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

**2 KINGS-019. HEZEKIAH, A PATTERN OF DEVOUT LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. Hezekiah trusted in the Lord God of Israel.... 6. He clave to the Lord, and departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments."*

*2 Kings 18:5,6*

Devout people in all ages and stations are very much like each other. The elements of godliness are always the same. This king of Israel, something like two thousand six hundred years ago, and the humblest Christian to-day have the family likeness on their faces. These words, which are an outline sketch of the king's character, are really a sketch of the religious life at all times and in all places. He realised it; why may not we? He achieved it amid much ignorance; why should not we amid our blaze of knowledge? He accomplished it amid the temptations of a monarchy; why should not we in our humbler spheres?

There are four things set forth here as constituting a religious life. We begin at the bottom with the foundation of everything. He trusted in the Lord God of Israel. The Old Testament is just as emphatic in declaring that there is no religion without trust, and that trust is the very nerve and life-blood of religion, as is the New. Only that in the one half of the book our translators have chosen to use the word trust, and in the other half of the book they have chosen to use, for the very same act, the word faith. They have thus somewhat obscured the absolute identity which exists in the teaching of the Old and of the New Testament as regards the bond which unites men to God. That union always was, and always will be, begun in the simple attitude and exercise of trust, and everything else will come out of that, and without that nothing else will come.

So this king had a certain measure of knowledge about the character of God, and that measure of knowledge led him to lean all his weight upon the Lord. You and I know a great deal more about God and His ways and purposes than Hezekiah did, but we can make no better use of it than he did--translate our knowledge into faith, and rely with simple, absolute confidence on Him whose name we know in Christ more fully and blessedly than was possible to Hezekiah.

And need I remind you of how, in this life of which the outline is here given and the inmost secret is here disclosed, there were significant and magnificent instances of the power of humble trust to bring to an else helpless man all the blessings that he needs, and to put a crystal wall round about him that will preserve him from every evil, howsoever threatening it may seem?

It has come addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee. Vindicate Thine own cause by delivering Thine own servant. And so, when the morning dawned, they were all dead men, and faith rejoiced in a perfect deliverance. And you and I may get the same answer, in the midst of all our trials, difficulties, toils, and conflicts, if only we will go the same way to get it, and let our faith work, as Hezekiah's worked, and take everything that troubles us to our Father in the heavens, and be quite sure that He is the God who daily bears our burdens. Let us begin with the simple act of confidence in Him. That is the foundation, and on that we may build everything besides.

Let us see what this man further built upon it. The second story, if I may so say, of the temple-fortress of his life, upon the foundation of faith, was, He clave to the Lord.

That is to say, the act of confidence must be followed and perfected by tenacious adherence with all the tendrils of a man's nature to the God in whom he says that he trusts. The metaphor is a very forcible one, so familiar in Scripture as that we are apt to overlook its emphasis. Let me recall one or two of the instances in which it is employed about other matters which throw light on its force here.

First of all, remember that sweet picture of the widow woman from Moab and the two daughters-in-law, one sent back, not reluctantly, to her home; and the other persisting in keeping by Naomi's side, in spite of difficulties and remonstrances. With kisses of real love Orpah went back, but she did go back, to her people and her gods, but Ruth clave unto her. So should we cling to God, as Ruth flung her arms round Naomi, and twined her else lonely and desolate heart about her dear and only friend, for whose sweet sake she became a willing exile from kindred and country. Is that how we cleave to the Lord?

More sacred still are the lessons that are suggested by the fact that this is the word employed to describe the blessed and holy union of man and woman in pure wedded life, and I suppose some allusion to that use of the expression underlies its constant application to the relation of the believing soul to Jehovah. For by trust the soul is wedded to Him, and so joined to the Lord as to be one spirit.

Or if we do not care to go so deep as that, let us take the metaphor that lies in the word itself, without reference to its Scriptural applications. As the limpet holds on to its rock, as the ivy clings to the wall, as a shipwrecked sailor grasps the spar which keeps his head above water, so a Christian man ought to hold on to God, with all his energy, and with all parts of his nature. The metaphor implies tenacity; closeness of adhesion, in heart and will, in thought, in desire, and in all the parts of our receptive humanity, all of which can touch God and be touched by Him, and all of which are blessed only in the measure in which, yielding to Him, they are filled and steadied and glorified.

And there is implied, too, not only tenacity of adherence, but tenacity in the face of obstacles. There must be resistance to all the forces which would detach, if there is to be union with God in the midst of life in the world. Or, to recur for a moment to the figure that I employed a moment ago, as the sailor clings to a spar, though the waves dash round him, and his fingers get stiffened with cold and cramped with keeping the one position, and can scarcely hold on, but he knows that it is life to cling and death to loosen, and so tightens his grasp; thus have we to lay hold of God, and in spite of all obstacles, to keep hold of Him. Our grasp tends to slacken, and is feeble at the best, even if there were nothing outside of us to make it difficult for us to get a good grip. But there are howling winds and battering waves blowing and beating on us, and making it hard to keep our hold.

Do not let us yield to these, but in spite of them all let our hearts tighten round Him, for it is only in His sweet, eternal, perfect love that they can be at rest. And let our thoughts keep close to Him in spite of all distractions, for it is only in the measure in which His light fills our minds and His truth occupies our thoughts that our thinking spirits will be at rest. And let our desires, as the tentacles of some shell-fish fasten upon the rock, and feel out towards the ocean that is coming to it, let our desires go all out towards Him until they touch that after which they feel, and curl round it in repose and in blessedness.

The whole secret of a joyful, strong, noble Christian life lies here--that on the foundation of faith we should rear tenacious adherence to Him in spite of all obstacles. So it was a most encyclopaedic, though laconic, exhortation that that good man sent down from Jerusalem to encourage the first heathen converts gave, when instead of all other instruction or advice, or inculcation of less important, and yet real, Christian duties, Barnabas exhorted them all that with purpose of heart--the full devotion of their inmost natures--they should cleave to the Lord.

Then the third stage, or the third story, in this building is that, cleaving to the Lord, he departed not from following Him. The metaphor of cleaving implies proximity and union; the metaphor of following implies distance which is being diminished. These two are incongruous, and the very incongruity helps to give point to the representation. The same two ideas of union and yet of pursuit are brought still more closely together in other parts of Scripture. For instance, there is a remarkable saying in one of the Psalms, translated in our Bible--My soul followeth hard after Thee. Thy right hand upholdeth me, where the expression followeth hard after is a lame attempt at translating the perhaps impossible-to-be-translated fullness of the original, which reads My soul cleaveth after Thee. It is an incongruous combination of ideas, by its very incongruity and paradoxical form suggesting a profound truth--viz. that in all the conscious union and tenacious adherence to God which makes the Christian life, there is ever, also, a sense of distance which kindles aspiration and leads to the effort after continual progress. However close we may be to God, it is always possible to press closer. However full may be the union, it may always be made fuller; and the cleaving spirit will always be longing for a closer contact and a more blessed sense of being in touch with God.

So, as we climb, new heights reveal themselves, and the further we advance in the Christian life the more are we conscious of the infinite depths that yet remain to be traversed. Hence arises one great element of the blessedness of being a Christian--namely, that we need not fear ever coming to the end of the growth in holiness and the increase of joy and power that are possible to us. So that weariness, and the sense of having reached the limits that are possible on a given path, which sooner or later fall upon men that live for anything but God, can never be ours if we live for Him. But the oldest and most experienced will have the same forward-looking glances of hope and forward-directed steps of strenuous effort as the youngest beginner on the path; and a Paul will be able to say when he is Paul the aged, and the time of his departure is at hand, that he forgets the things that are behind, and reaches forth unto the things that are before, while he presses towards the mark. Let us be thankful for the endless progress which is possible to the Christian, and let us see to it that we are never paralysed into supposing that to-morrow must be as this day, but trust the infinite resources of our God, and be sure that we growingly make our own the growing gifts which He bestows.

And so, lastly, the fourth element in this analysis of a devout life is He kept the commandments of the Lord. That is the outcome of them all. Faith, adhesion, aspiration, and progress, all vindicate their value and reality in the simple, homely way of practical obedience.

Let us learn two things. One as to the worthlessness of all these others, if they do not issue in this. Not that these inward emotions are ever to be despised, but that, if they are genuine in our hearts, they cannot but manifest themselves in our lives. And so, dear Christian friends! do you not build upon your faith, on your adherence to God, on your aspirations after Him, unless you can bring into court, as witnesses for these, daily and hourly, your efforts after the conformity of your will to His, in the great things and in the small. Then, and only then, may we be sure that our confidence is not a delusion, and that it is to Him that we cleave when our feet tread in the paths of goodness.

And on the other hand, let us learn that all attempts to be obedient to a divine will which do not begin with trust and cleaving to Him are vain. There is no other way to get that conformity of will except by that union of spirit. All other attempts are beginning at the wrong end. You do not begin building your houses with the chimney-pots, but many a man who seeks to obey without trusting does precisely commit that fault. Let us be sure that the foundations are in, and then let us be sure that we do not stop half-way up, lest all that pass by should mock and say, This man began to build and was not able to finish.

How many professing Christians lives are half-finished and unroofed houses, because they have not added to their faith--that is, to their cleaving to the Lord--endless aspiration and continual progress, and to their aspiration and their progress the peaceable fruit of practical righteousness! If these things be in us and abound, they mark us as devout men after God's pattern. And if we want to be devout men after God's pattern, we must follow God's sequence, which begins with trust and ends with obedience.