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

**PSALMS-037**. **A SONG OF DELIVERANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. 2. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. 3. God is known in her palaces for a refuge. 4. For, lo, the kings were assembled, they passed by together. 5. They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and hasted away. 6. Fear took hold upon them there, and pain, as of a woman in travail. 7. Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind. 8. As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God: God will establish it for ever. 9. We have thought of Thy loving-kindness, O God, in the midst of Thy temple. 10. According to Thy name, O God, so is Thy praise unto the ends of the earth: Thy right hand is full of righteousness. 11. Let mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of Thy judgments. 12. Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. 13. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following. 14. For this God is our God for ever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death."*

*Psalm 48:1-14*

The enthusiastic triumph which throbs in this psalm, and the specific details of a great act of deliverance from a great peril which it contains, sufficiently indicate that it must have had some historical event as its basis. Can we identify the fact which is here embalmed?

The psalm gives these points--a formidable muster before Jerusalem of hostile people under confederate kings, with the purpose of laying siege to the city; some mysterious check which arrests them before a sword is drawn, as if some panic fear had shot from its towers and shaken their hearts; and a flight in wild confusion from the impregnable dwelling-place of the Lord of hosts. The occasion of the terror is vaguely hinted at, as if some solemn mystery brooded over it. All that is clear about it is that it was purely the work of the divine hand--Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind; and that in this deliverance, in their own time, the Levite minstrels recognised the working of the same protecting grace which, from of old, had commanded deliverances for Jacob.

Now there is one event, and only one, in Jewish history, which corresponds, point for point, to these details--the crushing destruction of the Assyrian army under Sennacherib. There, there was the same mustering of various nations, compelled by the conqueror to march in his train, and headed by their tributary kings. There, there was the same arrest before an arrow had been shot, or a mound raised against the city. There, there was the same purely divine agency coming in to destroy the invading army.

I think, then, that from the correspondence of the history with the requirements of the psalm, as well as from several similarities of expression and allusion between the latter and the prophecies of Isaiah, who has recorded that destruction of the invader, we may, with considerable probability, regard this psalm as the hymn of triumph over the baffled Assyrian, and the marvellous deliverance of Israel by the arm of God.

Whatever may be thought, however, of that allocation of it to a place in the history, the great truths that it contains depend upon no such identification. They are truths for all time; gladness and consolation for all generations. Let us read it over together now, if, perchance, some echo of the confidence and praise that is found in it may be called forth from our hearts! If you will look at your Bibles you will find that it falls into three portions. There is the glory of Zion, the deliverance of Zion, and the consequent grateful praise and glad trust of Zion.

**I. There is the glory of Zion.**

Hearken with what triumph the Psalmist breaks out: Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. Beautiful for situation (or rather elevation), the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. Now these words are something more than mere patriotic feeling. The Jew's glory in Jerusalem was a different thing altogether from the Roman's pride in Rome. To the devout men amongst them, of whom the writer of this psalm was one, there was one thing, and one only, that made Zion glorious. It was beautiful indeed in its elevation, lifted high upon its rocky mountain. It was safe indeed, isolated from the invader by the precipitous ravines which enclosed and guarded the angle of the mountain plateau on which it stood; but the one thing that gave it glory was that in it God abode. The name even of that earthly Zion was Jehovah-Shammah, the Lord is there. And the emphasis of these words is entirely pointed in that direction. What they celebrate concerning Him is not merely the general thought that the Lord is great, but that the Lord is great in Zion. What they celebrate concerning it is that it is His city, the mountain of His holiness, where He dwells, where He manifests Himself. Because there is His self-manifestation, therefore He is there greatly to be praised. And because the clear voice of His praise rings out from Zion, therefore is she the joy of the whole earth. The glory of Zion, then, is that it is the dwelling-place of God.

Now, remember, that when the Old Testament Scripture speaks about God abiding in Jerusalem, it means no heathenish or material localising of the Deity, nor does it imply any depriving of the rest of the earth of the sanctity of His presence. The very psalm which most distinctly embodies the thought of God's abode protests against that narrowness, for it begins, The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: the world and they that dwell therein. The very ark which was the symbol of His presence, protests by its name against all such localising, for the name of it was the ark of the covenant of the God of the whole earth. When the Bible speaks of Zion as the dwelling-place of God, it is but the expression of the fact that there, between the cherubim, was the visible sign of His presence--that there, in the Temple, as from the centre of the whole land, He ruled, and out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shone.

