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

**PSALMS-060**. **THE HABITATION OF THE SOUL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling."*

*Psalm 91:9-10*

It requires a good deal of piecing to make out from the Hebrew the translation of our Authorised Version here. The simple, literal rendering of the first words of these verses is, Surely, Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge; and I do not suppose that any of the expedients which have been adopted to modify that translation would have been adopted, but that these words seem to cut in two the long series of rich promises and blessings which occupy the rest of the psalm. But it is precisely this interruption of the flow of the promises which puts us on the right track for understanding the words in question, because it leads us to take them as the voice of the devout man, to whom the promises are addressed, responding to them by the expression of his own faith.

The Revised Version is much better here than our Authorised Version, for it has recognised this breach of continuity of sequence in the promises, and translated as I have suggested; making the first words of my text, Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge, the voice of one singer, and Because thou hast made the Most High thy habitation, there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any evil come nigh thy dwelling, the voice of another.

Whether or no it be that in the Liturgical service of the Temple this psalm was sung by two choirs which answered one another, does not matter for our purpose. Whether or no we regard the first clause as the voice of the Psalmist speaking to God, and the other as the same man speaking to himself, does not matter. The point is that, first, there is an exclamation of personal faith, and that then that is followed and answered, as it were, by the further promise of continual blessings. One voice says, Thou, Lord! art my Refuge, and then another voice--not God's, because that speaks in majesty at the end of the psalm--replies to that burst of confidence, Thou hast made the Lord thy habitation (as thou hast done by this confession of faith), there shall no evil come nigh thy dwelling.

**I. We have here the cry of the devout soul.**

I observed that it seems to cut in two the stream of promised blessings, and that fact is significant. The psalm begins with the deep truth that He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Then a single voice speaks, I will say of the Lord, He is my Refuge and my Fortress, my God, in Him will I trust. Then that voice, which thus responds to the general statement of the first verse, is answered by a stream of promises. The first part of our text comes in as the second speech of the same voice, repeating substantially the same thing as it said at first.

Now, notice that this cry of the soul, recognising God as its Asylum and Home, comes in response to a revelation of God's blessing, and to large words of promise. There is no true refuge nor any peace and rest for a man unless in grasping the articulate word of God, and building his assurance upon that. Anything else is not confidence, but folly; anything else is building upon sand, and not upon the Rock. If I trust my own or my brother's conception of the divine nature, if I build upon any thoughts of my own, I am building upon what will yield and give. For all peaceful casting of my soul into the arms of God there must be, first, a plain stretching out of the hands of God to catch me when I drop. So the words of my text, Thou art my Refuge, are the best answer of the devout soul to the plain words of divine promise. How abundant these are we all know, how full of manifold insight and adaptation to our circumstances and our nature we may all experience, if we care to prove them.

But let us be sure that we are hearkening to the voice with which He speaks through our daily circumstances as well as by the unmistakable revelation of His will and heart in Jesus Christ. And then let us be sure that no word of His, that comes fluttering down from the heavens, meaning a benediction and enclosing a promise, falls at our feet ungathered and unregarded, or is trodden into the dust by our careless heels. The manna lies all about us; let us see that we gather it. When Thou saidst, Seek ye My Face, my heart said unto Thee, Thy Face, Lord, will I seek. When Thou saidst, I will be thy Strength and thy Righteousness, have I said, Surely, O Jehovah! Thou art my Refuge? Turn His promises into your creed, and whatever He has declared in the sweet thunder of His voice, loud as the voice of many waters, and melodious as harpers harping with their harps, do you take for your profession of faith in the faithful promises of your God.

Still further, this cry of the devout soul suggests to me that our response ought to be the establishment of a close personal relation between us and God. Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge. The Psalmist did not content himself with saying Lord! Thou hast been our Dwelling-place in all generations, or as one of the other psalmists has it, God is our Refuge and our Strength. That thought was blessed, but it was not enough for the Psalmist's present need, and it is never enough for the deepest necessities of any soul. We must isolate ourselves and stand, God and we, alone together--at heart-grips--we grasping His hand, and He giving Himself to us--if the promises which are sent down into the world for all who will make them theirs can become ours. They are made payable to your order; you must put your name on the back before you get the proceeds. There must be what our good old Puritan forefathers used to call, in somewhat hard language, the appropriating act of faith, in order that God's richest blessings may be of any use to us. Put out your hand to grasp them, and say, Mine, not Ours. The thought of others as sharing in them will come afterwards, for he who has once realised the absolute isolation of the soul and has been alone with God, and in solitude has taken God's gifts as his very own, is he who will feel fellowship and brotherhood with all who are partakers of like precious faith and blessings. The ours will come; but you must begin with the mine--my Lord and my God. He loved me, and gave Himself for me.

Just as when the Israelites gathered on the banks of the Red Sea, and Miriam and the maidens came out with songs and timbrels, though their hearts throbbed with joy, and music rang from their lips for national deliverance, their hymn made the whole deliverance the property of each, and each of the chorus sang, The Lord is my Strength and my Song, He also is become my Salvation, so we must individualise the common blessing. Every poor soul has a right to the whole of God, and unless a man claims all the divine nature as his, he has little chance of possessing the promised blessings. The response of the individual to the worldwide promises and revelations of the Father is, Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge.

Further, note how this cry of the devout soul recognises God as He to whom we must go because we need a refuge. The word refuge here gives the picture of some stronghold, or fortified place, in which men may find security from all sorts of dangers, invasions by surrounding foes, storm and tempest, rising flood, or anything else that threatens. Only he who knows himself to be in danger bethinks himself of a refuge. It is only when we know our danger and defencelessness that God, as the Refuge of our souls, becomes precious to us. So, underlying, and an essential part of, all our confidence in God, is the clear recognition of our own necessity. The sense of our own emptiness must precede our grasp of His fulness. The conviction of our own insufficiency and sinfulness must precede our casting ourselves on His mercy and righteousness. In all regions the consciousness of human want must go before the recognition of the divine supply.

**II. Now, note the still more abundant answer which that cry evokes.**

I said that the words on which I have been commenting thus far, seem to break in two the continuity of the stream of blessings and promises. But there may be observed a certain distinction of tone between those promises which precede and those which follow the cry. Those that follow have a certain elevation and depth, completeness and fulness, beyond those that precede. This enhancing of the promises, following on the faithful grasp of previous promises, suggests the thought that, when God is giving, and His servant thankfully accepts and garners up His gifts, He opens His hand wider and gives more. When He pours His rain upon the unthankful and the evil, and they let the precious, fertilising drops run to waste, there comes after a while a diminution of the blessing; but they who store in patient and thankful hearts the faithful promises of God, have taken a sure way to make His gifts still larger and His promises still sweeter, and their fulfilment more faithful and precious.

But now notice the remarkable language in which this answer is couched. Thou hast made the Most High thy Habitation, there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

Did you ever notice that there are two dwelling-places spoken of in this verse? Thou hast made the Most High thy Habitation; There shall no plague come nigh thy dwelling. The reference of the latter word to the former one is even more striking if you observe that, literally translated, as in the Revised Version, it means a particular kind of abode--namely, a tent. Thou hast made the Most High thy habitation. The same word is employed in the 90th Psalm: Lord, Thou hast been our Dwelling-place in all generations. Beside that venerable and ancient abode, that has stood fresh, strong, incorruptible, and unaffected by the lapse of millenniums, there stands the little transitory canvas tent in which our earthly lives are spent. We have two dwelling-places. By the body we are brought into connection with this frail, evanescent, illusory outer world, and we try to make our homes out of shifting cloud-wrack, and dream that we can compel mutability to become immutable, that we may dwell secure. But fate is too strong for us, and although we say that we will make our nest in the rocks, and shall never be moved, the home that is visible and linked with the material passes and melts as a cloud. We need a better dwelling-place than earth and that which holds to earth. We have God Himself for our true Home. Never mind what becomes of the tent, as long as the mansion stands firm. Do not let us be saddened, though we know that it is canvas, and that the walls will soon rot and must some day be folded up and borne away, if we have the Rock of Ages for our dwelling-place.

Let us abide in the Eternal God by the devotion of our hearts, by the affiance of our faith, by the submission of our wills, by the aspiration of our yearnings, by the conformity of our conduct to His will. Let us abide in the Eternal God, that when the earthly house of this tabernacle is dissolved, we may enter into two buildings eternal in the heavens--the one the spiritual body which knows no corruption, and the other the bosom of the Eternal God Himself. Because thou hast made Him thy Habitation, that Dwelling shall suffer no evil to come near it or its tenant.

Still further, notice the scope of this great promise. I suppose there is some reference in the form of it to the old story of Israel's exemption from the Egyptian plagues, and a hint that that might be taken as a parable and prophetic picture of what will be true about every man who puts his trust in God. But the wide scope and the paradoxical completeness of the promise itself, instead of being a difficulty, point the way to its true interpretation. There shall no plague come nigh thy dwelling--and yet we are smitten down by all the woes that afflict humanity. No evil shall befall thee--and yet all the ills that flesh is heir to are dealt out sometimes with a more liberal hand to them who abide in God than to them who dwell only in the tent upon earth. What then? Is God true, or is He not? Did this psalmist mean to promise the very questionable blessing of escape from all the good of the discipline of sorrow? Is it true, in the unconditional sense in which it is often asserted, that prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament, and adversity of the New? I think not, and I am sure that this psalmist, when he said, there shall no evil befall thee, nor any plague come nigh thy dwelling, was thinking exactly the same thing which Paul had in his mind when he said, All things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose. If I make God my Refuge, I shall get something a great deal better than escape from outward sorrow--namely, an amulet which will turn the outward sorrow into joy. The bitter water will still be given me to drink, but it will be filtered water, out of which God will strain all the poison, though He leaves plenty of the bitterness in it; for bitterness is a tonic. The evil that is in the evil will be taken out of it, in the measure in which we make God our Refuge, and all will be right that seems most wrong when we recognise it to be His sweet will.

Dear brother! the secret of exemption from every evil lies in no peculiar Providence, ordering in some special manner our outward circumstances, but in the submission of our wills to that which the good hand of the Lord our God sends us for our good; and in cleaving close to Him as our Refuge. Nothing can be evil which knits me more closely to God; and whatever tempest drives me to His breast, though all the four winds of the heavens strive on the surface of the sea, it will be better for me than calm weather that entices me to stray farther away from Him.

We shall know that some day. Let us be sure of it now, and explain by it our earthly experience, even as we shall know it when we get up yonder and see all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.