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

**PSALMS-075**. **LOOKING TO THE HILLS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. 2. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth."*

*Psalm 121:1-2*

The so-called Songs of Degrees, of which this psalm is one, are usually, and with great probability, attributed to the times of the Exile. If that be so, we get an appropriate background and setting for the expressions and emotions of this psalm. We see the exile, wearied with the monotony of the long-stretching, flat plains of Babylonia, summoning up before his mind the distant hills where his home was. We see him wondering how he will be able ever to reach that place where his desires are set; and we see him settling down, in hopeful assurance that his effort is not in vain, since his help comes from the Lord. I will lift up my eyes unto the hills; away out yonder westwards, across the sands, lie the lofty summits of my fatherland that draws me to itself. Then comes a turn of thought, most natural to a mind passionately yearning after a great hope, the very greatness of which makes it hard to keep constant. For the second clause of my text cannot possibly be, as it is translated in our Authorised Version, an affirmation, but must be taken as the Revised Version correctly gives it, a question: I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence cometh my help? How am I to get there? And then comes the final turn of thought: My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

So then, there are three things here--the look of longing, the question of weakness, the assurance of faith.

**I. The look of longing.**

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills--a resolution, and a resolution born of intense longing. Now the hills that the Psalmist is thinking about were visible from no part of that long-extended plain where he dwelt; and he might have looked till he wore his eyes out, ere he could have seen them on the horizon of sense. But although they were unseen, they were visible to the heart that longed for them. He directs his desires further than the vision of his eyeballs can go. Just as his possible contemporary, Daniel, when he prayed, opened his window towards the Jerusalem that was so far away; and just as Mohammedans still, in every part of the world, when they pray, turn their faces to the Kaabah at Mecca, the sacred place to which their prayers are directed; and just as many Jews still, north, east, south or west though they be, face Jerusalem when they offer their supplications--so this psalmist in Babylon, wearied and sick of the low levels that stretched endlessly and monotonously round about him, says, I will look at the things that I cannot see, and lift up my eyes above these lownesses about me, to the loftinesses that sense cannot behold, but which I know to be lying serene and solid beyond the narrowing horizon before me.

There was the look of longing, and the longing which made non-vision into a look; and there was the effort to divert his attention from the things around him to the things afar off; and there was the realisation, by reason of the effort, of these distant but most certain realities.

Now this Psalmist's home-sickness, if I may so call it, had nothing at all religious about it. It was simply that he wanted to get to his own country--his own, though he had been born in exile; and there was nothing more devout or spiritual or refining about his longing than there is about the wish to return to his native country that any foreigner in a distant land feels. But when we take these words, as we all ought to do, as the motto of our lives, we must necessarily attach the loftiest religious meaning to them. And here start up the plain, simple, but tight-gripping and stimulating questions, Do I see the Unseen? Does that far-off, dim land assume substance and reality to me? Do I walk in the light of it raying out to me through earth's darkness? Do I dwell contented with never a glimpse of it? It comes to be a very sharp question with us professing Christians, whether the horizon of our inward being is limited by, and coterminous with, the horizon of our senses, or whether, far beyond the narrow limits to which these can reach, our spirits desire stretches boundless. Are, to us, the things unseen the solid things, and the things visible the shadows and the phantoms? The Apocalyptic seer, in his rocky Patmos, was told that he was to be shown the things which are; and what was it that he saw? A set of what people call unreal and symbolic visions. The things which are, the world would have said, are the rocks that you are standing on, and the sea that is dashing upon them, and all the solid-seeming Roman world, and the power that has got you in its grip. These are the realities, and these things that you think you see, these are the dreams. But it is exactly the other way. The world and all that is about us, Manchester and its hubbub, warehouses crammed with cloth, and mills full of jennies and throstles--these are the shadows; and the things that only the believing eye beholds, that are wrapped in the invisibility of their own greatness, these, and these only, are the realities. We see with the bodily eyes the shadows on the wall, as it were, but we have to turn round and see with the eyes of our minds the light that flings the shadows. I will lift up my eyes from the mud-flats where I live to the hills that I cannot see, and, seeing them, I shall be blessed.

Further, do we know anything of that longing that the Psalmist had? He was perfectly comfortable in Babylon. There was abundance of everything that he wanted for his life. The Jews there were materially quite as well off, and many of them a great deal better off, than ever they had been in their narrow little strip of mountain land, shut in between the desert and the sea. But for all that, fat, wealthy Babylon was not Palestine. So amidst the lush vegetation, the wealth of water and the fertile plains, the Psalmist longed for the mountains, though the mountains are often bare of green things. It was that longing that led to his looking to the hills. Do we know anything of that longing which makes us that are in this tabernacle to groan, being burdened? Absent from the Lord, and present in the body, we should not be at ease, nor at home. Unless our Christianity throws us out of harmony and contentment with the present, it is worth very little. And unless we know something of that immortal longing to be nearer to God, and fuller of Christ, and emancipated from sense, and from the burdens and trivialities of life, we have yet to learn what the meaning of walking not after the flesh but after the Spirit really is.

Further, do we make any effort like that of this Psalmist, who encourages and stimulates himself by that strong I will lift up my eyes? You will not do it unless you make a dead lift of effort. It is a great deal easier for a man to look at what is at his feet than to crane his neck gazing at the stars.

And so, unless we take up and persevere in maintaining a habitual attitude of stirring up and lifting up ourselves, gravitation will be too much for us, and down will go the head, and down the eyes; and down will go the desires, and we shall be like men that live in some mountainous country, who never lift their gaze to the solemn white summits that travellers come across half Europe to see. Christian men and women too often walk beneath the very peaks of the mountains of God, and rarely lift their vision there. They perhaps do so for an hour and a half on a Sunday morning, or an hour on a Wednesday evening, when there is no other engagement, or for a minute or two in the morning before they hurry down to breakfast, or a minute or two at night when they are dead beat and unfit for anything. For the rest of the time, there are the mountains and here is the saint, and he seldom or never turns his head to look at them! Is that the sort of Christianity that is likely to be a power in the world, or a blessing to its possessor?

**II Further, notice the question of weakness.**

From whence cometh my help? The loftier our ideal, the more painful ought to be our conviction of incapacity to reach it. The Christian man's one security is in feeling his peril, and the condition of his strength is his acknowledgment and vivid consciousness always of his weakness. The exile in Babylon had a dreary desert, peopled by wild Arab tribes hostile to him, stretching between his present home and that where he desired to be, and it would be difficult for him to get away from the dominion that held him captive, unless by consent of the power of whom he was the vassal. So the more the thought of the mountains of Israel drew the Psalmist, the more there came into his mind the thought, How am I to be made able to reach that blessed soil? And surely, if we saw, with anything like a worthy apprehension and vision, the greatness of that blessedness that lies yonder for Christian souls, we should feel far more deeply than we do the impossibility, as far as we are concerned, of our ever reaching it. The sense of our own weakness and the consciousness of the perils upon the path ought ever to be present with us all.

Brethren! if, on the one hand, we have to cultivate, for a healthy, vital Christianity, a vision of the mountains of God, on the other hand we have to try to deepen in ourselves the wholesome sense of our own impotence, and the conviction that the dangers on the road are far too great for us to deal with. Blessed is the man that feareth always. Pride goeth before destruction. Remember the Franco-German war, and how the French Prime Minister said that they were going into it with a light heart, and how some of the troops went out of Paris in railway carriages labelled for Berlin; and when they reached the frontier they were doubled up and crushed in a month. Unless we, when we set ourselves to this warfare, feel the formidableness of the enemy and recognise the weakness of our own arms, there is nothing but defeat for us.

**III. Finally, notice the assurance of faith.**

The Psalmist asks himself, From whence cometh my help? and then the better self answers the questioning, timid self: My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. There will be no reception of the divine help unless there is a sense of the need of the divine help. God cannot help me before I am brought to despair of any other help. It is only when a man says, There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God! that God comes to help.

There is a story in the Book of Chronicles, about one battle in which Judah engaged, of a very singular kind. The first step in the campaign was that the king of Judah gathered all his people together, and prayed to God, and said, We know not what we shall do. We have no strength against this great multitude that cometh against us, but our eyes are unto Thee. Then a prophet came and assured him of victory, and next day they arrayed the battle. It was set in this strange fashion: in the forefront were put the priests and Levites, with their instruments of music, and not soldiers with spears and bows, and they marched out to battle with this song, The Lord is gracious and merciful. His mercy endureth for ever. Then, without the stroke of sword or thrust of spear, God fought for them and scattered their foes.

Which things are an allegory. If we recognise our helplessness, God is our help. If we conceit ourselves to be strong, we are weak; if we know ourselves to be impotent, Omnipotence pours itself into us. We read once that Jesus Christ healed them that had need of healing. Why does the Evangelist not say, without that periphrasis, healed the sick? Because he would emphasise, I suppose, amongst other things, the thought that only the sense of need fits for the reception of healing and help.

If, then, we desire that God should be the Strength of our hearts, and our Portion for ever, the coming of His help must be wooed and won by our sense of our own impotence, and only they who say, We have no might against this great multitude that cometh against us, will ever hear from Him the blessed assurance, The Lord will fight for you. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord! So, brethren! the assurance of faith follows the consciousness of weakness, and both together will lead, and nothing else will lead, to the realisation of the vision of faith, and bring us at last, weak as we are, to the hills where the weary and foot-sore flock shall lie down in a good fold, and on fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.