We are, then, not spiritualising, or forcing a New Testament meaning into these words, when we see in them an Eternal Truth. We are but following in the steps of history and prophecy, and of Christ and His Apostles, and of that last vision of the Apocalypse. We are but distinguishing between an idea and the fact which more or less perfectly embodies it. An idea may have many garments, may transmigrate into many different material forms. The idea of the dwelling of God with men had its less perfect embodiment, has its more perfect embodiment, will have its absolutely perfect embodiment. It had its less perfect in that ancient time. It has its real but partial embodiment in this present time, when, in the midst of the whole community of believing and loving souls, which stretches wider than any society that calls itself a Church, the living God abides and energises by His Spirit and by His Son in the souls of them that believe upon Him. Ye are come unto Mount Zion and unto the city of the living God. And we wait for the time when, filling all the air with its light, there shall come down from God a perfect and permanent form of that dwelling; and that great city, the New Jerusalem, having the glory of God, shall appear, and He will dwell with men and be their God.

But in all these stages of the embodiment of that great truth the glory of Zion rests in this, that in it God abides, that from it He flames in the greatness of His manifestations, which are His praise in all the earth. It is that presence which makes her fair, as it is that presence which keeps her safe. It is that light shining within her palaces--not their own opaque darkness, which streams out far into the waste night with ruddy glow of hospitable invitation. It is God in her, not anything of her own, that constitutes her the joy of the whole earth. Thy beauty was perfect, through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord. Zion is where hearts love and trust and follow Christ. The city of the great King is a permanent reality in a partial form upon earth--and that partial form is itself a prophecy of the perfection of the heavens.

**II. Still further, there is a second portion of this psalm which, passing beyond these introductory thoughts of the glory of Zion, recounts with wonderful power and vigour the process of the deliverance of Zion.**

It extends from the fourth to the eighth verses. Mark the dramatic vigour of the description of the deliverance. There is, first, the mustering of the armies--The kings were assembled. Some light is thrown upon that phrase by the proud boast which the prophet Isaiah puts into the lips of the Assyrian invader, Are not my princes altogether kings? The subject-monarchs of the subdued nationalities that were gathered round the tyrant's standard were used, with the wicked craft of conquerors in all ages, to bring still other lands under the same iron dominion. The kings were assembled--we see them gathering their far-reaching and motley army, mustered from all corners of that gigantic empire. They advance together against the rocky fortress that towers above its girdling valleys. They saw it, they marvelled--in wonder, perhaps, at its beauty, as they first catch sight of its glittering whiteness from some hill crest on their march; or, perhaps, stricken by some strange amazement, as if, basilisk-like, its beauty were deadly, and a beam from the Shechinah had shot a nameless awe into their souls--they were troubled, they hasted away.

I need not dilate on the power of this description, nor do more than notice how the abruptness of the language, huddled together, as it were, without connecting particles, conveys the impression of hurry and confusion, culminating in the rush of fugitives fleeing under the influence of panic-terror. They are like the well-known words, I came, I saw, I conquered, only that here we have to do with swift defeat--they came, they saw, they were conquered. They are, in regard to vivid picturesqueness, arising from the broken construction, singularly like other words which refer to the same event in the forty-sixth psalm, The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted. In their scornful emphasis of triumph they remind us of Isaiah's description of the end of the same invasion--So Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh.

Mark, still further, the eloquent silence as to the cause of the panic and the flight. There is no appearance of armed resistance. This is no battle of the warrior with garments rolled in blood, and the shock of contending hosts. But an unseen Hand smites once--and when the morning dawned they were all dead corpses. The impression of terror produced by such a blow is increased by the veiled allusion to it here. The silence magnifies the deliverance. If we might apply the grand words of Milton to that night of fear--

The trumpet spake not to the armed throng,

But kings sat still, with awful eye,

As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by.

The process of the deliverance is not told here, as there was no need it should be in a hymn which is not history, but the lyrical echo of what is told in history; one image explains it all--Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind. The metaphor--one that does not need expansion here--is that of a ship like a great unwieldy galleon, caught in a tempest. However strong for fight, it is not fit for sailing. It is like some of those turret ships of ours, if they venture out from the coast and get into a storm, their very strength is their destruction, their armour wherein they trusted ensures that they shall sink. And so, this huge assailant of Israel, this great galley with oars, washing about there in the trough of the sea, as it were--God broke it in two with the tempest, which is His breath. You remember how on the medal that commemorated the destruction of the Spanish Armada--our English deliverance--there were written the words of Scripture: God blew upon them and they were scattered. What was there true, literally, is here true in figure. The Psalmist is not thinking of any actual scattering of hostile fleets--from which Jerusalem was never in danger; but is using the shipwreck of the ship of Tarshish as a picture of the utter, swift, God-inflicted destruction which ground that invading army to pieces, as the savage rocks and wild seas will do the strongest craft that is mangled between them.

And then, mark how from this dramatic description there rises a loftier thought still. The deliverance thus described links the present with the past. As we have heard so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God. Yes, brethren! God's merciful manifestation for ourselves, as for those Israelitish people of old, has this blessed effect, that it changes hearsay and tradition into living experience;--this blessed effect, that it teaches us, or ought to teach us, the inexhaustibleness of the divine power, the constant repetition in every age of the same works of love. Taught by it, we learn that all these old narratives of His grace and help are ever new, not past and gone, but ready to be reproduced in their essential characteristics in our lives too. We have heard with our ears, O Lord, our fathers have told us what work Thou didst in their days. But is the record only a melancholy contrast with our own experience? Nay, truly. As we have heard so have we seen. We are ever tempted to think of the present as commonplace. The sky right above our heads is always farthest from earth. It is at the horizon behind and the horizon in front, where earth and heaven seem to blend. We think of miracles in the past, we think of a manifest presence of God in the future, but the present ever seems to our sense-bound understandings as beggared and empty of Him, devoid of His light. But this verse suggests to us how, if we mark the daily dealings of that loving Hand with us, we have every occasion to say, Thy loving-kindness of old lives still. Still, as of old, the hosts of the Lord encamp round about them that fear Him to deliver them. Still, as of old, the voice of guidance comes from between the cherubim. Still, as of old, the pillar of cloud and fire moves before us. Still, as of old, angels walk with men. Still, as of old, His hand is stretched forth, to bless, to feed, to guard. Nothing in the past of God's dealings with men has passed away. The eternal present embraces what we call the past, present, and future. They that went before do not prevent us on whom the ends of the ages are come. The table that was spread for them is as fully furnished for the latest guests. The light, which was so magical and lustrous in the morning beauty, for us has not faded away into the light of common day. The river which flowed in these past ages has not been drunk up by the thirsty sands. The fire that once blazed so clear has not died down into grey ashes. The God of Jacob is our refuge. As we have heard so have we seen.

And then, still further, the deliverance here is suggested as not only linking most blessedly the present with the past, but also linking it for our confidence with all the future. God will establish it for ever.

Old experience doth attain

To something of prophetic strain.

In the strength of what that moment had taught of God and His power, the singer looks onward, and whatever may be the future he knows that the divine arm will be outstretched. God will establish Zion; or, as the word might be translated, God will hold it erect, as if with a strong hand grasping some pole or banner-staff that else would totter and fall--He will keep it up, standing there firm and steadfast.

It would lead us too far to discuss the bearing of such a prophecy upon the future history and restoration of Israel, but the bearing of it upon the security and perpetuity of the Church is unquestionable. The city is immortal because God dwells in it. For the individual and for the community, for the great society and for each of the single souls that make it up, the history of the past may seal the pledge which He gives for the future. If it had been possible to destroy the Church of the living God, it had been gone long, long ago. Its own weakness and sin, the ever-new corruptions of its belief and paring of its creed, the imperfections of its life and the worldliness of its heart, the abounding evils that lie around it and the actual hostility of many that look upon it and say, Raze it, even to the ground, would have smitten it to the dust long since. It lives, it has lived in spite of all, and therefore it shall live. God will establish it for ever.

In almost every land there is some fortress or other, which the pride of the inhabitants calls the maiden fortress, and whereof the legend is, that it has never been taken, and is inexpugnable by any foe. It is true about the tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion. The grand words of Isaiah about this very Assyrian invader are our answer to all fears within and foes without: Say unto him, the virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee... . I will defend this city to save it for My own sake, and for My servant David's sake. God will establish it for ever, and the pledges of that eternal stability are the deliverances of the past and of the present.

**III. Then, finally, there is still another section of this psalm to be looked at for a moment, which deals with the consequent grateful praise and glad trust of Zion.**

I must condense what few things I have to say about these closing verses. The deliverance, first of all, deepens the glad meditation on God's favour and defence. We have thought, say the ransomed people, as with a sigh of rejoicing, we have thought of Thy loving-kindness in the midst of Thy temple. The scene of the manifestation of His power is the scene of their thankfulness, and the first issue of His mercy is His servant's praise.

Then, the deliverance spreads His fame throughout the world. According to Thy name, O God! so is Thy praise unto the ends of the earth. Thy right hand is full of righteousness. The name of God is God's own making known of His character, and the thought of these words is double. They most beautifully express the profoundest trust in that blessed name that it only needs to be known in order to be loved. There is nothing wanted but His manifestation of Himself for His praise and glory to spread. Why is the Psalmist so sure that according to the revelation of His character will be the revenue of His praise? Because the Psalmist is so sure that that character is purely, perfectly, simply good--nothing else but good and blessing--and that He cannot act but in such a way as to magnify Himself. That great sea will cast up nothing on the shores of the world but pearls and precious things. He is all light, and in Him is no darkness at all. There needs but the shining forth in order that the light of His character shall bring gladness and joy, and the song of birds, and opening flowers wheresoever it falls.

Still further, there is the other truth in the words, that we misapprehend the purpose of our own deliverances, and the purpose of God's mercy to Zion, if we confine these to any personal objects or lose sight of the loftier end of them all--that men may learn to know and love Him. Brethren! we neither rightly thank Him for His gifts to us nor rightly apprehend the meaning of His dealings, unless the sweetest thought to us, even in the midst of our own personal joy for deliverance, is not we are saved, but God is exalted.

And then, beyond that, the deliverance produces in Zion, the mother city and her daughter villages, a triumph of rapture and gladness. Let mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad because of Thy judgments. Yes, even though an hundred and four score and five thousand dead men lay there, they were to be glad. Solemn and awful as is the baring of His righteous sword, it is an occasion for praise. It is right to be glad when men and systems that hinder and fight against God are swept away as with the besom of destruction. When the wicked perish there is shouting, and the fitting epitaph for the oppressors to whom the surges of the Red Sea are shroud and gravestone is, Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously.

The last verses set forth, more fully than even the preceding ones, the height and perfectness of the confidence which the manifold mercies of God ought to produce in men's hearts. The citizens who have been cooped up during the invasion, and who, in the temple, as we have seen, have been rendering the tribute of their meditation and thankful gratitude to God for His loving-kindness, are now called upon to come forth from the enclosure of the besieged city, and free from all fear of the invading army, to walk about Zion, and go round about her and tell the towers, and mark her bulwarks and palaces.

They look first at the defences, on which no trace of assault appears, and then at the palaces guarded by them, that stand shining and unharmed. The deliverance has been so complete that there is not a sign of the peril or the danger left. It is not like a city besieged, and the siege raised when the thing over which contending hosts have been quarrelling has become a ruin, but not one stone has been smitten from the walls, nor one agate chipped in the windows of the palaces. It is unharmed as well as uncaptured.

Thus, we may say, no matter what tempests assail us, the wind will but sweep the rotten branches out of the tree. Though war should arise, nothing will be touched that belongs to Thee. We have a city which cannot be moved; and the removal of the things which can be shaken but makes more manifest its impregnable security, its inexpugnable peace. As in war they will clear away the houses and the flower gardens that have been allowed to come and cluster about the walls and fill up the moat, yet the walls will stand; so in all the conflicts that befall God's church and God's truth, the calming thought ought to be ours that if anything perishes it is a sign that it is not His, but man's excrescence on His building. Whatever is His will stand for ever.

And then, with wonderful tenderness and beauty, the psalm in its last words drops, as one might say, in one aspect, and in another, rises from its contemplations of the immortal city and the community to the thought of the individuals that make it up: For this God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our guide even unto death. Prosaic commentators have often said that these last two words are an interpolation, that they do not fit into the strain of the psalm, and have troubled themselves to find out what meaning to attach to them, because it seemed to them so unlikely that, in a hymn that had only to do with the community, we should find this expression of individual confidence in anticipation of that most purely personal of all evils. That seems to me the very reason for holding fast by the words as being a genuine part of the psalm, because they express a truth, without which the confident hope of the psalm, grand as it is, is but poor consolation for each heart. It is not enough for passing, perishing men to say, Never mind your own individual fate: the society, the community, will stand fast and firm.

I want something more than to know that God will establish Zion for ever. What about me, my own individual self? And these last words answer that question. Not merely the city abides, but He will be our guide even unto death. And surely, if so--if His loving hand will lead the citizens of His eternal kingdom even to the edge of that great darkness--He will not lose them even in its gloom. Surely there is here the veiled hope that if the city be eternal and the gates of the grave cannot prevail against it, the community cannot be eternal unless the individuals be immortal.

Such a hope is vindicated by the blessed words of a newer revelation: God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city.

Dear brethren! remember the last words, or all but the last words of Scripture which, in their true text and reading, tell us how, instead of aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, we may become fellow-citizens with the saints. Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gate into the city!