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

**PSALMS-031**. **THIRSTING FOR GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God."*

*Psalm 42:2*

This whole psalm reads like the sob of a wounded heart. The writer of it is shut out from the Temple of his God, from the holy soil of his native land. One can see him sitting solitary yonder in the lonely wilderness (for the geographical details that occur in one part of the psalm point to his situation as being on the other side of the Jordan, in the mountains of Moab)--can see him sitting there with long wistful gaze yearning across the narrow valley and the rushing stream that lay between him and the land of God's chosen people, and his eye resting perhaps on the mountaintop that looked down upon Jerusalem. He felt shut out from the presence of God. We need not suppose that he believed all the rest of the world to be profane and God-forsaken, except only the Temple. Nor need we wonder, on the other hand, that his faith did cling to form, and that he thought the sparrows beneath the eaves of the Temple blessed birds! He was depressed, because he was shut out from the tokens of God's presence; and because he was depressed, he shut himself out from the reality of the presence. And so he cried with a cry which never is in vain, My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God! Taken, then, in its original sense, the words of our text apply only to that strange phenomenon which we call religious depression. But I have ventured to take them in a wider sense than that. It is not only Christian men who are cast down, whose souls thirst for God. It is not only men upon earth whose souls thirst for God. All men, everywhere, may take this text for theirs. Every human heart may breathe it out, if it understands itself. The longing for the living God belongs to all men. Thwarted, stifled, it still survives. Unconscious, it is our deepest misery. Recognised, yielded to, accepted, it is the foundation of our highest blessings. Filled to the full, it still survives unsatiated and expectant. For all men upon earth, Christian or not Christian, for Christians here below, whether in times of depression or in times of gladness, and for the blessed and calm spirits that in ecstasy of longing, full of fruition, stand around God's throne--it is equally true that their souls thirst for God, for the living God. Only with this difference, that to some the desire is misery and death, and to some the desire is life and perfect blessedness. So that the first thought I would suggest to you now is, that there is an unconscious and unsatisfied longing after God, which is what we call the state of nature; secondly, that there is an imperfect longing after God, fully satisfied, which is what we call the state of grace; and lastly, that there is a perfect longing, perfectly satisfied, which is what we call the state of glory. Nature; religion upon earth; blessedness in heaven--my text is the expression, in divers senses, of them all.

**I. In the first place, then, there is in every man an unconscious and unsatisfied longing after God, and that is the state of nature.**

Experience is the test of that assertion. And the most superficial examination of the facts of daily life, as well as the questioning of our own souls, will tell us that this is the leading feature of them--a state of unrest. What is it that one of those deistic poets of our own land says, about Man never is, but always to be blest? What is the meaning of the fact that all round about us, and we partaking of it, there is ceaseless, gigantic activity going on? The very fact that men work, the very fact of activity in the mind and life, noble as it is, and root of all that is good, and beautiful as it is, is still the testimony of nature to this fact that I by myself am full of passionate longings, of earnest desires, of unsupplied wants. I thirst, is the voice of the whole world.

No man is made to be satisfied from himself. For the stilling of our own hearts, for the satisfying of our own nature, for the strengthening and joy of our being, we need to go beyond ourselves, and to fix upon something external to ourselves. We are not independent. None of us can stand by himself. No man carries within him the fountain from which he can draw. If a heart is to be blessed, it must go out of the narrow circle of its own individuality; and if a man's life is to be strong and happy, he must get the foundation of his strength somewhere else than in his own soul. And, my friends! especially you young men, all that modern doctrine of self-reliance, though it has a true side to it, has also a frightfully false side. Though it may he quite true that a man ought to be, in one sense, sufficient for himself, and that there is no real blessedness of which the root does not lie within the nature and heart of the man; though all that be quite true, yet, if the doctrine means (as on the lips of many a modern eloquent and powerful teacher of it, it does mean) that we can do without God, that we may be self-reliant and self-sufficient, and proudly neglectful of all the divine forces that come down into life to brighten and gladden it, it is a lie, false and fatal; and of all the falsehoods that are going about this world at present, I know not one that is varnished over with more apparent truth, that is smeared over with more of the honey that catches young, ardent, ingenuous hearts, than that half-truth, and therefore most deceptive error, which preaches independence, and self-reliance, and which means--a man's soul does not thirst for the living God. Take care of it! We are made not to be independent.

We are made, next, to need, not things, but living beings. My soul thirsteth--for what? An abstraction, a possession, riches, a thing? No! my soul thirsteth for God, for the living God. Yes, hearts want hearts. The converse of Christ's saying is equally true; He said, God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit; man has a spirit, and man must have Spirit to worship, to lean upon, to live by, or all will be inefficient and unsatisfactory. Oh, lay this to heart, my brother!--no things can satisfy a living soul. No accumulation of dead matter can become the life of an immortal being. The two classes are separated by the whole diameter of the universe--matter and spirit, thing and person; and you cannot feed yourself upon the dead husks that lie there round about you--wealth, position, honour. Books, thoughts, though they are nobler than these other, are still inefficient. Principles, causes, emotions springing from truth, these are not enough. I want more than that, I want something to love, something to lay a hand upon, that shall return the grasp of the hand. A living man must have a living God, or his soul will perish in the midst of earthly plenty, and will thirst and die whilst the water of earthly delights is running all around him. We are made to need persons, not things.

