching of the legion in which he himself commanded, when he said, I am a man under authority, having servants under me; and I say to this one, Go, and he goeth; to another, Come, and he cometh; to another, Do this, and he doeth it--speak Thou the word! To him Jesus Christ was Captain of the Lord's hosts, and Ruler of all the ordered forces of the universe. The Old Testament name enshrines the same idea. The universe is an ordered whole. Science tells us that. Modern thought emphasises it. But how cruel, relentless, crushing, that conception may be unless we grasp the further thought which is presented in this great Name, and see, behind all the play of phenomena, the one Will which is the only power in the universe, and sways and orders all besides! The armies of heaven and every creature in the great Cosmos are the servants of this Lord. Then we can stand before the dreadful mysteries and the all but infinite complications of this mighty Whole, and say, These are His soldiers, and He is their Captain, the Lord of hosts.

Next we turn, by one quick bound, from the wide sweep of that mighty Name to the other, The God of Jacob. The one carries us out among the glories of the universe, and shows us, behind them all, the personal Will of which they are the servants, and the Character of which they are the expressions. The other brings us down to the tent of the solitary wanderer, and shows us that that mighty Commander and Emperor enters into close, living, tender, personal relations with one poor soul, and binds Himself by that great covenant, which is rooted in His love alone, to be the God who cares for and keeps and blesses the man in all his wanderings. Neither does the command of the mighty Whole hinder the closest relation to the individual, nor does the care of the individual interfere with the direction of the Whole. The single soul stands out clear and isolated, as if there were none in the universe but God and himself; and the whole fulness of the divine power, and all the tenderness of the God-heart, are lavished upon the individual, even though the armies of the skies wait upon His nod.

So, if we put the two names together, we get the completion of the great idea; and whilst the one speaks to us of infinite power, of absolute supremacy, of universal rule, and so delivers us from the fear of nature, and from the blindness which sees only the material operations and not the working Hand that underlies them, the other speaks to us of gentle and loving and specific care, and holds out the hope that, between man and God, there may be a bond of friendship and of mutual possession so sweet and sacred that nothing else can compare with it. The God of Jacob is the Lord of hosts. More wondrous still, the Lord of hosts is the God of Jacob.

**II. Note, secondly, the double wonder of our relation to this great God.**

There is almost a tone of glad surprise, as well as of triumphant confidence, in this refrain of our psalm, which comes twice in it, and possibly ought to have come three times--at the end of each of its sections. The emphasis is to be laid on the us and the our, as if that was the miracle, and the fact which startled the Psalmist into the highest rapture of astonished thankfulness.

The Lord of hosts is with us. What does that say? It proclaims that wondrous truth that no gulf between the mighty Ruler of all and us, the insignificant little creatures that creep upon the face of this tiny planet, has any power of separating us from Him. It is always hard to believe that. It is harder to-day than it was when our Psalmist's heart beat high at the thought. It is hard by reason of our sense-bound blindness, by reason of our superficial way of looking at things, which only shows us the nearest, and veils with their insignificances the magnitude of the furthest. Jupiter is blazing in our skies every night now; he is not one-thousandth part as great or bright as any one of the little needle-points of light, the fixed stars, that are so much further away; but he is nearer, and the intrusive brightness of the planet hides the modest glories of the distant and shrouded suns. Just so it is hard for us ever to realise, and to walk in the light of the realisation of, the fact that the Lord of hosts, the Emperor of all things, is of a truth with each of us.

It is harder to-day than ever it was; for we have learned to think rightly--or at least more rightly and approximately rightly--of the position and age of man upon this earth. The Psalmist's ancient question of devout thankfulness is too often travestied to-day into a question of scoffing or of melancholy unbelief: When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy hands; what is man? Art Thou mindful of him? This psalm comes to answer that. The Lord of hosts is with us. True, we are but of yesterday, and know nothing. True, earth is but a pin-point amidst the universe's glories. True, we are crushed down by sorrow and by care; and in some moods it seems supremely incredible that we should be of such worth in the scale of Creation as that the Lord of all things should, in a deeper sense than the Psalmist knew, have dwelt with us and be with us still. But bigness is not greatness, and there is nothing incredible in the belief that men, lower than the angels, and needing God more because of their sin, do receive His visitations in an altogether special sense, and that, passing by the lofty and the great that may inhabit His universe, His chariot wheels stoop to us, and that, because we are sinners, God is with us.

Let me remind you, dear brethren! of how this great thought of my text is heightened and transcended by the New Testament teaching. We believe in One whose name is Immanuel, God with us. Jesus Christ has come to be with men, not only during the brief years of His earthly ministry, in corporeal reality, but to be with all who love Him and trust Him, in a far closer, more real, more deep, more precious, more operative Presence than when He dwelt here. Through all the ages Christ Himself is with every soul that loves Him; and He will dwell beside us and bless us and keep us. God's presence means God's sympathy, God's knowledge, God's actual help, and these are ours if we will. Instead of staggering at the apparent improbability that so transcendent and mighty a Being should stoop from His throne, where He lords it over the universe, and enter into the narrow room of our hearts, let us rather try to rise to the rapture of the astonished Psalmist when, looking upon the deliverance that had been wrought, this was the leading conviction that was written in flame upon his heart, The Lord of hosts is with us.

