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

**2 CORINTHIANS-022**. **STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."*

*2 Corinthians 12:8-9*

This very remarkable page in the autobiography of the Apostle shows us that he, too, belonged to the great army of martyrs who, with hearts bleeding and pierced through and through with a dart, yet did their work for God. It is of little consequence what his thorn in the flesh may have been. The original word suggests very much heavier sorrow than the metaphor of a thorn might imply. It really seems to mean not a tiny bit of thorn that might lie half concealed in the finger tip, but one of those hideous stakes on which the cruel punishment of impalement used to be inflicted. And Paul's thought is, not that he has a little, trivial trouble to bear, but that he is, as it were, forced quivering upon that tremendous torture.

Unquestionably, what he means is some bodily ailment or other. The hypothesis that the thorn in the flesh was the sting of the animal nature inciting him to evil is altogether untenable, because such a thorn could never have been left when the prayer for its removal was earnestly presented; nor could it ever have been, when left, an occasion for glorifying. Manifestly it was no weakness removable by his own effort, no incapacity for service which in any manner approximated to being a fault, but purely and simply some infliction from God's hand (though likewise capable of being regarded as a messenger of Satan) which hindered him in his work, and took down any proud flesh and danger of spiritual exaltation in consequence of the largeness of his religious privileges.

Our text sets before us three most instructive windings, as it were, of the stream of thoughts that passed through the Apostle's mind, in reference to this burden that he had to carry, and may afford wholesome contemplation for us to-day. There is, first, the instinctive shrinking which took refuge in prayer. Then there is the insight won by prayer into the sustaining strength for, and the purposes of, the thorn that was not to be plucked out. And then, finally, there is the peace of acquiescence, and a will that accepts--not the inevitable, but the loving.

**I. First of all we see the instinctive shrinking from that which tortured the flesh, which takes refuge in prayer.**

There is a wonderful, a beautiful, and, I suppose, an intentional parallel between the prayers of the servant and of the Master. Paul's petitions are the echo of Gethsemane. There, under the quivering olives, in the broken light of the Paschal moon, Jesus thrice prayed that the cup might pass from Him. And here the servant, emboldened and instructed by the example of the Master, thrice reiterates his human and natural desire for the removal of the pain, whatever it was, which seemed to him so to hinder the efficiency and the fulness, as it certainly did the joy, of his service.

But He who prayed in Gethsemane was He to whom Paul addressed his prayer. For, as is almost always the case in the New Testament, the Lord here evidently means Christ, as is obvious from the connection of the answer to the petition with the Apostle's final confidence and acquiescence. For the answer was, My strength is made perfect in weakness; and the Apostle's conclusion is, Most gladly will I glorify in infirmity, that the strength or power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore the prayer with which we have to deal here is a prayer offered to Jesus, who prayed in Gethsemane, and to whom we can bring our petitions and our desires.

Notice how this thought of prayer directed to the Master Himself helps to lead us deep into the sacredest and most blessed characteristics of prayer. It is only telling Christ what is in our hearts. Oh, if we lived in the true understanding of what prayer really is--the emptying out of our inmost desire and thoughts before our Brother, who is likewise our Lord--questions as to what it was permissible to pray for, and what it was not permissible to pray for, would be irrelevant, and drop away of themselves. If we had a less formal notion of prayer, and realised more thoroughly what it was--the speech of a confiding heart to a sympathising Lord--then everything that fills our hearts would be seen to be a fitting object of prayer. If anything is large enough to interest me, it is not too small to be spoken about to Him.

So the question, which is often settled upon very abstract and deep grounds that have little to do with the matter--the question as to whether prayer for outward blessings is permissible--falls away of itself. If I am to talk to Jesus Christ about everything that concerns me, am I to keep my thumb upon all that great department and be silent about it? One reason why our prayers are often so unreal is, because they do not fit our real wants, nor correspond to the thoughts that are busy in our minds at the moment of praying. Our hearts are full of some small matter of daily interest, and when we kneel down not a word about it comes to our lips. Can that be right?

The difference between the different objects of prayer is not to be found in the rejection of all temporal and external, but in remembering that there are two sets of things to be prayed about, and over one set must ever be written If it be Thy will, and over the other it need not be written, because we are sure that the granting of our wishes is His will. We know about the one that if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us. That may seem to be a very poor and shrunken kind of hope to give a man, that if his prayer is in conformity with the previous determination of the divine will, it will be answered. But it availed for the joyful confidence of that Apostle who saw deepest into the conditions and the blessedness of the harmony of the will of God and of man. But about the other set we can only say, Not my will, but Thine be done. With that sentence, not as a formula upon our lips but deep in our hearts, let us take everything into His presence--thorns and stakes, pinpricks and wounds out of which the life-blood is ebbing--let us take them all to Him, and be sure that we shall take none of them in vain.

So then we have the Person to whom the prayer is addressed, the subjects with which it is occupied, and the purpose to which it is directed. Take away the burden was the Apostle's petition; but it was a mistaken petition and, therefore, unanswered.

**II. That brings me to the second of the windings, as I have ventured to call them, of this stream--viz. the insight into the source of strength for, and the purpose of, the thorn that could not be taken away.**

The Lord said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee. For My strength (where the word My is a supplement, but a necessary one) is made perfect in weakness.

The answer is, in form and in substance, a gentle refusal of the form of the petition, but it is a more than granting of its essence. For the best answer to such a prayer, and the answer which a true man means when he asks, Take away the burden, need not be the external removal of the pressure of the sorrow, but the infusing of power to sustain it. There are two ways of lightening a burden, one is diminishing its actual weight, the other is increasing the strength of the shoulder that bears it. And the latter is God's way, is Christ's way, of dealing with us.

Now mark that the answer which this faithful prayer receives is no communication of anything fresh, but it is the opening of the man's eyes to see that already he has all that he needs. The reply is not, I will give thee grace sufficient, but My grace (which thou hast now) is sufficient for thee. That grace is given and possessed by the sorrowing heart at the moment when it prays. Open your eyes to see what you have, and you will not ask for the load to be taken away. Is not that always true? Many a heart is carrying some heavy weight; perhaps some have an incurable sorrow, some are stricken by disease that they know can never be healed, some are aware that the shipwreck has been total, and that the sorrow that they carry to-day will lie down with them in the dust. Be it so! My grace (not shall be, but) is sufficient for thee. And what thou hast already in thy possession is enough for all that comes storming against thee of disease, disappointment, loss, and misery. Set on the one side all possible as well as all actual weaknesses, burdens, pains, and set on the other these two words--My grace, and all these dwindle into nothingness and disappear. If troubled Christian men would learn what they have, and would use what they already possess, they would less often beseech Him with vain petitions to take away their blessings which are in the thorns in the flesh. My grace is sufficient.

How modestly the Master speaks about what He gives! Sufficient? Is not there a margin? Is there not more than is wanted? The overplus is exceeding abundant, not only above what we ask or think, but far more than our need. Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient that every one may take a little, says Sense. Omnipotence says, Bring the few small loaves and fishes unto Me; and Faith dispensed them amongst the crowd; and Experience gathered up of the fragments that remained more than there had been when the multiplication began. So the grace utilised increases; the gift grows as it is employed. Unto him that hath shall be given. And the sufficiency is not a bare adequacy, just covering the extent of the need, with no overlapping margin, but is large beyond expectation, desire, or necessity; so leading onwards to high hopes and a wider opening of the open mouths of our need that the blessing may pour in.

The other part of this great answer, that the Christ from Heaven spoke in or to the praying spirit of this not disappointed, though refused, Apostle, unveiled the purpose of the sorrow, even as the former part had disclosed the strength to bear it. For, says He, laying down therein the great law of His kingdom in all departments and in all ways, My strength is made perfect--that is, of course, perfect in its manifestation or operations, for it is perfect in itself already. My strength is made perfect in weakness. It works in and through man's weakness.

God works with broken reeds. If a man conceits himself to be an iron pillar, God can do nothing with or by him. All the self-conceit and confidence have to be taken out of him first. He has to be brought low before the Father can use him for His purposes. The lowlands hold the water, and, if only the sluice is open, the gravitation of His grace does all the rest and carries the flood into the depths of the lowly heart.

His strength loves to work in weakness, only the weakness must be conscious, and the conscious weakness must have passed into conscious dependence. There, then, you get the law for the Church, for the works of Christianity on the widest scale, and in individual lives. Strength that conceits itself to be such is weakness; weakness that knows itself to be such is strength. The only true source of Power, both for Christian work and in all other respects, is God Himself; and our strength is ours but by derivation from Him. And the only way to secure that derivation is through humble dependence, which we call faith in Jesus Christ. And the only way by which that faith in Jesus Christ can ever be kindled in a man's soul is through the sense of his need and emptiness. So when we know ourselves weak, we have taken the first step to strength; just as, when we know ourselves sinners, we have taken the first step to righteousness; just as in all regions the recognition of the doleful fact of our human necessity is the beginning of the joyful confidence in the glad, triumphant fact of the divine fulness. All our hollownesses, if I may so say, are met with His fulness that fits into them. It only needs that a man be aware of that which he is, and then turn himself to Him who is all that he is not, and then into his empty being will flow rejoicing the whole fulness of God. My strength is made perfect in weakness.

**III. Lastly, mark the calm final acquiescence in the loving necessity of continued sorrow.**

Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmity that the power of Christ may rest upon me. The will is entirely harmonised with Christ's. The Apostle begins with instinctive shrinking, he passes onwards to a perception of the purpose of his trial and of the sustaining grace; and he comes now to acquiescence which is not passivity, but glad triumph. He is more than submissive, he gladly glories in his infirmity in order that the power of Christ may spread a tabernacle over him. It is good for me that I have been afflicted, said the old prophet. Paul says, in a yet higher note of concord with God's will, I am glad that I sorrow. I rejoice in weakness, because it makes it easier for me to cling, and, clinging, I am strong, and conquer evil. Far better is it that the sting of our sorrow should be taken away, by our having learned what it is for, and having bowed to it, than that it should be taken away by the external removal which we sometimes long for. A grief, a trial, an incapacity, a limitation, a weakness, which we use as a means of deepening our sense of dependence upon Him, is a blessing, and not a sorrow. And if we would only go out into the world trying to interpret its events in the spirit of this great text, we should less frequently wonder and weep over what sometimes seem to us the insoluble mysteries of the sorrows of ourselves and of other men. They are all intended to make it more easy for us to realise our utter hanging upon Him, and so to open our hearts to receive more fully the quickening influences of His omnipotent and self-sufficing grace.

Here, then, is a lesson for those who have to carry some cross and know they must carry it throughout life. It will be wreathed with flowers if you accept it. Here is a lesson for all Christian workers. Ministers of the Gospel especially should banish all thoughts of their own cleverness, intellectual ability, culture, sufficiency for their work, and learn that only when they are emptied can they be filled, and only when they know themselves to be nothing are they ready for God to work through them. And here is a lesson for all who stand apart from the grace and power of Jesus Christ as if they needed it not. Whether you know it or not, you are a broken reed; and the only way of your ever being bound up and made strong is that you shall recognise your sinfulness, your necessity, your abject poverty, your utter emptiness, and come to Him who is righteousness, riches, fulness, and say, Because I am weak, be Thou my strength. The secret of all noble, heroic, useful, happy life lies in the paradox, When I am weak, then am I strong, and the secret of all failures, miseries, hopeless losses, lies in its converse, When I am strong, then am I weak.