Then again, we need one Being who shall be all-sufficient. There is no greater misery than that which may ensue from the attempt to satisfy our souls by the accumulation of objects, each of them imperfect and finite, which yet we fancy, woven together, will make an adequate whole. When a heart is diverted from its one central purpose, when a life is split up in a hundred different directions and into a hundred different emotions, it is like a beam of light passed through some broken surface where it is all refracted and shivered into fragments; there is no clear vision, there is no perfect light. If a man is to be blessed, he must have one source to which he can go. The merchantman that seeks for many goodly pearls, may find the many; but until he has bartered them all for the one, there is something lacking. Not only does the understanding require to pass through the manifold, up and up in ever higher generalisations, till it reaches the One from whom all things come; but the heart requires to soar, if it would be at rest, through all the diverse regions where its love may legitimately tarry for a while, until it reaches the sole and central throne of the universe, and there it may cease its flight, and fold its weary wings, and sleep like a bird within its nest. We want a Being, and we want one Being in whom shall be sphered all perfection, in whom shall abide all power and blessedness; beyond whom thought cannot pass, out of whose infinite circumference love does not need to wander; besides whose boundless treasures no other riches can be required; who is light for the understanding, power for the will, authority for the practical life, purpose for the efforts, motive for the doings, end and object for the feelings, home of the affections, light of our seeing, life of our life, the love of our heart, the one living God, infinite in wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth; who is all in all, and without whom everything else is misery. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.

Brother! let me ask you the question, before I pass on--the question for the sake of which I am preaching this sermon: Do you know that Father? I know this much, that every heart here now answers an Amen (if it will be honest) to what I have been saying. Unrest; panting, desperate thirst, deceiving itself as to where it should go; slaking itself at the gilded puddles that the beasts would cough at, instead of coming to the water of life!--that is the state of man without God. That is nature. That is irreligion. The condition in which every man is that is not trusting in Jesus Christ, is this--thirsting for God, and not knowing whom he is thirsting for, and so not getting the supply that he wants.

**II. There is a conscious longing, imperfect, but answered; and that is the state of grace--the beginning of religion in a man's soul.**

If it be true that there are, as part of the universal human experience, however overlaid and stifled, these necessities of which I have been speaking, the very existence of the necessities affords a presumption, before all evidence, that, somehow and somewhere, they shall be supplied. There can be no deeper truth--none, I think, that ought to have more power in shaping some parts of our Christian creed, than this, that God is a faithful Creator; and where He makes men with longings, it is a prophecy that those longings are going to be supplied. The same ground which avails to defend doctrines that cannot be so well defended by any other argument--the same ground on which we say that there is an immortality, because men long for it and believe in it; that there is a God because men cannot get rid of the instinctive conviction that there is; that there is a retribution, because men's consciences do ask for it, and cry out for it--the very same process which may be applied to the buttressing and defending of all the grandest truths of the Gospel, applies also in this practical matter. If I, made by God who knew what He was doing when He made me, am formed with these deep necessities, with these passionate longings--then it cannot but be that it is intended that they should be to me a means of leading me to Him, and that there they should be satisfied. For He is the faithful Creator, and He remembers the conditions under which His making of us has placed us. He knoweth our frame, and He remembereth what He has implanted within us. And the presumption is, of course, turned into an actual certainty when we let in the light of the Gospel upon the thing. Then we can say to every man that thus is yearning after a goodness dimly perceived, and does not know what it is that he wants, and we say to you now, Brother! betake yourself to the cross of Christ go with those wants of yours to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world: He will interpret them to you. He will explain to you, as you do not now know, what they mean; and, better than that, He will supply them all. Your souls are thirsting; and you look about, here and there, and everywhere, for springs of water. There is the fountain--go to Christ. Your souls are thirsting for God. The unfathomed ocean of the Godhead lies far beyond my lip; but here is the channel through which there flows that river of water of life. Here is the manifested God, here is the granted God, here is the Godhead coming into connection and union with man, his wants and his sins--the living God and His living Son, His everlasting Word. He that believeth upon Him shall never hunger, and he that cometh unto Him shall never thirst. God is the divine and unfathomable ocean; Christ the Son is the stream that brings salvation to every man's lips. All wants are supplied there. Take it as a piece of the simplest prose, with no rhetorical exaggeration about it, that Christ is everything, everything that a man can want. We are made to require, and to be restless until we possess, perfect truth--there it is! We are made to want, and to be restless until we get, perfect, infinite unchangeable love--there it is! We must have, or the burden of our own self-will will be a misery to us, a hand laid upon the springs of our conduct, authoritative and purifying, and have the blessedness of some voice to say to us, I bid thee, and that is enough--there it is! We must have rest, purity, hope, gladness, life in our souls--there they all are! Whatever form of human nature and character be yours, my brother!--whatever exigencies of life you may be lying under the pressure of--man or woman, adult or child, father or son, man of business or man of thought, struggling with difficulties or bright with joy--Oh! believe us, the perfecting of your character may be got in the Lamb of God, and without Him it never can be possessed. Christ is everything, and out of His fulness all we receive grace for grace.