And then the second of the wonders that are here set forth in regard to our relations to Him is, the God of Jacob is our Refuge.

That carries for us the great truth that, just as the distance between us and God makes no separation, and the gulf is one that is bridged over by His love, so distance in time leads to no exhaustion of the divine faithfulness and care, nor any diminution of the resources of His grace. The God of Jacob is our Refuge. The story of the past is the prophecy of the future. What God has been to any man He will be to every man, if the man will let Him. There is nothing in any of these grand narratives of ancient days which is not capable of being reproduced in our lives. God drew near to Jacob when he was lying on the stony ground, and showed him the ladder set upon earth, with its top in the heavens, and the bright-winged soldiers and messengers of His will ascending and descending upon it, and His own face at the top. God shows you and me that vision to-day. It was no vanishing splendour, no transient illumination, no hallucination of the man's own thoughts seeking after a helper, and the wish being father to the vision. But it was the unveiling for a moment, in supernatural fashion, of the abiding reality. The God of Jacob is our Refuge; and whatever He was to His servant of old He is to-day to you and me.

We say that miracle has ceased. Yes. But that which the miracle effected has not ceased; and that from which the miracle came has not ceased. The realities of a divine protection, of a divine supply, of a divine guidance, of a divine deliverance, of a divine discipline, and of a divine reward at the last, are as real to-day as when they were mediated by signs and wonders, by an open heaven and by an outstretched hand. They who went before have not emptied the treasures of the Father's house, nor eaten all the bread that He spreads upon the table. God has no stepchildren, and no favourite and spoiled ones. All that the elder brethren have had, we, on whom the ends of the dispensation are come, may have just as really; and whatever God has been to the patriarch He is to us to-day.

Remember the experience of the man of whom our text speaks. The God of Jacob manifested Himself to him as being a God who would draw near to, and care for, and help, a very unworthy and poor creature. Jacob was no saint at the beginning. Selfishness and cunning and many a vice clung very close to his character; but for all that, God drew near to him and cared for him and guided him, and promised that He would not leave him till He had done that which He had spoken to him of. And He will do the same for us--blessed be His name!--with all our faults and weaknesses and craftiness and worldliness and sins. If He cared for that huckstering Jew, as He did, even in his earlier days, He will not put us away because He finds faults in us. The God of Jacob, the supplanter, the trickster, is our Refuge.

But remember how the divine Presence with that man had to be, because of his faults, a Presence that wrought him sorrows and forced him to undergo discipline. So it will be with us. He will not suffer sin upon us; He will pass us through the fire and the water; and do anything with us short of destroying us, in order to destroy the sin that is in us. He does not spare His rod for His child's crying, but smites with judgment, and sends us sorrows for our profit, that we should be partakers of His holiness. We may write this as the explanation over most of our griefs--the God of Jacob is our Refuge, and He is disciplining us as He did him.

And remember what the end of the man was. Thy name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince thou hast power with God, and hast prevailed. So if we have God, who out of such a sow's ear made a silk purse, out of such a stone raised up a servant for Himself, we may be sure that His purpose in all discipline will be effected on us submissive, and we shall end where His ancient servant ended, and shall be in our turn princes with God.

Let me recall to you also the meaning which Jesus Christ found in this name. He quoted the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob as being the great guarantee and proof to us of immortality. The God of Jacob is our Refuge. If so, what can the grim and ghastly phantom of death do to us? He may smite upon the gate, but he cannot enter the fortress. The man who has knit himself to God by saying to God, Lo! I am Thine, and Thou art mine, in that communion has a proof and a pledge that nothing shall ever break it, and that death is powerless. The fact of religion--true, heartfelt religion, with its communion, its prayer, its consciousness of possessing and of being possessed, makes the idea that death ends a man's conscious existence an absurdity and an impossibility.

The God of Jacob is our Refuge, and so we may say to the storms of life, and after them to the last howling tornado of death--Blow winds and crack your cheeks, and do your worst, you cannot touch me in the fortress where I dwell. The wind will hurtle around the stronghold, but within there shall be calm.

Dear brethren! make sure that you are in the refuge. Make sure that you have fled for Refuge to the hope set before you in the Gospel. The Lord of hosts is with us, but you may be parted from Him. He is our Refuge, but you may be standing outside the sanctuary, and so be exposed to all the storms. Flee thither, cast yourselves on Him, trust in that great Saviour who has given Himself for us, and who says to us, Lo! I am with you always. Take Christ for your hiding-place by simple faith in Him and loving obedience born of faith, and then the experience of our Psalmist will be yours. Your life will not want for deliverances which will thrill your heart with thankfulness, and turn the truth of faith into a truth of experience. So you may set to your seals the great saying of our psalm, which is fresh to-day, though centuries have passed since it came glowing fiery from the lips of the ancient seer, and may take up as yours the great words in which Luther has translated it for our times, the Marseillaise of the Reformation--

A safe stronghold our God is still;

A trusty shield and weapon;

He'll help us clear from all the ill

That hath us now o'ertaken.