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

**2 KINGS-005. WHEN THE OIL FLOWS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed."*

*2 Kings 4:6*

The series of miracles ascribed to Elisha are very unlike most of the wonderful works of even the Old Testament, and still more unlike those of the New. For about a great many of them there seems to have been no special purpose, either doctrinal or otherwise, but simply the relief of trivial and transient distresses. This story, from which my text is taken, is one of that sort. One of the sons of the prophets had died in Shunem. He left a widow and two little children. The creditor, according to the Mosaic law, had the right, which he was about to put in practice, of taking the children to be bondmen. And so the penniless, helpless woman comes to Elisha, as a kind of deliverer-general from all sorts of distresses, and tells him her pitiful tale. He asks her what she wants him to do, and she has no counsel to give. Then the thing to do strikes him. He asks what she has in the house. It was a poor, bare hovel of a place. There was not anything in it save a pot of oil, which was all her property. He sends her to borrow vessels, of all sorts and sizes. He takes the pot of oil, and shuts the door. Then she sets the two boys fetching and carrying; and herself taking up the one possession that she has, in faith she pours; and dish after dish is filled, and still she pours; and they were all filled, and she kept on pouring. Then she said, Bring some more; and the boys answered, There are not any more, so then the oil stopped.

There was no very special reason for all this. It is not at all like most Biblical miracles. I do not suppose it had any symbolical intention; but I venture to do a little gentle violence to the incident, and to see in the staying of the oil when no more vessels were brought to be filled, a lesson addressed to us all, and it is this: God keeps giving Himself as long as we bring that into which He can pour Himself. And when we stop bringing, He stops giving.

Now, if I may venture to be fanciful for once, let me tell you of three vessels that we have to bring if we would have the oil of the Divine Spirit poured into us.

**I. The vessel of desire.**

God can give us a great many things that we do not wish, but He cannot give us His best gift, and that is Himself, unless we desire it. He never forces His company on any man, and if we do not wish for Him He cannot give us Himself, His Spirit, or the gifts of His Spirit. For instance, He cannot make a man wise if he does not wish to be instructed. He cannot make a man holy if he has no aspiration after holiness. He cannot save a man from his sins if the man holds on to his sin with both hands, like some shellfish with its claws when you try to drag it out of its cleft in the rock. He cannot give the oil unless we bring the vessels of our hearts opened by our desires.

If God could He would. Ye have not because ye ask not. But we are never to forget that God is not led to begin His giving because we petition Him, but that the infinitude of His stores, and the endless, changeless, unmotived, perfect love of His heart, make self-communication--I was going to use a very strong word, and I do not know that it is too strong--necessary to the blessedness of the blessed God, and, long before we ever thought of Him, or sought anything from Him, there was pouring out from Him all the fulness of His love: just as we may conceive of the sunshine raying out before the orbs that were to circle round it had been completely shaped, but were still diffused and nebulous.

But, while God is always giving, our capacity to receive determines the degree of our individual possession of Him. Or, to put it in the plainest words--we have as much of God as we can take in; and the principal factor in settling how much we can take is--how much we wish. Measure the reality and intensity of desire, and you measure capacity. As the atmosphere rushes into every vacuum, or as the sea runs up into and fills every sinuosity of the shore, so wherever a heart opens, and the unbroken coast-line is indented, as it were, by desire, in rushes the tide of the divine gifts. You have God in the measure in which you desire Him.

Only remember that that desire which brings God must be more than a feeble, fleeting wish. Wishing is one thing; willing is quite another. Lazily wishing and strenuously desiring are two entirely different postures of mind; the former gets nothing and the latter gets everything, gets God, and with God all that God can bring.

But the wish must not only rise to intensity and earnestness, but it must be steadfast. Suppose these two little boys of the widow had held their vessels below the spout of the oil-pot with tremulous hands, while they looked away at something else, sometimes keeping the vessels right under, and sometimes shifting them on one side, it would have been slow work filling the unsteadily held vessels. So it is in regard to receiving God's best gift. Our desires must be unwavering. A cup held by a shaking hand will spill its contents, or will never receive them. Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord. The steadfast wish is the wish that is answered.

Is it not a strange indifference to our true good that we who have learned, as most of us have learned only too well, that in this world to wish is not to have, should turn away from the possibility that lies before us each, of passing from this disappointing world of vain longings into a region where we cannot wish anything that we do not get? There is only one thing about which it is true that, if you want, and as much as you want, you will have; and that thing is found when we turn away our wishes from the false, fleeting, and surface satisfactions of earth, and fasten them upon God, Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ... think. Wish for Him, and you have what you have wished. Wish for anything else, and you may have it or you may not, but depend upon it the fish is never half as big when it is out of the water as it felt to be when it was tugging at the hook.

**II. Another vessel that we have to bring is the vessel of our expectancy.**

Desire is one thing; confident anticipation that the desire will be fulfilled is quite another. And the two do not certainly go together anywhere except in this one region, and there they do go, linked arm in arm. For whatsoever, in the highest of all regions, we wish, we have the right without presumption to believe that we shall receive. Expectation, like desire, opens the heart.

There are some expectations, even in lower regions, that fulfil themselves. Doctors will tell you that a very large part of the curative power of their medicine depends upon the patient's anticipation of recovery. If a man expects to die when he takes to his bed, the chances are that he will die; and if a man expects to get better, Death will have a fight before it conquers him. There are hundreds of cases, in all departments of life, where he who sets himself to a task with assured persuasion that he is going to do such and such a thing will do it. Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail, said the heroine in the tragedy; and there is a great truth in her fierce encouragement.

All these illustrations fall far beneath the Christian aspect of the thought that what we expect from God we receive. That is only another way of putting According to thy faith be it unto thee. It is exactly what Jesus Christ said when He promised, Whatsoever things ye ask when ye stand praying believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.

I am afraid that a great many of us often have expectations fainter than desires; and that we should be very much surprised if the thing that we ask for, in the prayers that we so often repeat by rote, were granted to us. You will hear men praying for holiness, for clean hearts, for progress in the Christian life, for a hundred other such blessings. They do not expect that anything is going to come in consequence, and they would be mightily at a loss what to do with the gift if it did come. The absence of expectancy in our public petitions is to me one of the saddest features in the Christian life of this day. If you expect little, you will get little; and we do expect far less than we ought. We cannot raise our confident expectations too high; for He is able to do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask as well as think. The Apostle has set the limit of our expectations, in the same context, and here it is: That we may be filled with all the fulness of God. There are two limits: one is the boundless illimitableness of God's perfection, and the possibilities of our possession of Him are not exhausted until we have reached that infinite completeness. But then, there is a practical, working limit for each of us; and that is--what do you desire? and what do you expect? God can give more than we can ask or think, but He cannot at the moment give more than we expect or desire.

True, the vessels that we bring to be filled with the oil are not like the vessels that the fatherless boys brought. These were of a definite capacity; and the little cup when it was filled was filled, and there was an end of it. But the vessels that we bring are elastic, and widen out. The more that is put into them the more they can hold, so that there is no bound to the capacity of a heart for the reception and inrush of God; and there will not be a bound through all the ages of a growing possession of Him in eternity. But for to-day, desire and expectancy determine the measure of the gift.

**III. Lastly, one more vessel that we have to bring is obedience.**

If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine. There is one case of the general principle that wishes and anticipations are all right and well, but unless they are backed up and verified by conduct, even wishes and anticipations will not bring God's gift. For it is possible for a man who, in his better moments of devotion, has some desires after a loftier range of goodness and a completer conformity to God than he ordinarily has, to rise from his knees and rush into the world, and there live in some lust, or uncleanness, or vice, or indulgence, or absorption in the cares of this life, in such a way as that desires and anticipations shall vanish. If we fill our vessels full, before we take them to the source of supply, with all manner of baser liquids, there will be no room for the oil. We may contradict and stifle our desires by our conduct, and by it make our expectations perfectly impossible to be fulfilled. Are our daily doings of such a nature as that the Spirit of God, which is symbolised by the oil, can come into our hearts; or are we quenching and grieving Him so that He

Can but listen at the gate

And hear the household jar within?

Desire, Expectancy, and Obedience--these three must never be separated if we are to receive the gift of Himself, which God delights and waits to give. All spiritual possessions and powers grow by use, even as exercised muscles are strengthened, and unused ones tend to be atrophied. It is possible, by neglect of God and of the gift given to us, to incur the stern sentence passed on the slothful servant--Take it from him. By disobedience and negligence we choke the channel through which God's gifts can flow to us. So, brethren, bring these three vessels, and you will not go away with them empty. Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.