Not only in Christ is there the perfect supply of all these necessities, but also that fulness becomes ours on the simple condition of desiring it. The thirst for the living God in a man who has faith in Christ Jesus, is not a thirst which amounts to pain, or arises from a sense of non-possession. But in this divine region the principle of the giving is this--to desire is to have; to long for is to possess. There is no wide interval between the sense of thirst and the trickling of the stream over the parched lip; but ever it is flowing, flowing past us, and the desire is but the opening of the lips to receive the limpid and life-giving waters. No one ever desired the grace of God, really and truly desired it; but just in proportion as he desired it, he got it--just in proportion as he thirsted, he was satisfied. Therefore we have to preach that grand gospel that faith, simple, conscious longing, turned to Christ, avails to bring down the full and perfect supply.

But some Christian people here may reply, Ah! I wish it were so: what was that you were saying at the beginning of your sermon, about men having religious depression, about Christians longing and not possessing? Well, I have only this to say about that matter. Wherever in a heart that really believes on God in Christ, there is a thirst that amounts to pain, and that has with it a sense of non-possession, that is not because Christ's fulness has become shrunken; that is not because there is a change in God's law, that the measure of the desire is the measure of the reception; but it is only because, for some reason or other that belongs to the man alone, the desire is not deep, genuine, simple, but is troubled and darkened. What we ask, we get. If I am a Christian, however feeble I may be, the feebleness of my faith and the feebleness of my desire may make my supplies of grace feeble; but if I am a Christian, there is no such thing as an earnest longing unsatisfied, no such thing as a thirst accompanied with a pain and sense of want, except in consequence of my own transgression.

And thus there is a longing imperfect in this life, but fully supplied according to the measure of its intensity, a longing after the living God; and that is the state of a Christian man. And O my friend! that is a widely different desire from the other that I have been speaking about. It is blessed thus to say, My soul thirsteth for God. It is blessed to feel the passionate wish for more light, more grace, more peace, more wisdom, more of God. That is joy, that is peace! Is that your experience in this present life?

**III. Lastly, there is a perfect longing perfectly satisfied; and that is heaven.**

We shall not there be independent, of course, of constant supplies from the great central Fulness, any more than we are here. One may see in one aspect, that just as the Christian life here on earth is in a very true sense a state of never thirsting any more, because we have Christ, and yet in another sense is a state of continual longing and desire--so the Christian and glorified life in heaven, in one view of it, is the removal of all that thirst which marked the condition of man upon earth, and in another is the perfecting of all those aspirations and desires. Thirst, as longing, is eternal; thirst, as aspiration after God, is the glory of heaven; thirst, as desire for more of Him, is the very condition of the celestial world, and the element of all its blessedness.

That future life gives us two elements, an infinite God, and an indefinitely expansible human spirit: an infinite God to fill, and a soul to be filled, the measure and the capacity of which has no limit set to it that we can see. What will be the consequence of the contact of these two? Why this, for the first thing, that always, at every moment of that blessed life, there shall be a perpetual fruition, a perpetual satisfaction, a deep and full fountain filling the whole soul with the refreshment of its waves and the music of its flow. And yet, and yet--though at every moment in heaven we shall be satisfied, filled full of God, full to overflowing in all our powers--yet the very fact that the God who dwells in us, and fills our whole natures with unsullied and perfect blessedness, is an infinite God; and that we in whom the infinite Father dwells, are men with souls that can grow, and can grow for ever--will result in this, that at every moment our capacities will expand; that at every moment, therefore, the desire will grow and spring afresh; that at every moment God will be seen unveiling undreamed-of beauties, and revealing hitherto unknown heights of blessedness before us; and that the sight of that transcendent, unapproached, unapproachable, and yet attracting and transforming glory, will draw us onward as by an impulse from above, and the possession of some portion of it will bear us upward as by a power from within; and so, nearer, nearer, ever nearer to the throne of light, the centre of blessedness, the growing, and glorifying, and greatening souls of the perfectly and increasingly blessed shall mount up with wings as eagles. Heaven is endless longing, accompanied with an endless fruition--a longing which is blessedness, a longing which is life!

My brother! let me put two sayings of Scripture side by side, My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God,--Father Abraham! send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue. There be two thirsts, one, the longing for God, which, satisfied, is heaven; one, the longing for quenching of self-lit fires, and for one drop of the lost delights of earth to cool the thirsty throat, which, unsatisfied, is hell. Then hearken to the final vision on the page of Scripture, He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. To us it is showed, and to us the whole revelation of God converges to that last mighty call, Let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely!